Summary

Exile's a fucking *bitch*

Dan finds himself kicked out of town and searching for literally *anywhere* out of the rain - somehow, he must have just enough luck, as he stumbles upon a seemingly abandoned house in the middle of the forest.

Except it *isn't* abandoned, and the resident *isn't* exactly...*normal*...

Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/works/15151202).
Dan

Exile’s a fucking bitch.

I mean, it’s clearly been hours, and all I’ve managed to do is get myself lost in the damn forest outside town, have a mud pit suck my shoe down to god-knows-where, and get soaked to the bone from the rain that’s somehow still getting at me despite the canopy of trees overhead. Not for the first time since I was thrown out, I debate turning around and taking the jail sentence instead.

Although a lifetime in prison would be long and miserable - this, at least, speaks of a quick death if I can’t find food or shelter soon.

My one sock, exposed to the disgustingly wet elements and freezing my damn foot off, almost seems to be doing more harm than good. I pause my trek under a particularly large tree and lean back against the bark to tug the thing off; the early fall air bites the exposed skin, and I can feel every leaf and acorn and other bit of miscellaneous debris under my foot when I step forward, but it’s a little warmer than it was before. I think.

“This f-fucking s-sucks,” I hug myself to conserve warmth and grumble to nobody, because I’m lost and there isn’t anybody to grumble to, then exhale heavily as I continue on. My original departure from town had been a hasty affair, shoved out with nothing but my clothes, and I’d walked for as long as I could with as much confidence as I could project.

Which lasted all of ten seconds beyond the treeline before I’d been bit by at least twelve mosquitos and scared half to death by a fucking moth.

And now the sun’s long since set, and I’m still wandering aimlessly, and I can’t decide if I should just drop to the ground and give up or keep moving. It’s almost too dark to see, and the sounds are all muffled and obscured by the rain, and water’s dripping into my eyes, but I think there’s a group of trees up ahead. Shelter, maybe.

Or maybe I can just die in fucking peace.

With a deep, slightly shaky breath, I trudge ahead, stepping on two rocks along the way that have most definitely cut my foot up before I finally emerge into a clearing. Six very slow blinks later, my brain finally realizes I’m not staring at a grove of trees, but an actual cabin. House. Thing.

If I had any energy, I’d be sprinting toward it - as it stands, I’m managing a slow shuffle that doesn’t get me there near as fast as I’d like, but at least I’m staying upright. The entire place is shrouded in shadows, unlit from the inside, and I wonder if I’m lucky enough that I’ve stumbled upon a-

“Fuck!” My toe - on the unprotected foot, of course - slams into a wooden stair, one I hadn’t seen but I now suspect leads up the porch and to the front door. I go down hard.

My elbows crash into another stair, sending a vibrating pain up through my arms and across my back, and I can’t do anything aside from slump heavily on the damp wood as rain patters against my cheek for several aching minutes. At least the storm seems to be letting up a bit.

Once everything’s dulled to a low throb, I manage to push myself up with nothing more than a grunt and a grimace. My next steps are much more cautious, testing the location of each stair with my foot before moving forward. It doesn’t help that I very literally can’t see anything.
I wave a hand in front of my face, just to be sure, then sigh when it blends into the blackness.

But now, at least, I’ve managed to get under the cover of the porch, and the journey to the door is much less stair-ridden - I’m tempted to find a window to peek in, to see if I’ve mistaken the place and it’s not actually abandoned, but I really can’t see anything. So I grope around for the door, grinning when my hand bumps into hard metal, and I grasp the doorknob and turn.

The door creaks open as I push, louder than I expect, and I hold my breath - surely, surely my day could not be improving like this. I am not this lucky. But aside from the obnoxiously unmaintained hinges, the place is quiet.

“Hello?” I try, but it comes out as sort of a croak, so I clear my throat. “Hello?” I call again, louder and a bit more confidently. I stare at nothing, blink, listen for sounds. When there aren’t any, I try to contain my growing enthusiasm and march right through the front door.

Which is how, for the second time in as many minutes, I end up sprawled on the ground. Although, the first time was technically stairs, my brain chimes in. With a groan, I roll over and slide my fingers along the floor until they come in contact with the slightly-raised piece of wood between the inside and outside that attacked my foot.

“Why is this place out to get me?” I mumble, frowning into the darkness. “As if I don’t have enough problems to deal with right now.” Still sore from both my earlier tumble and the most recent, my muscles and joints complain the moment I try to stand.

I shut them up with the promise of rest later - I’m not stupid enough to assume that this place isn’t full of spiders or snakes or some other ungodly animal waiting to sink its teeth into me. I need light, and I need to make sure I’m safe.

The light comes first, entirely unintentionally, as I lean heavily against the wall with the plan to use it as a starting point for my search - not three inches from the raised edge of the door frame is a lightswitch of all things, and hope bubbles up in my chest as I flick it on.

The room bursts into view, bright to the point of blinding, and I have to actually close my eyes, then squint until they adjust.

“Shit.” It’s the only thing I can think, staring at the furnished, very obviously lived-in space: there’s a kitchen off to my right, with a few cupboards swung open to reveal mugs and plates and bowls, and a lounge off to my left with a well-worn sofa, a cushy armchair, and a TV. Behind the sofa, a staircase extends up to what I’m sure are bedrooms. Where people are probably sleeping.

I hold my breath, going as still as I can and listening for any noise. It’s not til my foot starts aching under me that I remember its bareness, and that I probably cut it up in my trek toward the place. Quietly, carefully, and with one last glance at the staircase for any sign of movement, I lift my leg, crossing it over the other, and lean against the kitchen counter beside me for balance.

“Shit.” I say it again, under my breath, because not only are there two angry red lines of blood, but my eyes follow them as they drip down onto the floor. Where more blood has pooled, in very nice footprint-like shapes.

I have to clean it up, I can’t just… I try to silence my thoughts, listening intently again for any movement, but the place is just as silent as when I’d come in. And I yelled ‘hello’, maybe whoever lives here is on a vacation? Or away for the evening?

I decide that’s the most likely scenario - if someone hasn’t heard me by now, it’s because there’s
nobody here to do so. And I could really use a place to wait out this rain, at the very least. *Ugh, and a shower.* I grimace at the way my clothes seem to suddenly cling to me, making everything feel sticky and gross.

With a determined breath, I hop alongside the counter until I’m stood at the sink, where there’s a very convenient roll of paper towels propped up against a window. After tugging three from the roll and wetting them, I wipe gingerly at my foot until the paper towels are a muddy reddish-pink and my foot no longer resembles a murder scene.

Although it’s not gushing any longer, I make a point of hopping back over to the doorway so as not to accidentally reopen the almost-clotted cuts. Then I’m squatting rather awkwardly, foot barely touching the ground as I rub at the smooth wood floors - fortunately, they seem to be lacquered, and the blood comes up easily.

When I stand, everything aches and I groan, suddenly angry and cold and sore and done with all of this shit. A part of me wants to just collapse right here and never move again, but the other part is tugging me toward the stairs, with the hopes of finding a hot shower.

*Surely the people who live here wouldn’t care if I just took a quick shower, right?* My line of reasoning for this is entirely nonexistent, basically consisting of ‘I want hot water’, so I make my way over to the trash can to dispose of the bloodied towels and then hop around the edge of the lounge until my hand rests on the railing of the stairs.

For a long moment, I just stare at the staircase, the idea of having to hop one one foot all the way to the top immensely daunting. I let my head fall back, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to psych myself up for it. *There’s a hot shower up there, there’s a hot shower, hot shower hot shower hot shower,* I chant internally until a little bit of energy has returned to my exhausted limbs, and I grip tighter to the railing as I hop up the first step.

Then the next and the next and the next, and after a literal eternity, I collapse onto my knees on the landing of the second floor, disgustingly out of breath and shaky. I suddenly feel twice as gross, sweaty, and warm, though the idea of hot water scalding my skin and washing away all the grime is still more than appealing - like a giant reset button, to erase the past day from my mind and body.

After an indeterminate amount of time, my neck finally manages the strength to look up, to catalogue my surroundings: a few doors, only one swung open, and there’s clearly a sink and mirror visible even from here. Apparently, the lights I turned on downstairs had also lit the hallway up here.

I use the wall as leverage to get myself standing, then take a quick check of my foot - blood’s still clotting in the wound, but I know better than to think it won’t break open if I put weight on it. With a resigned sigh, I hop alongside the wall toward the bathroom.

My left leg is burning by the time I collapse into the tub, still fully clothed but not exactly worried about it - I mean, my clothes are at least as dirty as I am, and probably could use a good wash as well. *A quick shower, I’ll do my best to get my clothes clean, then they can dry while I take a short nap. I can be gone before anyone even notices.*

There’s a sensation at the base of my neck that tells me that *probably* that’s not a good idea, that I can’t possibly get that lucky, but I ignore it and reach across to the faucet to start the water. It comes out ice cold at first, but warms up quickly, and I plug the drain so it can fill up and I can soak for a minute.

My cuts sting the moment they’re submerged, but it’s a good kind of sting, and I let the now-hot
water soothe my aching muscles. **Okay, I’m going to count to five, then I need to start moving.** The tried and true method gets me shifting, pulling my boot from my foot and scrubbing off the excess mud before discarding my sock, sliding my jeans and boxers off, then pulling my shirt over my head.

I sort of scrub them all together, then search the white-tiled space around me for some kind of- **there!** I stretch for the far corner of the tub, grasping at a bottle of what I hope is body wash. *Strawberry?* I sigh - it’s absolutely *not* my favorite, too overpowering and saccharine-sweet, but I can’t very well afford to be picky.

I’m surprised to find the strawberry scent is subtle and actually a bit invigorating as I squeeze a hefty amount on the pile of clothes in my lap, then I squish and rub them around until I’ve got them some semblance of washed.

With another resigned sigh because I’m bloody *exhausted*, I unplug the drain and push myself into a standing position. Cool air sends goosebumps across my skin, and I quickly turn the handle of the faucet to get the water running through the showerhead.

Soapy clothing drips from one hand, and I realize a few seconds too late that I should probably close the shower curtain - some water’s already splashed out and onto the tile floor, which I vow to wipe up as soon as I’m done. *I can’t leave a trace.*

Once I’ve protected the rest of the bathroom from any wayward water, I’m back to focusing on my clothes - it takes a stupid amount of time to rinse all the soap from them, and an even *stupider* amount of time to wring them out so they’re sort of dry. But I’m still sore and gross - a wet sort of gross, where the grime hasn’t quite been washed off, only soaked a bit - so I toss the damp clothes out into the bathroom to be hung up once I’m clean.

Strawberry body wash back in hand, I lather up every single inch of exposed skin, though I’m cautious around the cuts on my foot - even the bit of sudsy water that washes over them when I rinse off leaves them stinging.

It’s not til I’ve spent a good minute looking around the shower for some shampoo - to be fair, my brain is not working at full capacity - that I realize the strawberry body wash is that multipurpose sort of wash, meant for hair as well. With a shrug and probably a bit more of the gel than necessary, I scrub at my hair until the suds threaten to drip down into my eyes.

The whole affair is strangely calming, a piece of normalcy interjected into a surreal and awful day, and it takes a very long time to convince myself to actually get out of the shower. *Someone could be back soon, and don’t you want to nap before you go?* I grumble obscenities at myself, but I know I’m right, and I turn the water off and pull the curtain aside.

At which point I near have a heart attack, because there’s a random guy standing in the doorway, wide-eyed and staring at me.

“Who are you?” He asks. I scream.
When my hand lands on the cool metal doorknob, I hum under my breath to drop the ward protecting it from any intruders. The rain had only delayed my search a bit, but I’m glad I was able to track down the herbs I’d been looking for - mostly some fresh lavender, as I’m running low, but I’d happened across a patch of catnip as well, and Mellix hadn’t let me leave without collecting some for later.

I hadn’t thought much about the lights being on, but I set my basket aside and frown into the empty space. I can hear water running in the shower upstairs as well.

“Susan,” I pull out my most chastising tone, which isn’t as annoyed as I’d hoped to make it sound. There’s a creak as the house groans around me. “I get that you’re not happy with the new water filtration system, but you can’t just go wasting it, and the electricity!” I add, waving a hand at the lights around us. They dim slightly.

“Thank you,” I twist my lips - even when she’s being a pain, I can’t really stay mad at my house. I mean, I live in her, so it’d be a bad idea to piss her off. “And I’ll see what I can do about having the water run through the walls counter-clockwise instead,” I add, grabbing my basket again and heading toward the back door. *Okay, set the catnip out to dry, the lavender can go-*

“Can you shut off the water, though?” I remind the house, basket still slung over my arm as I pick out the bundles of catnip and spread them out on the table. Once the sun’s up, they’ll get plenty of light and heat from the nearby window to dry.

There’s a strange shuddering around me, like the pipes are grumbling, and I roll my eyes. Just cause she’s annoyed doesn’t mean she can’t at least take care of things herself. The basket of lavender joins the catnip on the table, and I trudge up the stairs.

The bathroom door is swung wide, though I usually make a point of closing it - along with all the doors in the house - and I smack the wall lightly as I make my way toward it. *Finally, she got the message*, I think when the water shuts off.

“Thanks,” I mumble, patting the wall more gently. But she’s still not shut off the lights or closed the door, so I step into the bright room. *What’s the point of a sentient house if she won’t even help me keep things in order?*

My eyes bug out of my head when I turn the corner: the shower curtain slides to the side entirely of its own accord- *no, wait, a completely naked guy is pulling back the curtain.* His eyes go wide as well, and for a moment, he just stands there, staring at me with his mouth hung open.

“Who are you?” I’m absolutely floored that my voice is so calm and controlled, given how fast my heart is racing. *Why’d I let Mellix off on his own? I should’ve made him come back with me, and I thought I had my wards up? He shouldn’t-*

The guy screams - like a proper high-pitched, terrified scream - then clamps his hands over his mouth. Then every inch of his skin - *every inch* - flushes bright red, and his hands drop down to his crotch, which is just as naked as the rest of him. No longer distracted *quite* as much, I notice the pile of clothes scattered on the floor by his feet, and I do the only sensible thing I can think of: I back out of the bathroom, and lean flush against the wall on the other side.

“Uh, you should get dressed?” I offer, and sure, *now* my voice is all shaky and uncertain. I slam the
side of my fist against the wall, lightly enough that I hope the guy hasn’t heard but hard enough to send Susan a message of *why the heck did you let him in here?*

“I’m, uh…” he says after a minute, but he trails off, and I expect him to be telling me he’s finally dressed. “Sorry,” is what comes out next, though, and I lift my eyebrows as I stare at the closed door of my bedroom across from me.

“I really don’t want to hurt you,” and I’m not even sure I could, “so please explain what-” I break off when he steps out of the bathroom, clad in damp, wrinkly clothes that stick to his wet skin. Dark brown curls drip onto his shoulders, and his cheeks still burn bright red. “Uh, right,” I continue, momentarily distracted, “explain what you’re doing in my house?” I hope that I sound properly angry.

“It’s a, uh, very long story,” he keeps his head bowed, but even at the angle, I can see a smirk touch the edge of his lips. He’s a little slouched, and I notice him balancing mostly on one leg as he keeps the other propped up on his toe. His hand doesn’t leave the door frame. “But I should go, I- oh,” he turns around, back into the bathroom, and reemerges with a single boot in hand.

A single boot.

“I’ll go, now. I’m sorry,” he emphasizes, looking up for half a second to lock eyes with me. Then he’s hobbling over to the staircase and doing his best to get downstairs. On one leg. From here, I notice two angry red lines across the bottom of the foot he’s holding in the air, one of which has started to leak blood.

“You’re hurt,” I say, and it’s not a question. He freezes midway down the stairs - an impressive effort for literally being on one foot - and I cast my mind out as far as I can, hoping to let Mellix know to come home as soon as he can.

With a deep breath and a desperate hope that I’m not making a mistake, that I can trust my gut instinct on this one, I grab the guy’s hand and loop his arm over my shoulders, giving him some extra support as he resumes his journey down the stairs.

“You don’t- uh, thanks,” the guy turns away from me, so I give myself a minute to study his features - still blushing, and I can’t really blame him. I think my own cheeks are a bit red - I mean, I’d seen him completely naked. I can’t see the color of his eyes from here, but he has very long eyelashes and thick, full lips that part slightly as we reach the bottom of the staircase.

Then he’s pulling away, heading toward the front door.

“You’re hurt,” I repeat, because he didn’t say anything. “You shouldn’t go outside on that, not til it’s healed.” He stops in his tracks - *or is it ‘track’, if he’s on one foot?* - and peeks over his shoulder at me.

“I don’t- uh, are you sure? I don’t want to impose,” he dips his head again, but I just smirk.

“You mean any more than you already have?” I quip back, and immediately regret it; his shoulders stiffen, and he starts once again hopping toward the door. “No, I- it was a joke, I didn’t- just, it’s still raining, and you only have one shoe.” I take a tentative step toward him, still wildly unsure why I’m doing this.

“No, I really have imposed, like a lot, and I shouldn’t have, I’m sorry,” his voice is low and scratchy, but he’s at the door already, and his hand turns the knob. I drop my gaze to the wood floor and my chest falls, even as I exhale in relief - I should be glad that the random stranger is
“Holy fucking-” the guy shouts, and there’s a loud thump; by the time I look back up toward him, the door’s been flung wide, and he’s fallen back on his ass. A very large wolf hovers over him, sniffing experimentally. When the animal looks up, he’s got a shit-eating grin on his face, and I try not to laugh too hard at how he’s pinned the guy down by the shoulder, the way the guy’s shivering under the giant paw.

“Mellix, none of that, now, he’s not-” I walk forward, but pause my sentence - *is he dangerous? He got through my wards, somehow.* “He’s not done anything to hurt me,” I decide, which is true. I file the other piece of information into the back of my head for the time being.

“Wha- what the...what the *fuck*?” The guy manages to squeak out, as high-pitched as his scream earlier. Mellix burps, then licks his lips before stepping right over the stranger and stopping beside me to nuzzle at my arm. I give him a quick head scratch before walking over to the guy.

“Mellix seems to think you’re alright, are you sure you don’t want to stay, just until your foot is better?” I offer a hand, pressing my lips into a line so they don’t break out into a poorly-timed grin - he’s still wide-eyed with fear, and it’s hard to miss the rapid rise and fall of his chest. His hand shakes, but he reaches for mine anyway.

“Mellix,” he mumbles the name, and the wolf makes a noise behind us. “You- that’s, uh, that’s a *wolf*,” he points out, grimacing when I help pull him to his feet - *foot?* I lift my eyebrows and nod, unable to fight the smirk this time. His hand lingers in mine for a moment, warm and still a bit damp - though that could just be sweat, he’s still very clearly freaked out.

“Yep, he is, and I’m Phil,” I add, because if the guy’s going to be here for a bit, I may as well introduce myself. His expression finally relaxes, just slightly, and I watch his lips part as he takes a slow, deep breath.

“Dan,” he nods, finally releasing my hand and leaning heavily against the counter behind him. “Thank you,” his voice is low, and his gaze drops back to the ground. I notice him take a quick look at Mellix, though, and my eyes follow his to where the wolf has gone and settled on the sofa.

“Mellix, get off there, you know how Susan hates when you do that! That’s what I bought you a bed for,” I add, pointing at the stairs - he hops up, snorting at me, then climbs the staircase in a few leaps. Even though I do most of the cleaning, Susan is *meticulous* when it comes to the wolf hair getting everywhere. The only room she allows it in is Mellix’s, and she absolutely refuses to have anything to do with it.

“Oh, you don’t live alone?” The guy - Dan - says from his position near the door. The door, which I’ve yet to close. But Susan must’ve heard her name, or been paying some kind of attention, because it’s started drifting shut on its own. I help it along.

“No, I do,” I hesitate to finish the thought aloud - witchcraft isn’t exactly *illegal* or anything, but it’s usually frowned upon. Judged. When I look over to Dan, he’s staring at me, clearly expecting more of an answer, but I brush it off. “What’s got you out here so late, and in the middle of the storm?” *Topic change, don’t make this about me.* As expected, Dan’s eyes go wide, and he sucks in a breath - okay, I hadn’t expected his reaction to the conversation shift to be *that* drastic.

*Oh god, what if he’s a murderer or something? On the run?* My brain decides to go with the worst-case scenario, and I glance over my shoulder at the stairs. *How quickly could Mellix get to me?* I hate using spells to intentionally do harm, but if it’s self-defense...
“Uh, you probably don’t want to know,” Dan’s words pull me from my head for a moment, and I squint a bit as I turn back to him. “Like I said, long story,” his free hand - the one not clinging to the counter - is rubbing at the edge of his shirt, fingers playing with the hem. Nervous, then.

“Well, I’d rather not be harboring a murderer,” I admit with a small smile and a tilt of my head, hoping to lighten the mood. So, of course, Dan stiffens, knuckles going white as he grips the counter. His other hand stills. I take a very large step back, calling to Mellix in my head.

“It’s not exactly-” Dan looks up, and his eyes widen to match mine. “No! No, it’s not like that, I didn’t-” he sighs, running a hand across his face. “I didn’t kill anyone.” Now he stares hard at me. “I promise, I didn’t kill anybody.” When his gaze flicks up and behind me, I know Mellix must be perched at the top of the stairs.

“Okay…” I trail off, still a bit unsure. But Mellix wouldn’t have let him in, Susan wouldn’t have let him in if he wanted to hurt me. Hell, my wards shouldn’t have even let him in, harmful intentions or not. My wards…oh my god, wait, oh my god, he’s-

“I just, I freed a bunch of people, people who didn’t deserve to be in prison,” Dan’s talking again, but the revelation in my head is too much, I can barely focus. Pay attention, pay attention. “And I kinda got kicked out,” now his voice has gone soft, and he shifts around on his unhurt foot. Probably not dangerous, that’s the important thing, I decide.

“You should sit,” I point toward the lounge, and he purses his lips, but there’s just the barest hint of a smile as he starts to hop over. I step forward, intent on helping him, but he must not be comfortable with it; he moves faster, collapsing sort of on his side as he finally reaches the sofa.

“Thanks,” he says - again, it’s that small, soft voice. My eyes flick up to the stairs, and Mellix tilts his head before retreating back to his room. When I turn away, I can’t help the grin that creeps up my cheeks.

I can’t believe it, he’s a witch too!
For the first time since I’d gotten out of the shower - Phil’s shower - I exhale, relief rushing through my muscles. Everything aches, my foot is throbbing, and I think one of the cuts has broken open again, but at least I can fucking sit.

And Phil hasn’t kicked me out. Though I’m determined to be on my way as soon as I can - a fresh flush of heat creeps up to my cheeks, just knowing I’d been caught. Oh god, and he saw me naked. I roll my eyes at my own stupidity. At least Phil’s in the kitchen, unable to see me as he rummages around in some drawers and cabinets, and I’m really fucking glad that dog-wolf-thing went upstairs. Because surely no beast is that well-trained.

“Do you, uh, want any tea?” The voice startles me, and my stomach grumbles at the suggestion of anything being put in it. Then Phil’s chuckling, pulling other things from his cupboard, and leaving random cabinet doors open. “Some food as well, then,” he concludes. I’d normally decline out of politeness, but I’m really fucking hungry.

I still can’t believe how nice this guy is - he found a complete stranger standing naked (ugh) in his bathroom, clearly having broken in, and he’s made every effort to actually welcome me, and help me? He really should lock his doors, I decide, because it’s easier than thinking about why he’s being so kind. The world isn’t a kind place, not without ulterior motives.

“Sorry, I don’t have anything all that substantial,” Phil’s apologizing as he walks over, two mugs of tea in one hand and the other carrying a bowl of fruits. The tea sloshes precariously close to the edge, and I reach out on instinct to take the cups and set them on the coffee table. “Thanks, it’s chamomile, by the way,” he says as he sets the bowl down, then turns toward the stairs.

“Oh, duh. “Thank you!” I call as he starts to climb, and he pauses to flash a bright grin at me.

“No problem. I’m just gonna grab some, uh, for your foot?” He gestures vaguely, and I assume he means bandages or some antiseptic, so I nod. I wonder, briefly, if he was waiting for me to do that before continuing, waiting for me to acknowledge that he’d be gone a moment.

But a half second later, the sweet, warm, earthy scent of the tea is drifting toward me, and I reach over for a mug. It’s definitely too hot to drink, but I take a sip anyway, hoping the burn will bring my brain to its senses. For all I know, Phil could be the murderer, luring weak passersby into his warm little home to be baked into an oven like a twisted version of Hansel and Gretel.

Although, I concede to myself, that was already a pretty twisted fairytale in its own right. Phil’s on his way back down already, weilding a small tin of something and a roll of gauze bandages. I set the tea aside, not feeling any better for having the burning liquid in my stomach. Food, that’s what I need.

As Phil makes his way over to the sofa, I pop a few berries into my mouth. They’re fresh and juicy, and I swear the flavor is the best thing to hit my tongue in years. Though it probably has more to do with how hungry I am.

“Eat as much as you want, I have plenty more,” Phil notes with a soft smile before kneeling beside where I have my foot propped up on the sofa. A little alarm bell rings in the back of my head, because isn’t that exactly what the evil old witch said to the children? Or maybe it was the other way round, and they ate whatever they wanted without asking?
I twitch back purely on instinct when Phil’s hand touches my foot, and he freezes, looking up to where I’m staring stiffly down at him. He lifts his eyebrows, and I take a deep breath before nodding. Based on his reaction, he probably thinks I’m just being extra sensitive, or it hurts, but honestly I *hate* people touching my feet - I’m absurdly ticklish.

In an effort to distract myself, I grab my cup of tea again, blowing on it and inhaling the steam. Phil’s hand is gentle on my foot, holding it still as he rubs some kind of paste on it. When I inhale sharply at the feeling, nearly choking on the drink, I decide to hold off on taking a sip until he’s done.

“What’s that?” I ask, hoping for a distraction; he glances up for a second, then over to the little tin the paste came from.

“Garlic and a bit of marigold, and coconut oil,” he lists off the ingredients casually, and I scrunch my eyebrows. *Antiseptic isn’t good enough?* I suddenly wonder if he’s one of those hippie all-natural vegan-everything kind of people. And I wonder if that’s worse than him being a murderous evil cannibal.

“Oh,” I say instead. “Oh.” And that time it comes out as more of a moan, or maybe a very relaxed-sounding noise, because thinking of it as a moan is far too embarrassing. But the stuff he rubbed on the cuts has already started soothing them, a numbing sort of warmth spreading across my foot, and I lean back a bit into the sofa cushion I’m propped up on. It’s only once I remember the mug of tea that I sit up properly again and take a sip. *Still too hot.*

“I know, I know, it could’ve done with some rosemary as well, but I ran out last week,” he looks back up, eyes searching mine, and I frown before taking another sip of the tea. The burn doesn’t feel quite as significant anymore.

Then Phil’s gaze finally leaves me, and he grabs the roll of bandages. This time, he barely touches my foot except to hold the end of the gauze in place, then again to tuck in the trailing bit.

“There, all set. Probably needs to be changed in the morning, but you should be all set in a day or two?” He concludes, shifting back onto his feet and standing. “Did you get enough to eat for now? I’ll send Mellix hunting tomorrow morning, first thing,” he adds, frowning at the small bowl of berries. “I could make some toast?”

If there wasn’t still the feeling at the base of my neck telling me he might be a murderer - *at least not a vegan, though, I think* - I’d laugh at how hard he’s trying.

“It’s fine, you’ve done more than enough,” a smirk still makes its way to my face, though I don’t recall telling it to go there. I restructure my expression into something I hope looks more neutral, trying to focus on my cup of tea.

“Oh,” Phil nods, then shuffles on his feet. I take another sip of tea. Now that it’s a bit cooler, I can focus on the warm sweetness, the full flavor. It’s very calming. Almost *too* calming, but-

“You didn’t drug this, did you?” I ask, the words tumbling out in a rush before I can even think about them. Every muscle in my body clenches, suddenly on edge. Phil’s eyes go wide, and he freezes as well. After what I could *swear* is a solid minute but is probably more like five seconds, he blinks, then sputters out a laugh.

“Drug you? No, no, Dan, I didn’t-” he breaks off again, chuckling more quietly this time. It’s odd to hear him say my name, unexpected. But everything loosens a bit, and I nod. “I’m not- I mean, I thought you were-” he starts, then stops. I lift a brow.
“You thought I was a murderer?” I finish for him, and his mouth opens and closes like a fish for a moment. *Hadn’t that been what he meant?* I take another sip of tea, frowning when I realize I’ve almost finished it. Phil hasn’t even touched his. *If all I have is his word, how do I know he didn’t drug it, though?* “Aren’t you going to drink your tea?” His gaze softens, face relaxing into a gentle smile, and he reaches for his cup.

“Just waiting for it to cool. Mind if I?” He gestures at the spot my legs have extended to block - really, I’ve just flopped on his sofa, and I’m taking up the whole damn thing. With some kind of hum, I rush to make space for him, cautious of my freshly-wrapped foot. He sits as close to the armrest as he can, keeping a distance from my curled-up legs.

I wait a little impatiently for him to take a sip of his tea, which he does only after a few tense seconds. I didn’t realize I’d been holding my breath, but I exhale with relief and drink more of my own tea. It’s good, and I don’t want it to go cold before I’ve finished.

“So you got, uh, ‘kicked out’?” Phil asks, and I can hear the air-quotes without him making them. “Is that the nice way of saying exiled?” Instead of responding, I just frown and reach for the bowl of fruit and toss a few more berries into my mouth - they’re blackberries, I think. I focus very very intently on them.

“Touchy subject, got it,” he just nods, taking another sip of his tea. He’s not exactly watching me, but I can see his eyes flick over toward me every few seconds - watching without watching. What’s his game, then? Because he has one, everyone does. Mine is survival, apparently. Though I’d admittedly been ready to die out in the forest.

A part of me is kind of glad I didn’t.

“Family?” I wince the second the word leaves his lips, and he shakes his head. “Okay,” he stares off at the far wall, takes another sip of his tea, then a small smile curls his lip. “Favorite color?” My eyebrows arch up my forehead.

“Favorite...sorry, what?”

“Color,” he repeats, turning to face me fully. “Is that a safe topic?” I think my mouth is open, though I’m not really sure. I wiggle a bit, shifting just to redirect some of my confusion. Maybe to distract Phil from the fact that his other topics of discussion had gotten to me.

“Uh, black?” It’s cliche, I know, but I don’t really have a favorite color. Phil mumbles something into his mug, then takes a sip. I can see the way he’s pursing his lips together, like he’s trying not to laugh. “What?” For a moment, I’m tempted to extend my leg, poke him in the thigh with my toe. It’s a strange feeling, given I don’t even know the guy.

“I said it’s not-”

“It is too a color!” I interrupt before he can finish, the stupid comment reminding me of primary school when everyone said it, and he snorts out a laugh. My cheeks flush, and I reach for another handful of berries.

“Mine’s blue,” he adds, his smirk shifting into a more genuine smile. Then he holds my gaze for a very long moment, and I sort of want to turn away but I end up unable to. “Maybe red,” he amends, tilting his head. Then he’s back to his tea, whatever strange tension that had been hanging in the air completely broken.

“Okay,” I nod, a little confused as to why I’m agreeing with his color choice. I copy his actions,
downing the last of my tea. A soft growl above my head makes me jump, and I shrink down from the sharp-toothed grin of the giant wolf peeking over the railing of the stairs.

“Mellix is right, I should get some sleep. And you’re probably exhausted,” he adds. I’m still staring at the yellow eyes of the beast staring right back at me, pushing myself as far down into the sofa cushion as I can manage.

There’s a sigh, and I flinch again as the wolf snorts hot air from its snout at me. Then he’s pulling back, retreating up the staircase. I exhale a shaky breath.

“He won’t hurt you, I promise,” Phil’s voice is soft, gentle, and I turn to find him giving me a small smile. I decide that I hate the pity in his eyes, so I scoff and set my empty mug down hard on the coffee table.

“Right, sure,” I choked the words out, aiming for a false confidence and ending up with more of the ‘false’ than the ‘confidence’. I hope he doesn’t notice the way my hand shakes as I pull it back, crossing my arms over my chest. Phil just sighs again, but I don’t look up this time.

“Will the sofa be alright? For you to sleep on, I mean? I’ll grab a blanket,” he rushes off up the stairs before I have the chance to grumble out an answer, which is probably for the best - I know I’d sound ungrateful, which is not at all the case. He has no reason to open his home to me. Again, though, the thought of waking up to a knife at my throat has begun to haunt me. Or the maw of that terrifying wolf. I shiver, just as Phil returns with the promised blanket - and a pillow - in tow.

“Oh god, of course you’re cold, those clothes are still damp,” he shakes his head, “wait here, I’ll get some sweatpants and a shirt.” Then he’s back up the stairs, the bedding dropped at the other end of the sofa. I feel weird about moving them while he’s not here, which is a nonsensical thing to feel but I do anyway.

“Alright,” he announces as he descends, “these should fit fine,” he tosses a pair of sweatpants and a dark grey t-shirt my way, both much drier than my current clothes. I hadn’t even realized, but now that Phil’s mentioned it, another shiver races up my spine, and goosebumps stick up all over my skin - actually from the cold, this time.

“Oh, thank you,” I’m glad all the malice has left my voice, because I’m not usually a horribly rude person, not without a good reason - and he’s yet to try to hurt me, though I’m becoming warier by the minute.

“I’m headed off to bed, then,” he says, nodding. “Uh, good night?” I don’t know if he means it as a question, but I answer in my head at least - yes, I think it’s been a good night. Better than I expected, anyway.

“Night,” I offer back, though I’m a bit late; I can hear the door shut upstairs just as I speak.

I’m quick to shrug off my damp clothes and swap them for the fresh set; after a brief internal debate, I strip my boxers off as well - I don’t think I’ll have any luck falling asleep with them being wet like that. Before anyone would have a chance to come back down the stairs - wolf or human - I slip on the sweatpants. At first, I’m not sure about the shirt, since I usually don’t wear one to sleep, but the pants are so damn warm that I find myself tugging the shirt over my head as well.

Much like the sweatpants, it feels like it just came out of the dryer; I grab the blanket, then shift
over to the other end of the sofa, and my head barely hits the pillow before I’m out, exhaustion
dragging me under.
“Susan,” I peek over the edge of the railing to find Dan already passed out - I’d been about to come back down and clean everything up, but I suppose it can wait til morning. “Can you dim the lights? Not all the way out, just almost.” I don’t want him getting hurt if he wakes up in the pitch blackness and can’t find his way to the switch, not with his foot all cut up.

She must be in a good mood, because the lights go almost out, and I pat the railing before turning back toward my room - although, at the last minute, I take a detour to stop by and say good night to Mellix.

“Hey, boy,” I stick my head in to find him curled up on the bed, a king-sized one that he fits perfectly on. His ears perk up, and one eye flicks open, but it’s clear he wants to rest. “I know, I’ll be quick, just wanted-”

He lifts his head and tilts it, tongue lolling out.

“Okay, fine, I wanted to ask about Dan. What do you think? Could he be a witch as well?” I walk over, plopping down beside him and stroking his coarse fur. He just whines beside me, laying his huge head across my lap.

“Fine, I’ll figure it out myself,” I chuckle, and his eyes drift shut. “Come on, I need to get to sleep,” I wiggle under him, but it’s apparently no use - he’s snoring a moment later, and I groan and flop back onto the bed, resigned to my fate.

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When I wake, it’s to a faceful of fur - not for the first time, but it never gets less annoying. Unfortunately, this particular bit of fur is also smacking at me impatiently, and I realize it must be Mellix’s tail whacking me in an attempt to wake me.

Sitting up is a creaky affair filled with joints cracking and muscles stretching, and I finally get myself fully upright a minute later. My alarm clock in animal form is already bouncing on his toes, tilting his head back and forth at me.

“It’s not like you can’t get outside, Susan would let him out if he has to pee or wants to get out and hunt- ‘hunt’, why does that-

My eyes fly wide, and I rush out the door and down the hall and to the staircase, leaning over the railing: just like last night, there’s a random guy laying on my sofa, curled up in my sweatpants and shirt and with a single bandaged foot sticking out from under my blanket. Mellix’s head appears at my shoulder, and he whines once.

“Well you said he was safe,” I whisper, wanting to chuckle at how anxious the giant furball is. Although, most of the time, he’s an extension of my own emotions. So I guess it’s just me, then. “Go on,” I point down the stairs, though my eyes stay fixed on Dan. “I said I’d send you out hunting, can you get some chickens? Nothing like you usually get, although that might-”

I break off when the clicking of claws across wood pulls me from my thoughts - maybe I should’ve told him to get one of those demonic bears or something, then I could gauge Dan’s reaction. But Mellix is already out the door, a sliding glass one to the back garden that Susan can open and close easily.
With Dan still asleep and nothing much to do until Mellix returns, I head into the bathroom for a quick shower - between the arrival of a stranger at odd hours of the evening and my wolf trapping me in his room, I really hadn’t gotten a chance for one last night.

As I step into the white-tiled room, I’m hit with a very strong flashback: Dan, stark naked and standing fully exposed in front of me. A wave of embarrassment washes over me as I realize I’d literally just stared at him, not even bothering to look away. Oh god, he probably thinks I’m a creep or something. I take a deep breath and squeeze my eyes shut until I’ve mostly gotten that image from my mind.

Except the second hot water is cascading down my back, the image reappears behind my eyelids. And moves, which Dan didn’t do last night. He takes slow steps towards me, skin glistening and hips rolling, looking like something that should not exist on this plane of reality - too much, too pretty, a bit unreal. It’s not until I feel cold tile against my skin that I realize I’m leaning heavily against the wall of the shower, biting my lip and fist my cock. Oh my god, I did not just-

But I did, apparently, and still am, because I’m picturing Dan getting closer, trailing a hand down my bare chest - which had not been bare last night - and pressing himself flush against me. My hips stutter into my hand, and I can’t even be bothered to feel bad anymore because the idea of Dan is just so good, and before I’ve even gotten anywhere in this fantasy, I’m coming hard and biting my fist to keep myself silent.

I end up leaving the shower feeling a bit less clean than when I got in.

By the time I’ve gotten clothes on, I’ve mostly managed to talk myself down. I mean, it’s not the first time I’ve gotten off on the idea of someone I don’t really know. I try to ignore the feeling that it was better than anyone else I’ve ever thought about. And that I hadn’t really intended to ever think about Dan that way.

Fortunately - or maybe unfortunately? - my thoughts are interrupted by a scream from the lounge, and I take the stairs two at a time to get down, all concerns about my shower debacle replaced by immediate fear of whatever catastrophe might be waiting for me.

The scene I find is actually hilarious, although evidently not to Dan: Susan has let Mellix back in, I assume while Dan was still asleep, and the wolf has dropped four chicken carcasses on the floor beside the sofa. I’d guess Mellix also had the bright idea of waking Dan up with a semi-bloody lick to the face, based on the reddish-pink mark on his cheek. I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to hide my grin.

Dan just stares at me, eyes and mouth both as wide as they’ll go, with his hands splayed out beside him. He keeps glancing between the chickens, the wolf, and me, like he’s waiting for the nightmare to end, and it just sends me over the edge into a fit of uncontrollable giggles.

“Mellix!” I sort of shout, meaning to chastise but sounding more like I’m just...well, laughing. “Take those out by the fire pit, you dolt,” I walk over and rub his muzzle, shaking my head at the way he grins at me - he knows we either cook fresh meat right away outside or store it in the freezer behind the shed, and he knows how to keep his mouth clean after a kill, so it’s clear he’s done this whole thing on purpose.

Dan’s still dead silent, stood up by the sofa, and I take one last look at the utter shock - and slobbery streaks of chicken blood - on his face before heading over to the sink and wetting a cloth. He still hasn’t moved by the time I get back over, but at least his jaw isn’t on the floor anymore - his lips are only parted a bit, brows scrunched.
“He did it on purpose,” I explain as I dab at his cheek, cleaning him as best I can. My comment must confuse him, because he tilts his head - a move that reminds me of the wolf himself - and I find myself grinning again. “Mellix, he knows how to behave, he just chose not to. I think he likes scaring you.” Now Dan’s properly frowning, and he crosses his arms. I continue wiping at his face.

“Well, that’s just-” he stops, grabbing the cloth out of my hand, and wipes down the rest of his cheek and neck. “Have I got it all?” I reach up to his chin, turning his head to the side to check for anything he might’ve missed. Then I nod. “It’s rude,” he finishes his sentence, cheeks still pink with anger, then marches over to the sink; I turn to watch him.

When he stomps particularly hard and sucks in a breath, I recall the reason for his staying here to begin with.

“Rude, yeah, uh, do you want me to change the bandage for you?” I offer as he hobbles the rest of the way to the kitchen. When he leans over the counter, I can see his shoulders tense even from across the room, and I wonder if he’s about to say no, to up and leave like he had the night before. Or had tried to leave. Worry suddenly squirms in my stomach.

“That, uh, would be good, thanks,” his voice has gone soft and small again, and I get the idea that he’s not used to asking for or accepting help. He’s got his foot balanced on his big toe as he rinses off the cloth in the sink, and I just lean back against the railing of the staircase and watch.

“I didn’t have a black one,” I say, my mouth speaking before my brain can tell it not to. Dan doesn’t react at first, and I wonder if the sound of the water has covered up my random outburst. But then he’s turning it off and peeking over his shoulder as he wrings out the cloth.

“A black one?” His tone is deadpan, barely hinting that it’s a question, and my cheeks flush. Why am I so awkward?

“Shirt! A black shirt, your favorite color?” I realize I’ve definitely made my response sound like a question, but Dan’s eyebrows just quirk up and he gives me a small smirk. Then he turns back around to the sink, doing I can’t even guess what.

“Grey’s fine,” is the only answer I get, and then Mellix is back at the door, whining at us.

“Breakfast?” I change the subject, because it’s easier than trying to continue that train wreck of a conversation. Dan nods, and I head over to the fridge. “Can you help me carry?” I ask, since he’s just stood there. Another nod, and he makes his way over to me, limping a bit. “Oh!” I’m an idiot. “Your foot, wait, that first,” I let the door of the fridge shut, and his lips part for a moment before I turn and head back to the sofa.

Fortunately, the coffee table is still littered with items from last night, including the poultice and bandages. I don’t even have to ask before Dan’s sat down in front of me, a foot propped up on the table. Because he’d been so jumpy yesterday, I give him a look, one I hope he understands to mean ‘can I go ahead?’ - fortunately, he does, nodding his consent and leaning back into the cushion.

I’m pleased to find that the cuts haven’t bled through the bandage, though I hadn’t been all that worried they would. After unwrapping the old gauze, careful to avoid touching him as much as I can, I examine the cuts: they’re already fading to a light pink color.

“Is it okay?” Dan’s voice is higher than usual, and tight with concern, so I smile at him.

“It’s good,” I promise, opening the small jar and spreading a bit more poultice over the fading cuts. At this rate, I’d expect them healed by tomorrow morning - spelled healing tends to work quickly,
though it can occasionally be unpredictable. I try to be as gentle as I can manage, but Dan’s still squirming a bit under my touch. “Almost done,” I say, glancing up to find his eyes squeezed shut and his bottom lip clenched tight between his teeth.

Without warning, I’m reminded of my fantasizing in the shower this morning. *Hell, that wasn’t even twenty minutes ago!* I wrap the fresh bandage around his foot in a haste.

“All set!” I force my voice to sound cheery as I stand, smiling at him then turning away and rushing into the kitchen as fast as I can. The cool air from the fridge does wonders for my suddenly warm cheeks.

“Thanks, did you still need help?” Dan is very close, closer than I expect, and I have to cough to cover the sound of my squeak. My knuckles turn white as I grip the handle tighter.

“Help?” The word sounds too high-pitched, and I clear my throat as I pretend to scan the fridge.

“Uh, carrying stuff?” Dan’s tone speaks of uneasiness, or confusion, and I inhale sharply.

“Right! Yes, thank you,” I quickly grab a carton of eggs and milk and hand them over, then grab some orange juice and slam the fridge shut. My other hands are soon loaded down with plates and glasses, and I nod my head toward the back door. Where Mellix has now settled a bit, but he perks up the second we get close.

Before I can ask, Susan’s sliding the door open for us, and I step through without a second thought.

“Wow, automatic doors, how fancy,” Dan mumbles behind me, and I frown. *Although, even among witches, I guess a sentient house is pretty uncommon.* Either that, or he’s faking ignorance to throw me off his trail. *What if he doesn’t even realize I’m a witch, though?*
Dan

It’s been...a rough morning so far. And I really need to work on screaming less.

But my heart rate has finally come down - for the most part, though it’s started to climb now that there’s a giant wolf staring at me - and we’re about to eat some real food, so I’m feeling a bit more settled. A bit.

I hadn’t realized how fancy Phil’s house was until the door slid open for us and we stepped outside - I mean, I’ve seen automatic doors before, sure, but rarely in houses; this one leads us out into a sprawling garden draped with lush plants, beside which sits a fire pit that sparks to life as we walk toward it. I suppose the garden itself isn’t high-tech, necessarily, but it’s pretty damn cool, and clearly well-maintained.

“Are you completely self-sufficient out here?” I ask, eyes wandering over the various perfectly ripe fruits and vegetables. Are these all in season? There seem to be so many, but I don’t know anything about agriculture. It’s only once my gaze lands on the hulking form of Mellix that I quicken my pace and refocus on Phil.

“Mostly,” Phil admits - and it _does_ sound like an admission, like there’s something he’s saying without saying. “I guess Mellix has to hunt _somewhere_, but otherwise, yeah.” Oh, _right_. The image of disgusting chicken carcasses littering the floor flashes in my head, and I grimace.

“And I do have to go into town sometimes,” he adds, “when I can’t get whatever I need here.” At his words, my muscles freeze, and I nearly drop the milk. My feet stumble, sending a prick of discomfort up from the cut one, but I can’t even be bothered to wince.

Phil looks over from his spot beside the fire pit, already hanging up the chickens to roast. There’s a cast iron skillet laid out over the fire as well, where I imagine our eggs will be cooked, if I can manage to make myself breathe and relax and walk over there.

“Don’t worry, though, we’re outside the town limits,” he purses his lips, expression softening. I exhale slowly and nod, forcing my body to move forward. _Outside town limits, I’m fine_. My heart rate has shot back up to its earlier speed.

“Right, yeah,” I push words out - because that’s what I should do, I think - and hand eggs and milk over to Phil. I focus very hard on continuing to breathe.

“Do you want to sit? I’ll get the eggs going,” he offers, pointing off toward a small wood table with some chairs sat around it. Curled around the base of the table, though, is a very menacing-looking wolf, so I plop myself down in the grass right beside Phil and the fire.

“I’m good here, thanks,” I cast one more glance at the table, and Mellix lifts his head and bares his teeth at me. “Definitely good here.” I don’t miss the small chuckle from Phil, but I try to ignore it. Instead, I do my best to focus on the food - the chicken rotates of its own accord, I assume some rotisserie powered by a generator, and Phil cracks a few eggs over the skillet. The sizzling is calming, making my ears tingle and my eyes glaze over. _I’m not sure what my future holds, but at least I’m not dead yet in the present._

Before long, a plate is being shoved in my face, piled high with slices of roast chicken and topped with some over-easy eggs. I take it purely on instinct, looking up as Phil smiles down at me. Then he’s disappearing behind me, walking over to the table where Mellix has settled.
I watch as the wolf leaps up, maw opening wide as Phil tosses two of the roasted chickens toward him. The first he catches, crunching on it like a chew toy before he swallows it nearly whole. The second thumps on the ground, but he’s quick to pick it up a moment later; this one he takes his time with, ripping off small pieces to gulp down.

By the time he finishes, I still haven’t stood up from my spot near the cooling fire pit - Phil must’ve put it out before he handed me my plate. He’s sat at the table, pouring himself a glass of orange juice and cutting into his food. A growl rumbles in my stomach, apparently loud enough to draw the attention of the very beast I’m trying to avoid.

Mellix’s ears perk up, then he’s bounding over - honestly looking more like a puppy than a massive wolf, but I scramble onto my feet and back toward the house regardless, doing my best not to dump the contents of my plate all over the grass.

“Mellix!” Phil’s voice is a godsend, if I believed in a god, as Mellix slides to a halt only a few feet away. “Quit that, Dan’s a guest, and you’re scaring him on purpose!” The wolf backs up a few steps, whining, but turns and walks back over to the table. My heart is still hammering in my chest, and I can’t manage to move. Phil just scratches Mellix’s head, then shoves him away.

It’s not til the wolf has disappeared into the surrounding trees that I exhale, then take a shaky step toward the table. By the time I get over there, I’ve managed to calm down considerably, and Phil just smiles up at me as he chews whatever bite he’s just taken.

“I’m not scared,” I frown, setting my plate down and sitting in the chair opposite him. He shakes his head, brows scrunching together, then swallows.

“No, of course not.” There’s a glint in his eye, though, and I grab a fork and stab angrily at an egg. The yolk breaks, but it’s a soft kind of unsatisfying break, and I poke around at the food until my stomach reminds me how damn hungry I actually am, and to quit pouting and just eat.

The first bite is good, like really good - or maybe I’m just starving - so I end up basically shoveling the contents of my plate into my mouth. It’s not til there’s nothing left that I look up to find Phil just sort of grinning at me around a bite, and I at least have the common sense to duck my head back down, a little embarrassed at my likely-disgusting display.

“Do you want more?” He asks after swallowing, and I peek up. Am I still hungry? My stomach feels mostly full, though I’m kind of tempted to ask for seconds. I’m already overstepping my bounds on hospitality, I decide, and shake my head.

“Full, thanks,” I clear my throat, sitting back in the chair. Phil just nods, eyes returning to his plate - almost empty - and continuing his meal. Because it’s awkward sitting there watching him eat, I reach for the carton of milk and pour myself a glass. Then sip it slowly, just to have something to do.

Movement at the tree line behind Phil catches my attention, and I try very hard to keep my expression neutral as Mellix emerges and saunters back over toward us. He’s got something dangling from his jaw - another dead animal, I assume - and his tail wags as he gets closer. I take a long, slow drink of milk. He’s just trying to frighten me on purpose, if I act like I’m not afraid, he’ll stop.

The tried and true tactic of getting a bully to stop fucking with you that somehow never really worked for me in high school.

Phil must notice my gaze drift, as he turns to look over his shoulder. Then he’s up on his feet,
speed-walking toward the wolf and stopping him in his tracks just outside the perimeter of the
garden. I can’t hear anything from here, but his shoulders look tight and tense, and he’s clearly
pointing back toward the forest; Mellix’s ears flick back and forth, then yellow eyes lock with mine
for a second, and my heart jumps to my throat.

But a moment later, he’s retreating back into the trees; at some point I remember to blink and
breathe and take another sip of milk - which ends up being my last, so I set the empty glass down
with a loud clink on the table. Phil’s walking back now, offering a small smile.

“You didn’t have to send him away,” I jump to the defensive. “I told you, I’m not scared.” Hands
now free from having to hold anything, I cross my arms and try very hard not to pout. I end up
pursing my lips instead.

Phil’s half-smile grows wider, until he looks on the edge of laughter.

“Right, uh, yeah,” is all he manages to say. I expect him to sit back down, but he collects his empty
plate and mine before I can argue. In an effort to help, I grab our empty glasses and stack them,
then hold the orange juice and milk cartons under my other arm to carry to the kitchen. Fortunately,
there’s no protest from Phil, and I trail behind him and back into the house.

As before, the door slides open as soon as we’re in range, and I shake my head at the unexpected
luxury. Really, perhaps I could imagine that in a fancy city apartment, but a random cabin in the
woods? Ultimately, I conclude that Phil must either be a rich guy who keeps to himself, or he really
is a serial killer who lures people into his home only to end up woodchipping them for fertilizer.
Those plants are really well-cared-for…

“Are you, uh-” I break off, because Phil’s spun around and staring at me, eyes a little wider than I
anticipated. His lips part, like he’s about to say something, then they close and he looks off to the
side for a second. Then back to me. Then he lifts his brows. “Oh, uh, are you like, a…” my cheeks
flush, because I’d been about to ask if he’s a fucking murderer, which suddenly sounds like the
dumbest idea to ever pop in my head.

“Am I a what?” Phil prompts aloud, reaching out to take the glasses from me. I relinquish them
without much thought, still debating whether to let my stupid mouth say the stupid words. I twist
my lips instead, then walk over to use the fridge door as a very effective barrier between the surely
judgmental eyes Phil will give me.

“Like, a murderer or something?” I set the cartons back in the fridge slowly, hoping to avoid
whatever look I’m currently being given. It’s almost palpable, the tension in the air. Oh god, he’s
going to kill me right now because I just figured out his plans. Irrationally, I slam the door shut so I
can keep an eye him. Not that he’s actually moved, aside from turning toward me.

“A...a murderer?” His brows arch higher up his forehead, lips parted for a moment before they
break into a bright grin. Then he’s laughing, and his eyes squint until they’re shut, and heat floods
my cheeks as I drop my gaze to the floor. Right, of course he’s not going to kill me, I’m a fucking
idiot. Still, it doesn’t settle well in my stomach that he’s just being nice to me because.

“I mean, you have a giant fucking wolf who’s out to get me, and you just let a complete stranger
stay in your house, and you live in the middle of nowhere and I’ve never even seen this place
before-” I scramble for any logical reasons behind my fear, but they all sound flat and childish the
second I say them out loud. Phil’s at least had the decency to cover his laughter with a hand.

“Sorry, I just, I thought you were going to-” he breaks off, giggles dissipating. In fact, he sobers
almost completely, straightening up and dropping his hand. “I mean, I did think you might be a
murderer at first, remember?” He gives me a sheepish grin, and I exhale a short breath of relief. *Fair enough.*

“I mean, you’re not, though, right?” I ask, licking my lips and trying to keep myself calm - he didn’t actually *answer.* Again, of course, he breaks out into a fit of giggles, and I duck my head.

“No, Dan, I’m not a murderer,” he clarifies, which I appreciate. Though he could be lying, there’s no way I’d even know. Granted, I guess, *I* could be lying about being a murderer, and he wouldn’t know.

“Guess we’re even, then,” I nod, completing my own thought aloud. Which, in retrospect, I realize is probably confusing, but Phil just nods like he understands and sets about rinsing off the dishes to put into the dishwasher. “Anything I can help with?” I offer, still uncomfortable that he’s being so hospitable and I’ve done nothing but barge into his home, use his shower without permission, and take his food without giving anything in return. Oh, and call him a murderer. “Like, really, anything?” Guilt squirms in my gut.

“It’s-” Phil turns to look at me, and he must see that guilt on my face - or *something*, anyway - as he cuts himself off before the inevitable ‘it’s fine’ I can hear in his tone. He purses his lips for a moment. “Actually, yeah, could you grab the mugs and bowl from the coffee table?” I nod, glad for a task.

A task which takes all of five seconds to complete, then I’m back to shifting back and forth on my feet aimlessly.
As I rinse out the mugs and pile them into the dishwasher, I look back to find Dan just standing there, evidently waiting for his next task. Really, I usually do everything myself, but it’s clearly making him uncomfortable not to be helping.

“Oh! I just forgot, the eggs are still outside, could you grab those as well?” I’m done anyway, so I lean back on the counter to watch Dan make his way outside. I’m glad Mellix hasn’t returned yet - I still can’t believe he’d come back with a harpy of all things - and I hope he isn’t just waiting beyond the tree line for his opportunity to strike. That would be a little hilarious, though.

I try not to project that thought too far, in case Mellix is close enough to hear and gets it in his head to actually do it.

“Here, uh, anything else?” Dan holds up the carton - one of my favorite spelled items, it never runs out of eggs - and I point at the fridge. Then wrack my brain for anything else he could help with.

“I think the breakfast stuff is cleaned up,” I start, hoping to find my sentence along the way. What had I even planned on doing today, before Dan showed up? “Oh! I have to go into town today,” I shake my head when he grimaces. “No, you shouldn’t come with, of course, but could you pick some fruit for me, from the garden? I mean, if you don’t mind,” I add, because I’m getting the idea that he wants things to do, but I don’t want to be too presumptuous. Apparently, I’m not, because he just scoffs.

“Phil,” this is accentuated with an eye roll, “you’re the one letting me stay here til I’m healed, it’s the least I can do,” I nod, though there’s a small drop in my gut - he should be healed by tomorrow morning. Does that mean he’ll be leaving, then? I’m not sure I want him to go...

“Right, okay,” I say, forcing a bright grin. “Uh, I’m gonna head out, but feel free to use the shower-” words suddenly fully escape me at both Dan’s and my flush.

“Or whatever, uhm, just, yeah, I’ll be back soon!” The door opens before I pull at it, and I step out into the cool air and take a deep breath.

“How is it,” I ask nobody, or maybe Susan if she’s listening, “that I manage to be so awkward?”

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I make it to town in record time, an accomplishment I blame on my racing heart and desperate need to be as far away from Dan as I possibly can. It’s not til I’m walking down the main street, passing familiar shops and boutique jewelry stores, that I manage to slow my steps and my breathing.

Okay, focus, what was I coming in town for again?

With a groan and an eye roll that mimics Dan’s earlier level of sarcasm, I check the never-busy street for any oncoming cars - Beatrice’s shop is on the other side, full of occult items that I rarely have use for but which occasionally come in handy. It’s more the woman herself I take issue with. I really try to be nice, I do, but she’s just so haughty about the kind of witchcraft she practices - I have no problem with those who are into the darker things as long as they steer clear of me, but Beatrice makes a point of talking down to me about everything.

“Hello- oh! Phil, so nice of you to stop by!” The false sweetness grates at my ears as I push
through the front door - painted all black as a part of her aesthetic. She’s stood behind the counter, grinning at me. I still can’t believe she got fang caps put on her teeth, though she insists they’re real, directly from a vampire source. She has a lot of ‘sources’.

“Morning, Beatrice,” I give her a tight-lipped smile in return as I walk over. “Has that black chalk come in yet? Or the possessed quail eggs?” It’s rare that I need any of these things, but they come in handy to have around - the eggs in particular, if there’s ever a shortage of demonic creatures for Mellix to hunt.

“Hmm,” she narrows her eyes at me, scanning me from head to toe - her other point of complaint: I never dress like a witch. She, on the other hand, skirts around the end of the counter to reveal a flowing black dress, cinched tight at her waist with a corset. Long fabric trails from her wrists and neck, floating around her on an air I know she perpetually generates just for the sake of aesthetics. Even her makeup is spelled to suck in light, to give her an air of mystery and danger.

I sigh as I follow her to the back of the shop.

“No chalk yet, and you’re fifth on the list to get it once it’s in,” she reminds me, and I repress a sigh - last I’d asked, I was fourth, but it’ll do me no good to argue. “But I’ve got two quail eggs left over from the last buyer, you want both, I assume?” She whirls around to hold them out, and I take them. They’ll keep a while, what with being possessed and all.

“Thanks,” I say, as genuinely as I can manage - she’s being uncharacteristically pleasant today, and I have no reason to be rude if she isn’t.

“Now, are you sure you can properly handle both? Do you need a transport spell to get them home?” Ah, there it is. Instead of the frown that begs to tug my cheeks down, I force a smile as she heads back behind the counter.

“I’m alright, thanks, I have my own transport spells.” I do, actually - plus, hers are obnoxiously overpriced because they include this horrible puff of black smoke that always leaves those nearby coughing and choking. “Just the eggs,” I emphasize at her lifted brow.

“If you say so,” she practically sings. “Eighteen for each.” Eighteen? If I could get them anywhere else, I would, but she does have ‘sources’, and I’ve yet to get an ineffective or fake item from her. With a resigned sigh, I hand her my card, and she gives me a fang-toothed grin as she swipes it and prints my receipt. “Have a day!”

The silly farewell, her attempt at leaving customers with an edgy impression, follows me out the door. As soon as I’m down the road, I exhale. The eggs feel heavy in my hand - a product of the possession - but I know this part of town isn’t exactly fond of spells out in the open. It’s a miracle they tolerate Beatrice’s shop, though she’s just as willing to sell pre-spelled items and curses to any regular person, and there’s no shortage of mean or lazy people here.

Fortunately, although my next stop is much more mundane, it’s also far more friendly toward witches. The garden center comes into view as I turn the next corner, still carefully balancing the eggs in my hand, but I can feel myself grinning as I approach.

This place has always felt a bit like a second home.

“Phil! How are you?” Javier’s deep voice booms over the sound of sprinklers - spelled to go off exactly when the plants need them - and I wave my free hand enthusiastically. Javier had helped me plan out my entire home garden, provided each set of seeds and taught me all the tips and tricks. In return - aside from paying for his services - I’d spelled several of his own items, like the
sprinklers and the garden tools; those now work their way around the greenhouse, tending to the plants.

“I’m great, Javier, how are you this morning?” I usually try to avoid small talk, even with people I like, but he’s an older guy and I’m one of his only regular customers. For a few minutes, he goes on about the most recent shipment of cacti and how they’re taking up far more water than he expected since they’re, well, *cacti*.

“But I suspect you’re here for the belladonna?” There’s a gleam in his eye and his wrinkled cheek lifts in a knowing smirk, but I just smile and nod - I think he suspects I’m some kind of evildoer masquerading as a helpful witch, because I have requests like this every now and again and I’d much rather go to him than Beatrice when I can. He shuffles away, off to find the plant. To be fair, belladonna is incredibly dangerous, poisonous and quick to kill, and that’s *without* any magic involved.

But, handled carefully and prepared properly - with gloves and lots of protection - it’s one of the best ingredients to use in a suspension or flying spell. Which makes it particularly useful for the sprinkler system I have installed in both my garden and here in Javier’s. And I rarely curse anyone or anything, but it’s much easier to have belladonna on hand than to order the dried stuff in bulk through Beatrice’s shop like I usually do.

“Be very careful, and keep the soil moist on this one,” the man is making his way back with a tiny sprout of a plant in a giant pot - giant, to most likely to prevent any accidental brushes with the paralytic leaves. He sets it gently on the counter, and I hand over some cash. Most places take a card, but Javier’s a bit old fashioned like that.

“I’ll be careful, don’t worry,” I nod, glad to have prepared a levitation spell ahead of time. I’m cautious, but clumsy as hell, and I’d definitely end up face-planting into the pot after tripping over thin air. “Mind if I transport something as well?” Javier looks up from counting his money, brows raised, before nodding his head and waving a hand in dismissal.

Without any fancy shenanigans, the two quail eggs pop out of existence - they should’ve landed right in the incubators in the shed at home, and I’m sure Susan will set them to remain in a stasis for the time being. I don’t trust sending the belladonna home on its own, though, so it floats beside me as I take the long way out of town and back toward the house.

The long way, because I have to avoid the street where everyone would stare daggers at me just for having a floating plant beside me.

With a sigh, I start my trek, wishing I had the ingredients on hand for a full-sized-person transport spell. Those are a bit more troublesome to create and perfect, and I’ve only made a few I’d say I’m proud of - the ones that *didn’t* dump me in the middle of a swamp or up a tree. Though even the good ones left me with a bit of a headache.

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I go round the back way once the house is in view, intent on setting up the belladonna and putting the right protection spells around it to keep out any animals - *or unsuspecting Dans*, I realize as I catch sight of a figure poking around by the shed.

“Have any trouble with the fruit?” I ask, stopping beside the empty patch that’s already been prepped for the poisonous plant. The pot lowers itself to the ground beside me just as Dan whirls around, eyes wide and mouth dropped open.
“Oh! I uh, no, no trouble,” he gives me a shaky smile, glancing between the shed and me like he’s been caught doing something he shouldn’t have done. Snooping, clearly, but I don’t have much in the shed that would be of interest...unless he’s a witch! I try not to grin too brightly back at him.

“Great! I’m going to get this planted,” Dan just nods, still frozen in place by the shed door, so I go for the most casual thing I can think to say. “It’s belladonna.” In spite of myself, my eyebrows quirk up at the word, waiting for a reaction.

“Belladonna?” He squints, and his face scrunches. Then he’s looking toward the sky, and I can’t decide if that’s a meaningful reaction or not. “Isn’t that poisonous or something?” I frown, then nod.

“Very, you can’t even touch it without gloves on, okay?” I realize he’s a grown adult, I have no business talking to him like he’s a child, but he clearly doesn’t know what the stuff is - either a poorly-trained witch, then, or he’s very good at faking it.

Or maybe he’s not a witch at all, but then how’d he get through my wards?

I realize after a moment that I’ve been fully lost in my head and we’re both just staring at each other, so I clear my throat and try to focus on the task at hand. Maybe I should just...tell him I’m a witch?

The solution - or rather, all the problems that could occur alongside that ‘solution’ - has me suddenly terrified: if he’s not a witch after all, he might be one of those witch-haters, or he might be afraid of me, and then what if he leaves? He’s been in my life for less than a day, and I’m already...well, I think I’d like him to stay around awhile longer.

I head over to the shed, which is apparently enough to get Dan moving, as he backs away with a ducked head and red-tinted cheeks. Even if I don’t mention being a witch, he’ll be healed eventually, and then he’ll want to leave, won’t he?

Or maybe I could convince him to stay?
Dan

Why am I such absolute shit at being sneaky?

To be fair, if I’d wanted to go snooping, I probably shouldn’t have waited for so long after Phil left, but the idea had only occurred to me after I’d plucked some random fruits and stored them in the fridge, then lounged around on the sofa for a while, watching-but-not-really-watching some cooking show on TV.

Once it had popped into my head, though, I’d thrown myself off the sofa and marched up the stairs: the bathroom I’d already seen, and it was just as uneventful as the first time - well, I guess it hadn’t been uneventful, but it hadn’t held anything interesting the first time and it still held nothing interesting the second. The room across the hall, though, seemed to be Phil’s room, scattered with the plaid button-downs he’d worn yesterday and today and containing nothing more than a bed and a wardrobe.

The wardrobe had been surprisingly well-organized, given the messy state of his floor, but otherwise had nothing to pique my curiosity.

The next room I barely had to peek into - one giant bed covered in dog fur, most definitely belonging to the wolf who had yet to return, and I had no intention of being caught in there. The final room wouldn’t open, no matter how I jiggled the doorknob, so I’d given up and retreated downstairs.

The lounge and kitchen seemed just as uninteresting as the bathroom, but I’d noticed a shack outside that begged to be investigated. A shed would surely hold some secrets, I’d decided.

Which is how, not five seconds after opening the door to said shed, Phil had called out behind me and I’d whirled around, heat flushing my cheeks. Nothing he said for the next two minutes really registered in my brain, unable to get past the thrumming of my heartbeat in my ears, and I’d near run for the hills when he started walking toward me - until I realized he was just heading for the shed.

“Uh, right, sorry,” I stutter out some kind of apology, though he hasn’t even asked for one, but he just gives me a small smile as he steps inside. The door swings wide, and I can just barely see past him, so I shift up onto my toes to get a glimpse.

I find a rather boring shed, full of a few pots and gardening tools, some miscellaneous machinery, and a few pairs of gardening gloves. These are what Phil reaches for, and I stumble back and out of his way again as he turns around. Well, unless he’s hiding something horrible in that room upstairs, I guess he really isn’t a murderer...

But the mystery of that room is very suddenly and desperately grabbing my attention, and I don’t realize I’m following Phil until he’s haunched down beside whatever little plant he’s about to transplant - he’d said belladonna, right?

“What do you want a killer plant for?” I realize my word choice belatedly, but Phil just chuckles as he works, careful to give the leaves a wide berth as he scoops the roots out and sets them into the garden plot, surrounding them with the remaining soil from the pot. It’s not til he’s finished that he stands, brushing off his gloves, and responds.

“Not for any killer purpose, I promise.” His voice still holds that laughter, and I wonder if he didn’t
assume I was referencing the whole murderer thing from earlier. “It has certain useful...properties,” he says cryptically, squinting at me. I must not react the way he’s expecting - and really, how am I meant to react to that? - because he twists his lips and turns away, back toward the shed.

This time, I don’t follow, too confused to make my body move.

Which lasts for about ten seconds, then there’s a very warm, heavy breath on the back of my neck, and I yelp and jump away. Of course, when I whirl around, staring right back at me are two yellow eyes attached to a giant mouth full of razor-sharp teeth and a big reddish-pink tongue that lolls out in clear amusement.

“Fuck off,” I grumble at the wolf, immediately regretting my decision when he sticks his muzzle in my face and sniffs. “I am not food,” I announce loudly, then take another step back, shaking far more than I’d like to admit; I try not to jump again when Mellix’s ears perk up and he trots past me, I assume toward Phil.

“Hey boy!” There’s a soft whine from the wolf, and I turn to see Phil scratching his head, a fond smile on his face. That is a hell of a well-trained beast. Although, not that well-trained if he’s taking every opportunity to torment me.

“Phil!” I shout across the garden, not willing to risk my life by getting any closer. “Tell your dog to quit messing with me!” I cross my arms over my chest, pouting in an attempt to control the lingering fear pricking at my nerves, screaming at me to run!

Instead of responding, Phil just walks over, Mellix loping behind him, and it takes a stupid amount of willpower to keep myself from racing back for the house. I guess technically the wolf hasn’t hurt me yet, but I’m not about to just drop my guard.

“You two had better learn to get along if you’ll be staying under my roof,” Phil matches my posture, arms crossed and a tight-lipped pout that honestly looks like it’s already turning into a smile. Mellix tilts his head at Phil, then at me, then snorts out a sound that I would characterize as a laugh if it weren’t coming from an animal.

“He’s got a point, you said I should be good to go tomorrow anyway,” I force the words out, and they send a pang through my chest. I’ll be gone tomorrow. My pout turns into a frown. Where will I go, though? I literally have nothing, and nowhere. For a single tense moment, we’re both silent.

“Do you have a plan, a place to go?” Phil’s voice has gone soft by the time he responds, and I wonder if I’m really that bad at hiding my own thoughts. I take a deep breath, hoping to stall until I have something cleverer to say than ‘no, I have abso-fucking-loutely nothing’.

“I-” I’d been about to start, to at least pretend I had a plan, when a wet tongue laps across the side of my face. So I end up sputtering, spitting on the grass and trying to get the gross slobber out of my mouth.

“Ah,” I glance up to find Phil’s eyebrows lifted, then he nods like some sage master. “No plan, then,” and he brushes right past me and into the house. Mellix follows, and his tail whacks my arm on the way.

“I didn’t-” I spit again, wiping angrily at my face. “I didn’t say I had no plan!” I argue, but Phil doesn’t respond. “I do too have a plan,” I try again. Nothing. He’s just stood at the sink, washing his hands and blatantly ignoring my lies. For a desperate moment, I scramble to try to think of anything I could say to prove I’m not some incompetent loser who probably would’ve died if I
hadn’t come upon his house the other night.

But I can’t, there’s very literally nothing in my head aside from heaps of fear and self-doubt and frustration, so I just huff out an angry breath and cross my arms again. Mellix mimics me with some kind of snorting sound as he wanders over by the sofa, resting his chin on the cushion like he’d like to get up but knows he’s not allowed.

“You’re welcome to stay here,” Phil says, only audible now that he’s turned the tap off. I glance over from where I’d been frowning at Mellix to find Phil drying his hands, facing me with a small smile. *Stay?* A wave of relief washes over me, along with a curl of guilt in my stomach.

“I don’t have any money, or anything, I couldn’t-”

“Nonsense, just help out around the house and consider it rent,” Phil’s waving a hand at me, leaning back against the counter, and I don’t really know what to say. Every instinct in me is screaming that nobody is this nice, that there has to be a catch, that I am not this lucky. And then there’s Phil, just grinning at me.

“Would it make you feel better if we say it’s only til you come up with a better plan?” He asks, breaking the silence I couldn’t manage to fill. But it would, so I nod.

“Actually, yeah,” I add. “Okay, fine, but can you ask Mellix to please stop scare- uh, being so rude to me?” I frown back at the wolf, who’s crept up so his front paws and chest are laying on the sofa but his back legs still rest on the ground. His ears perk up at his name.

“Mellix, you heard him, no more rudeness!” Phil teases; then he giggles, actually giggles, and I’m tempted to storm out of the house right then and not turn back. But that brings me back to my plan - or lack thereof - so I just pout and cross my arms and hope he’s done with the taunting. *I’m not scared of a giant dog.*

“One, Mellix, for real, go find something to do outside, give Dan a break and give Susan a break, she’ll throw a fit if you get fur all over the sofa,” Phil’s voice has turned a bit more serious, or at least less joking, and the wolf whimpers as he backs off the cushion and trots outside, tail between his legs. I frown - I hadn’t meant for Phil to kick him out, no matter the way he sets me on edge.

“He didn’t have to-” but Phil just waves a hand, shutting me up.

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“Okay, fine, but who’s Susan? You mentioned her yesterday as well,” I frown - he’d said he didn’t live with anyone, but then who is this lady? Phil’s friend, maybe? *Or a girlfriend,* my brain supplies; it sounds like a much more logical explanation, but I don’t like the way it feels to think about it. My cheeks flush at the underlying implication of my own twinge of jealousy, and I duck my head.

“She’s, uh…” When I glance up, Phil’s the one looking a little uncertain, and I quirk a brow. *Maybe it is a girlfriend, then…* I hold my breath. “My house?” My eyes go wide, then scrunch, and my mouth opens - as if I would even know how to respond.

“Your house?” I finally manage, articulate as always. But a very small glow of hope ignites in my chest, and I try to tamp down on it, stop it from getting out of hand. *I do not have any kind of*
feelings, not for a stranger I barely know. Even if he’s a nice stranger. And nice to look at.

About twelve different expressions cross Phil’s face before I have time to blink, though I think I can pull out confusion and frustration, and maybe embarrassment. Frustration? Is that really what that frown was?

“It’s-”

But we’re quickly silenced by a loud keening outside, and we both whirl around to the back door. From the angle I’m at, I can’t see anything, but Phil must notice something worth investigating because he’s soon racing out the door; I follow without hesitation.

It’s not til I’m sliding to a stop beside the garden bed, cuts on my foot aching at the motion, that I fully comprehend what’s happened: Mellix is laying on his side, breathing shallow and tongue lolling out of his mouth. His teeth are stained a purplish-red, and Phil’s crouched beside him, a hand on his stomach. The belladonna!

“It’s -”

“Dan, I need your help, please go upstairs to the back room,” even Phil’s breath comes in short gasps, skin turning pale at the sight of his pet in danger. “I need bloodroot, it’s a root that’s dark red, like blood, and a few black candles, and some quartz. You know what quartz is?” His words are rushed, but eerily calm. “Dan?” He chokes out, the sound a stark contrast to his directions; I realize I haven’t moved, and Phil’s still hovering over Mellix, his back now bowed like he’s about to lay his head on the wolf’s fur.

“Red roots, black candles, and yes, I know what quartz is,” I repeat, my own breath suddenly coming faster and harder, though I haven’t even done anything. Oh my god, what if the wolf dies? Belladonna, Phil said it was poisonous, oh my god. I’m backing away slowly, too slowly, and I tap into some well of adrenaline that finally gets me turning around and rushing back to the house.

It’s not til I’m up the stairs and jiggling the handle of the door that I realize it’s that fucking locked room. Oh god, it’s locked, I can’t-

But the knob turns, and I’m falling inside, barely catching myself on unsteady feet before I can properly hit the ground. Curiosity takes the reins for a split second, begging me to look around, to snoop like I’d planned to earlier, but I push my intrigue aside for the sake of the dying animal downstairs.

My feet scuff over chalk marks on the wood floor in my rush to the far window, where a desk sits with a plastic cabinet of tiny drawers atop it. Each drawer has a label, and I scan with my eyes as I drag my fingers along the slips of paper - aloe, anise, basil, no...wait, bloodroot! I fumble with the little container until it’s falling out on the desk, reddish-brown lumps scattering like marbles. How much?

I’m all but hyperventilating now, grabbing a handful of the roots and whirling around to catalogue the rest of the room: to the left, a wall of mirrors of all different sizes, bordered in one corner by stacks of candles. Candles! I pile my arm with as many black candles as I can carry, some fat stumps and some the tall, thin kind, entirely unsure which Phil needs.

Quartz, quartz - where my gaze falls on the shelves across from me, stacked with gemstones of varying sizes and colors. These aren’t labeled, but I manage to figure out the quartz easily enough - just a clearish rock, right? Then I’m out the door, back downstairs and outside as quickly as my body will move.

“Here!” I practically shout, dumping the various items by Phil’s side; I’m almost embarrassed, out
of breath for no good reason, except that Mellix is still panting and whining in front of me, and that’s a little more important than worrying about my horrifying unfitness.

Phil doesn’t even acknowledge my presence, a hand still resting on the wolf’s stomach, but he grabs two of the bloodroots and sticks them down Mellix’s throat, massaging at his neck until he swallows. My eyes flick between Phil and the wolf, adrenaline and nerves making me bounce on my toes in spite of the way it aggravates my foot.

“Is that it, will he-” I’m asking, but Phil shushes me - a moment later, Mellix is vomiting, blackish-red bile spilling out the side of his open maw to stain the grass. I cough at the acrid smell and take a step farther back. Phil’s hand doesn’t leave the wolf, but his other arranges the larger candles - the ones that can stand on their own - in a semicircle beside him. The quartz earns a spot in the middle, and for the first time since we rushed outside, I wonder what the hell is happening.

The candles spark to life before my eyes, just as Phil waves a hand over them, and I’d almost be impressed at the illusion if it didn’t feel like a bit of a serious moment to be messing about with magic tricks. My lips tug down into a frown, parting to ask what on earth Phil’s fucking around with when he should probably be calling a fucking vet or something.

The garden falls into silence, though - a heavy, muted silence, not a nice, peaceful quiet - and I hold my breath as Mellix falls completely still, no longer making a sound. My eyes widen, watching Phil’s hand for any sign of a rise and fall. Jesus fucking christ, I didn’t love you, but please don’t fucking die? I say the words in my head like a prayer, swearing that if I’d ever believed in a god, it would be really great to see a miracle right now.

But the moment passes, and the soft sounds of the forest return around us, and Mellix still isn’t moving.

“Phil, is he-” I’m almost afraid to ask, to even dare finish the sentence, but Phil just turns toward me, inhaling deeply, slowly. Then he exhales.

“He’ll be okay,” he says, shaky and weak-sounding, like the stress of the moment has finally caught up with him. He still looks unnaturally pale, dark bags standing out under his eyes. His hand - the one that hadn’t left Mellix’s stomach - now pets across it in long strokes. As if on cue, the wolf whines, scooting himself back and away from the pile of vomit now soaking into the ground.

Somehow, I manage to exhale as well, to calm myself, to piece my own thoughts together. Naturally, then, curiosity and confusion hit me like a tsunami, and I scrunch my brows.

“Okay, I have a lot of questions.”
“Okay, I have a lot of questions,” Dan says, which only makes my racing heart race faster - I really hadn’t meant to be so obvious with the whole ‘I’m a witch’ thing, but he’d asked about Susan and then Mellix -

Oh god, poor Mellix...I keep a hand moving through his fur, hoping to bring some comfort. He’s still shivering, an aftereffect of pulling the toxin from his system, but he’ll be back to his usual self in a day or so. I’m suddenly eternally grateful to have Dan here, or I wouldn’t have been able to hold back the poison and get the ingredients I needed for that cleansing spell.

Although, if Dan hadn’t been here, I might’ve remembered to put the wards up right away...It’s not til I have this thought that I realize Dan’s said something, and I glance over to find him pouting, arms crossed - but his fingers are white and shaking where they grip his elbows, and I can tell that this got to him as well.

“Can it wait?” I ask, trying to steady my own breathing. These wards, first - I doubt Mellix will be dumb enough to try to eat the belladonna again, but I’d so much rather be safe than sorry. I lean fully over, pressing a loud kiss to the wolf’s fur, then push myself up from the grass. The candles wink out a moment later, wisps of smoke drifting up from the wicks, and I use the burning smell to keep myself grounded and focused and not so dizzy - that spell had taken a lot out of me, and I had not been prepared for it.

“No, if I’m living here, you can’t do cryptic shit and not tell me about it, I deserve-” Dan’s shouting, and it’s making my ears ring and my head pound, so I wave my hand at him.

“Give me like, five minutes, I’ll answer your questions, I just need to put these wards up, uh, first...” I’m practically mumbling, though, and my vision’s going blurry. No no no, I don’t -

Apparently, ‘I don’t’ refers to the fact that I don’t even get to finish the thought, because everything goes black a second later.

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What the….my eyelids stick together, forcing my eyes to stay shut, and my cheek feels uncomfortably warm - my back, however, feels damp and cool, and my head and hip ache. I shift slightly, then immediately groan and decide it’s the worst possible thing I could’ve done.

“Phil? Are you okay?” The voice echoes in my ears, sounding off and a bit loud, so it takes me a moment to recognize it as Dan’s. I finally manage to blink my eyes open, only to find a face hovering very close to mine. My instinct is to jerk back, away, but my head’s already blocked by something behind me.

Or, apparently, below me. As my senses come back, I realize I’m staring up at the sky - bright blue past Dan’s head - and laying back on the damp grass of what must be the garden. Where I collapsed. Great, that’s not embarrassing at all. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping it’s all just a dream and I’ll wake up in my bed or somewhere - anywhere - less mortifying.

“You sort of passed out, I didn’t know what to do, are you-” I peek my eyes open to find Dan still hovering there, brows scrunched and lips twisted in concern.

“No, I’m good, it’s-” I groan, reaching up to push him aside so I can attempt to sit up. The longer I
lay on the ground, the more heat I can feel creeping up my cheeks. I manage to grab his shoulder, though I realize a moment too late that I shouldn’t try to multitask - I end up getting about halfway to a sitting position, still gripping at Dan, before I have to stop and balance, propping myself up on my opposite hand.

“Are you sure, you don’t look- here, let me help?” I’m focusing very intently on my knees, which seem like a safe, stable place to stare, but my breath catches in my throat when Dan’s hand snakes around my back and encourages me to sit up fully; I can’t help but look over at him.

His brows are furrowed, lips turned down in a slight frown, and he’s watching his hand as he guides me up. When he glances at my face, we’re close enough that I can hear him suck in a breath, then he’s turning away and sitting back on his heels; I hadn’t realized, but he’s kneeling right beside me.

“Uhm, thanks,” I mumble, head clearing a bit now that I’ve stopped trying to do anything. “I passed out?” I ask, frowning. Why- oh, right, Mellix! Panic surges up in my chest and I suddenly whip my head around, vision swimming for a moment before my brain settles enough to recognize the empty space near the belladonna patch behind me. “Is he-”

“Mellix? He’ll be fine, you said so yourself,” Dan’s hand lands on my arm this time, and it’s warm and soft. I turn back, and he tilts his head toward the house. From where we’re sat, I can see the edge of the sofa, and a slow thumping of a giant grey-black tail over the armrest. If I wasn’t sure it’d send my head spinning again, I would definitely roll my eyes. “Do you need, like, some water or something? Something to eat?”

Dan’s voice sounds light and lovely, all of a sudden, and I slump forward to wrap my arms around my knees.

“In a bit,” I hum, uncomfortably aware that I should probably eat or drink or something, but feeling too floaty to move. A small smile tugs at my lips.

“Yeah, okay, don’t move, I’ll be right back,” Dan says beside me, and I can almost hear the frown in his tone. But the sun is warming my hair and the grass below me is cool and everything feels bright and fuzzy, so why would I go anywhere anyway?

I watch from the corner of my eye as Dan stands, walks inside, disappears from view. He’s nice to look at, I decide. Though it takes an absurd amount of effort, I prop my chin up on my elbows so I can see him as he comes back.

“Alright, have some water, and eat this,” he drops back down next to me, settling so he’s cross-legged on the grass; unfortunately, he’s just out of my view, and I pout before managing to turn toward him. And for some reason, he’s pouting too, which seems unfair. He’s the one who’s making me do stuff!

He shoves an apple at me, and a glass of water, but I just stare for a while. Even pouting, he’s pretty. My own frown softens. He rolls his eyes, though, and sets the apple in his lap before tugging my chin up from where it’s resting on my arm and then taking my hand and wrapping it around the glass of water for me.

“Drink,” he orders, staring hard at me. A bit of me still wants to rebel, because doing things takes effort, and I’m sleepy and happy, but he’s asking and I want to do whatever he wants. So I grip the glass a bit tighter, then lift it to my lips. The water goes down cool and smooth, and it’s suddenly the only thing I’ve ever wanted in my entire life; my eyes squeeze shut as I finish it in a few large gulps.
When I look back up, extending a shaky hand toward Dan to take the empty glass, his eyebrows have arched up his forehead, but he’s smiling a bit. I did that! I’m suddenly immensely proud, even though everything still feels a little achy and tired. But then he’s handing over the apple, nodding at it, and I really like that smile, so I’m glad to do what he wants. Whatever he wants.

It’s not til I’m swallowing the last bite that I realize not only how hungry and thirsty I really am, but how unrestrained my thoughts have been, loose and dizzy in my head; I’m immensely glad I didn’t say anything out loud. God, that would’ve been embarrassing…

“Thanks,” I clear my throat, because Dan’s still just staring at me, and try not to think too hard about how much I like that smile, how much it excites me that it’s there because of me. “I should, uh- oh!” I remember, suddenly, the cause of all this nonsense. “The wards, I should get those up,” I mumble to myself, shifting forward in a sad attempt at getting up to my feet.

“Wards?” Dan’s voice makes me pause. “Phil, are you sure you’re okay? I mean, you fell pretty hard, did you hit your head?” He frowns at me, pulling away, brows scrunched in concern. Why would-

“Just, help me up?” Wards first, I can worry about everything else later. Exhausted as I am, though, I’m not sure I’ll have enough energy for more than a weak spell at best. Okay, one ward, a simple one, then I can rest for a bit. Dan isn’t moving beside me, though, and his frown only deepens when I try to shift back to my feet again.

This time, I manage at least to get upright, though it takes a solid thirty seconds before I’m no longer woozy. Dan’s stood up as well, scanning me like he might be able to see physical evidence of whatever he’s suddenly so worried about. I brush him off - though the attention is kind of exhilarating - and take a few cautious steps toward the newly planted, slightly nibbled belladonna.

The ward itself only takes a few seconds to zing into effect, and it’s truly a simple one, no ingredients required. Mostly, it acts like an electric fence, sparking annoyingly at anyone or anything that gets too close; it wouldn’t really stop someone, just deter them. But it’ll have to do for now, as a fresh wave of dizziness has me stumbling backward.

Warm hands grip my shoulders unexpectedly, and I manage to find my feet as the moment passes.

“Right, okay, you’re coming inside, I’m kicking Mellix off the sofa, and you’re going to rest,” Dan’s hand slides to the middle of my back, the other gripping my arm gently, and he guides me toward the back door of the house.

For a minute, I forget everything about everything except the way his hands feel on me, how I sort of want to just sink back into them, but then we’re in the lounge and Mellix is slinking off the sofa and onto the floor, and I’m collapsing face-first into the warm, wolfy-smelling cushions.

“Just get some sleep, yeah?” Dan’s voice is the last thing I hear before everything goes dark for the second time today.

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This time when I wake, there’s no pounding in my head - or, at least, it’s not very painful - and I’m able to sit up without much difficulty. Also, the surface under me is far more comfortable.

Everything around me, outside my brain, is very quiet for a moment; then there’s a clink, and I look up to see Dan stood in the kitchen doing...something. I can’t say for sure, because his back is turned, but he’s mumbling something at the stove and there’s another - louder - clink, and I realize
he must be setting something down. A bit loudly.

Because he hasn’t noticed I’m awake yet, and because it might be fun to prank him a bit, I grab onto the armrest and inch myself up so I’m standing - fortunately, I’m able to stay upright without any lasting dizziness - and tiptoe over to the kitchen.

“Hey, Dan!” I shout once I’m right behind him, peeking over his shoulder. He yelps, almost the same high-pitched noise from the first night when I’d found him- nope, abort that thought immediately. I focus on the way he’s whirled around, a pan brandished and at the ready to attack. My hands fly up in self defense, but there’s a spark of recognition in his wide eyes and I’m not really concerned he’ll actually whack me.

I should’ve been concerned.

The pan smacks into my arm a second later, not hard enough to damage anything but certainly enough to make it sting.

“You asshole!” He shouts, voice still higher than his usual tone. I fight to keep the grin off my face. Dan’s cheeks have flamed bright red, and he’s huffing out a breath and pouting at me already. “Fuck off, and why doesn’t your stove work?” He slams the pan back down on the hob, twisting the knobs to turn it on and gesturing at it when it doesn’t.

“They’re not- I don’t-” I start, then bump his hip to get him to move aside. The stove is spelled, much like the majority of my household items, to turn on without gas or electricity - I’m proud of how off-grid Susan is, that, between her energy and my witchcraft, we can run nearly everything.

When I direct a tiny bit of energy toward the stove and turn the knob to help focus it - not strictly necessary, but useful in my drained state - the fire flicks to life, and Dan just grumbles something about how many times he’d done it ‘exactly like that’. I try not to smirk - but my lips do quickly drop into a slight frown, because surely a witch would’ve guessed that the stove was spelled? And been able to turn it on?

*Could I be wrong, is he really not a witch then? But how on earth did he get past my wards?*
Of course, on top of all the major heart attacks I’ve already had today - first Mellix’s poisoning, then Phil collapsing - Phil has to go and scare me half to death. *Guess it was my turn for a near-death experience, then.* I do my best to frown.

I still can’t get past all the nonsense he’d been talking, though - I didn’t think he hit his head when he fell, but *wards*? Some kind of magic or something? And there had been a lot of mysterious items up in that locked-but-not-locked room. Which had, of course, gone and locked itself up the moment I’d gotten Phil to the couch and had a few minutes to investigate. Not to mention that, aside from getting Mellix to hurl his guts up to get rid of the poison, he’d done all that nonsense with candles and gemstones?

I’ve been worried, focused on making sure Phil’s alright, but now I need answers. And food; my stomach growls at me. *Food first, then.*

“Come on, I literally did that *twentyyyy times*, and *exactly* like that,” I grumble, shoving Phil aside. He had plenty of bread on hand, and I’d been thinking to make us some grilled cheese, but he has absolutely no cheese lying around. So I’d settled on some toasted ham sandwiches, until the stove wouldn’t work and he’d gone and scared the shit out of me.

Phil chuckles beside me, apparently watching me place the buttered bread on the pan to start cooking. I’m suddenly feeling self-conscious, a prickle at the back of my neck from just knowing he’s staring at me.

“Shouldn’t you be resting?” I snap, then feel the drop in my gut. *That was rude.* “I mean, you nearly passed out just from walking inside earlier,” I try to temper my tone, hoping it comes out more concerned than pissed off. My stomach grumbles again as the first bit of sizzling starts, and I make an effort to focus on putting the ham onto the bread.

“I’m feeling better, thanks,” he says, and I exhale slowly, trying to control the pang in my chest. *Shit, I should’ve asked that first.* But he doesn’t sound sarcastic or snide, more like he’s simply responding, and my shoulders droop a bit. “Is that for me as well, or should I get something else started?”

Now I feel better.

“I’m making one for each of us,” I glance over my shoulder to find him wandering back to the sofa, a little unstable, and my muscles suddenly tense, ready to jump up and grab him if he looks like he’s about to go down again. “Just, maybe sit down?” I can’t keep the tightness from my voice as I grip the pan handle, not breathing until he’s dropped down into the armchair. Then I inhale, exhale, and turn my attention back toward the pan.

Besides, it’ll be much easier to ask these questions without looking at him.

“So...you’re, what, into magic or something?” I swallow thickly, the word making me uncomfortable - maybe he isn’t a murderer, but what if he’s into some weird, goat-sacrificing shit? Or he’s trying to summon a demon or speak to the dead or fucking *raise* the dead?

I mean, I know that stuff isn’t actually real - *magic* isn’t actually real - but supernatural shit really rustles my spooky jimmies, if I’m being honest with myself.

“‘Into magic’...yeah,” he chuckles, “I guess you could say that.” I full-on turn to lift an eyebrow at
him. But he’s just staring at me with a completely neutral expression, not even the smallest hint of a smile, no sarcasm in his tone to say ‘ha! Got you again’. My other eyebrow lifts to join the first.

“You’re serious?” I ask, because surely he’s about to crack, about to laugh at my gullibility. Surely. But he just furrows his brows, nods.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” He says like it’s the most normal thing in the world. *Have I just agreed to living with someone who’s lost his grip on reality?* “I mean, I guess it’s not as common nowadays, sure,” Phil’s dropped his gaze to his lap, and his fingers rub at the hem of his shirt. “But I didn’t think it mattered.” Now his voice has gone almost inaudible - either that, or the sizzling of the pan behind me is too loud.

A sizzling pan I know how to deal with. A guy who thinks he can do magic, I do not.

So I turn around and flip the sandwiches, focus for a moment on the food.

“If you don’t want to stay, that’s fine,” Phil’s a little louder behind me, but his voice trembles just slightly. “I know lots of people aren’t exactly...okay with witchcraft. Or witches.”

I take the slowest breaths I can, inhaling deep and blowing them out of my nose in long puffs. Some of the ham juice has leaked into the pan, and it’s sending an intoxicating scent to my growling stomach. These things make sense.

“I mean, what kind of magic?” I ask, head spinning just trying to come up with any question that would be logical. *Which I can’t, because this isn’t logical.*

“Nothing bad!” He practically shouts, “or harmful, mostly just...useful spells, I guess?” For about three seconds, I almost want to burst into laughter - *spells? Really?* - but it’s clearly something he’s passionate about, it would be immensely rude of me to make fun of it. Besides, if he’s just lighting some candles or drawing weird symbols or messing around with crystals, is it all that big a deal?

“Okay, uhm, sure,” I decide on, finally. Maybe we can just...push past this. And never talk about it again, so I don’t have to actively hide how ridiculous I think it is. “The sandwiches, they’re done.” I slide them both off the pan and onto their own plates, then turn the hob off. *Thanks for fucking working this time, stove.* I shoot it an angry glare before bringing the plates into the lounge.

Phil just watches me intently, eyes a bit wide as I hand him his sandwich and sit on the sofa across from him. We’re both very quiet, and I don’t know if I should meet his gaze at the moment. I don’t know if I could keep a straight face if I did.

“Oh! Okay,” Phil just beams at me, then down at the plate, like it contains the world instead of a slightly burnt ham sandwich. I take another bite of my own, swallowing the lump in my throat along with the savory ham, and my stomach thanks me.

We eat in silence, aside from some uncomfortably loud chewing noises on my part and a few appreciative hums from Phil, and I almost forget about the whole witch debacle. *Almost.*
“Thanks again for your help with Mellix earlier,” Phil’s the one to speak first, evidently hungrier than I anticipated as he’s already finished his sandwich while I’m still working on the final few bites of mine. I glance up, chewing and holding up a finger.

“Sure,” I manage once my mouth is clear. “He’ll be alright, you said?” I know he said, but it’s just about the only topic I can think of that has absolutely nothing to do with magic or witches or spells or-

“Yeah! He’ll be fine, but I do need to go and add another ward before it slips my mind again,” Phil stands, and instinct overrides my momentary frustration at not avoiding the subject - I jump to my feet as well, just in case Phil’s at all unsteady.

But he must be regaining his energy, because he only furrows his brows at me for a moment before widening his eyes and gesturing toward my plate.

“Finished as well? I’ll clean up, since you made lunch,” he offers, and I shove the final bite of my sandwich into my mouth so I can pretend I hadn’t been about to grab him to stop him from falling, which he apparently wasn’t in any danger of doing. *Uh, no, I actually stood up cause my first reaction was to wrap my arms around you, no big deal. Cause that doesn’t seem weird or creepy at all.*

“Oh!” Phil just stares, wide-eyed, as I take the plate from his loose grip and make my way to the sink. Back turned, I let my own expression morph into some monstrous combination of confused, bemused, and ‘desperately wishing the earth would open up and swallow me whole’. I’m tempted to splash the cool water from the faucet on my face, just to shock myself out of it, but Phil’s likely still behind me, as I haven’t heard any movement.

“Mm, actually,” I say around my bite, swallowing it as quickly as I can, “let me, and you go, uh…” I trail off, not willing to say the whole ‘wards’ thing but desperate to get out of this situation, to manage the overwhelming levels of awkwardness and embarrassment pooling in my stomach. *Please let me be alone for like two minutes so I can try to process this…*

“Thanks!” He finally says, sounding bright as ever. I watch the crumbs from the plates disappear down the drain. “Actually, that’s probably for the best, I really need to get that ward up. Can’t have Mellix getting his nose in there again!” I’m not sure if I hear footsteps, since the water is a bit loud.

*Satisfied I’m finally alone - at least for the moment - I exhale heavily. So Phil thinks he can do magic, that he’s a witch.* My lip finally tugs up in the smirk I’d been holding back as I watch him arrange a few lit candles - white, this time - and wave his hands through the air a bit. The smirk turns into more of a chuckle, since I know he can’t hear or see.

Not for the first time, but certainly for the first time with any clarity, I wonder how the hell Phil got that idea in his head. *Luck? Coincidences? Too much time spent on the internet?* In any event, it’s clear he believes in whatever he thinks he can do, and hasn’t had anyone outright question it. Although he’d definitely been surprised that I didn’t dislike him for his self-proclaimed status. *Does some kind of prejudice against witches exist, then? In his head, at least?* I’m about to follow that train of thought as far as it’ll go, into the depths of what I imagine Phil’s mind looks like,
when the sliding door opens and he comes back through.

Out behind him, I’m just noticing the orangey glow of the sky, yet another indicator that it’s far later in the day than our ‘lunch’ would have me guessing. *That would explain why I was so damn hungry, then.*

“All taken care of?” I try to keep the teasing out of my tone, but I must not succeed quite as well as I hope, because Phil sort of half-frowns at me, brows quirking down for a second before smoothing out into a mostly neutral expression. I realize I haven’t moved from the sink when he walks over, and I step aside for him.

“Yes! But I’m well behind on everything else and I’m not sure I can-” he halts the process of scrubbing his hands off, and I glance back outside, mildly alarmed to find the candles still burning outside on the grass.

“Phil,” I interrupt, although he had already paused, so it’s not quite interrupting, “you forgot- oh, nevermind.” With a wholly focused stare and a bit more exasperation that I’d meant to have, I march outside and blow out the candles. It’s not til they’re all four sending up tiny wisps of smoke that Phil’s at my side, panting a bit and gripping my shoulder.

“Nonono, why’d you do that?” I’m tempted to stumble away from him, from his hand on me, but he just sounds plaintive and a little out of breath, and I’m afraid he’s using me for support. Instead, I turn and lift a brow at him.

Which was, in retrospect, likely a mistake: his face is only an inch from mine, with how he’s leaning against me, breath hitting my nose in warm, slightly ham-scented puffs. I pull back a bit on instinct, and he pitches forward and down to the ground.

“Phil!” I shout - at first, I’m assuming I’ve just gone and let him fall, but he’s fumbling with the unlit wick of the candle nearest my foot and looking for all intents and purposes like he’s trying to *will* it back to life.

“Phil?” I try again, a bit more cautiously. Instead of a response, he just groans, then drops back to sit on his heels and glower at me.
I cannot believe he just did that.

I spent the majority of my remaining energy on placing that ward, which would’ve set in just under an hour, and he went and blew out the candles like it was nothing! Meaningless! I know I’m already frowning at him, but I make an effort to scrunch my brows closer together and tug my lips down just a bit farther.

“You can’t actually be upset at me for-” I cross my arms as he talks, and he cuts himself off. “Oh my god, you’re mad? I literally prevented a fucking forest fire, and you’re mad?” He scoffs, eyes going wide as he crosses his arms right back at me.

“That took the last of my energy, there’s no way I’ll have enough to manage it again until tomorrow at least!” I grumble, aware of the dampness soaking through my jeans at the knee - the sprinklers had just gone off. Sure, one more thing to screw up the day, why not! I’m tempted to just throw my hands in the air and leave it be - I do have that small ward up, at least - but the image of Mellix twitching on the ground is enough to send a fresh wave of anxiety and frustration through my veins.

Dan’s just watching, increasingly incredulous, as I manage to get standing up - which is an effort in itself, now that I’m so thoroughly drained. I march back inside, throwing one last annoyed glance over my shoulder, and climb the stairs. Very slowly, just in case.

There’s a soft swishing sound as Susan opens the door behind me, and a creak on the stairs as Dan - I assume - trails after me.

“What are you doing, then?” He asks, a little gentler and less...judgy than before. I pause mid-step and take a very deep breath. He clearly isn’t a witch unless he’s amazing at faking it - he seems utterly clueless about witchcraft.

“Getting a tent,” I say, hoping to convey the ‘I shouldn’t have snapped at you’ without actually saying it aloud. It's not like he apologized for messing up the ward. I resume the climb, pleased to find I make it to the top landing without any dizziness or any excessive hyperventilating.

“A...tent?” Dan’s still behind me, following me toward my supply room, and I only pause for a moment at the door before deciding that he’s seen it once already, and if I’m in there with him, it’ll be fine. He can’t get into trouble.

“A tent.” I agree. I’m tempted to explain how I’ll have to camp out for the night, in part to stop Mellix from sniffing at the belladonna again but also to protect it from other animals who might get hurt. Or people. Or protect it from anyone who might have nefarious intentions. Frankly, I’ve yet to actually encounter an evil witch - unless Beatrice counts - but it’s always something I’ve been sort of terrified of.

Well, terrified of the witch, sure, but also terrified of the things that such a witch could do if they got access to things like belladonna. Then every evil thing they do would be my fault.

“A tent…” Dan repeats, but his tone is distant and distracted. I’m already fumbling through the wardrobe in the far corner, searching for the clear tarp I usually use to act as a floating tent when I want to spend an evening under the moon and stars.

Tonight, it’ll have to be hung by hand. I groan again, cursing the limits of my own abilities;
moments later, my fingers find the edge of the lightweight, translucent fabric and I tug it out.

“What, are we camping?” Dan chuckles, but the joke falls flat from how long he took to come up with it, and I’m still in a bit of a sour mood; I just twist my lips when I turn toward him. It takes me a full ten seconds to register that he said ‘we’. ‘We’? My feet actually stumble as I head back toward him, toward the door.

“Well, I’m camping out tonight, yeah, I have to keep an eye on the belladonna,” I manage to regain my balance and brush past him, ends of the tarp trailing behind me.

“You’re not-” he pauses, and I hear footsteps follow me from the room. Without being asked, Susan slams the door behind him and I’m sure she has the common sense to lock it. There’s an audible pause, but I don’t stop my trek back downstairs. It’s not til I’m at the sliding door that I realize Dan’s not there, and I glance back up the staircase with a frown.

“Susan, you locked it, right?” I’m not exceptionally concerned he’ll hurt himself in my supply room, but there’s always a possibility. Or a possibility he’s one of those evil witches I’ve got no reason to be worried about…I take a step back toward the stairs, but then Dan’s appeared, looking a bit red-faced and flustered.

“How’d you do that?” He hikes a thumb over his shoulder, frowning; it takes me a moment to realize he’s talking about the door.

“I told you?” Now I’m the one frowning. “Well, Susan did it, the house- I mentioned her, right?” Everything feels a bit fuzzy, and I wonder if it’s some delayed effect from passing out earlier. I told him I’m a witch, right? We had that discussion? Dan just blinks at me for a moment, and I can almost see the gears whirring in his head.

“Right…” he manages after a moment, finally taking a step down the stairs. Then another, and another, and he pulls himself to a stop beside me and the sliding door. Susan opens it, evidently expecting me to head outside. Dan and I both glance over at the sudden movement, and I exhale as I realize how dark it’s already getting - the sky has gone purple, just barely light enough to string up the makeshift tent.

“Right, I’m off to bed, sort of, but you’re welcome to, uh-” I break off, turning back to Dan. “Is the couch okay?” I offer, not entirely willing to give up my room, even just for the evening. Although the idea of him in my bed is a prospect that sends tingles across my skin- no, no, I will not be imagining that right now!

“I’m sorry,” Dan mumbles, and I realize I’m frowning. No, that wasn’t me frowning at you! I was chastising myself for… I stop my own apology before it can even get past my lips. “I should, uh, right,” he doesn’t ever say what he thinks he should do, though, spinning on a heel and settling himself on the sofa.

“Oh, okay,” I feel like we’re both tiptoeing around each other, but I suppose it’s fair if he’s only just gotten here, and- oh! “Wait! Uh, how’s your foot?” I’m sort of already giving myself some credit since he hasn’t been wincing or limping - I’d like to think I’d have noticed - so it can’t be hurting much at all. From where he’s sat, I can see his brows quirk up before he lifts his leg up to rest on his other.

“It feels fine,” he says, poking at it gently, but there’s doubt woven into his tone. If he’s not used to any spelled healing, I can imagine that would be surprising, I decide. “Should I, like, unwrap it to check? Or does it need fresh bandages or anything?” He turns to face me now, hands cradling his foot.
Realistically, it should be fine to be unwrapped by now - the skin’s likely already scarred over, but it should look like it’s been healed for months if he waits til tomorrow. And, I’ll admit, I’m a bit excited to see his reaction to that.

“Well, it’s probably for the best to wait, we can check on it tomorrow,” I nod, pursing my lips - I hope I’m conveying a stern sincerity even if it’s entirely fake. I just want to see the look on his face tomorrow, when there’s an even more significant difference. A sudden spike of excitement makes me want to bounce on my toes - if I had any energy, I think I’d be flipping over backwards just trying to impress him with more spells.

I still can’t get over the fact that he doesn’t seem to hate me for being a witch. There’s a fair few in town that can’t stand us, I’m just glad he was more ignorant than prejudiced before his exile.

Dan just nods, looking back to his foot and wiggling his toes for good measure. I take that as my dismissal and head out the still-open door, mumbling a quick thanks to Susan for continuing to hold it for me.

It’s already nearly dark out, but the air isn’t too cold and Susan switches on a few of the outdoor flood lights to help me see by, so it’s not all bad. It’s been a while since I laid out under the stars, I suppose. I ultimately decide this is a good thing. And none of the ingredients for the ward went to waste, either. I take a deep breath, trying to push away any other negativity I’d held toward Dan for messing it up. He just didn’t know.

I can almost feel my shoulders relax, a bit of that pent-up frustration flowing out, and I set to work - the first step will be twine, and I drop my tarp near the belladonna patch to get some from the shed.

Just as I’m heading back, twine and scissors in hand, I notice a shadowy figure hunched over near the garden plot; for a split second, I can’t decide if I should sneak up on them to try to attack or run and shout and try to scare them off, but my mind’s made up for me when the figure stands and tilts their head at me: one of the overhead lights switches on, illuminating Dan’s face. Oh thank god. Wait, does that mean he was trying to steal belladonna? Like a tidal wave, all my silly fears about evil witches come rushing back in.

“Phil?” Dan just lifts a hand to block the sudden brightness, and I can see him squinting at me. “Did you want some help? I feel bad, y’know, for blowing out the candles,” his gaze drifts to the ground, where the candles are still sat, unfortunately very flameless.

“Oh, uh, thanks!” I try to grin back, but worry still squirms in my stomach. He’d have to be the best liar ever, with how he keeps reacting to witchcraft...I do my best to push all my concerns aside and hand him the twine and scissors. “Can you just cut up some sort of long pieces, like a couple feet? Then two really long ones?”

For a moment, Dan just stares at the items, then he glances back up at me, looking like I just dropped him in the middle of the forest with no- oh. I guess he did sort of just get dropped in the middle of the forest, forced to find his way around entirely on his own. I don’t think that’s why he looks so lost right now, but the thought wipes away any concerns I’d had about him being some kind of evil witch.

“I’m, uh, left-handed,” he finally says, blinking back down at the scissors - it takes me a moment to realize that he’s gripping them awkwardly, trying and failing to snip them and frowning a moment later.

“That’s fine!” It’s sort of a shout, and Dan’s head recoils a bit before relinquishing the twine and scissors to my outstretched hands. “I’ll cut, if you can string up the long pieces between the
sprinkler heads?” Not the best method, but it’ll hold for the night. I set to making the first big strand just longer than I am tall, then hand it over to Dan.

“Here to here?” He points to one of the suspended sprinklers, hung over the patch beside the belladonna’s, then to the one on the other end, and I nod. For a moment, I just watch his hands, long slender fingers curling and securing the knot well above his head. When he turns back toward me, I make a point of frowning down at the twine like it’s the most interesting thing on the planet.

I don’t look back up til I’ve got the rest of the pieces cut, but now Dan’s just starring at me, and I freeze a little. The brightness from the overhead lights suddenly seems out of place, illuminating him in a white paleness that looks more ghostly than anything. Oh, don’t be silly, you wrapped his foot. You helped him down the stairs. You touched him, he’s not a ghost. I shake the thought from my head.

“Something wrong?” Dan frowns, and the light accents a dimple in his cheek, making it look far more pronounced.

“No! No, nothing wrong, just, uh- oh!” My eyes go wide, and I shove the remaining twine into Dan’s hand. “Here, hang the other long one, I need to get some weights,” I don’t bother clarifying, though his brows scrunch down in clear confusion - he’ll see in a moment, anyway.

I rush back to the shed, now grateful for the same lighting I’d been frowning about a minute ago. I exchange the ball of twine and the scissors for a handful of gardening tools, which I mean to act as weights to keep the tarp in place and prevent it flying away. Dan’s face when I return has become - if possible - even more confused.

“Okay, get the tarp up and over the- yeah, like that,” I nod when he tosses it over the first string. The second takes a few tries, but then it’s hanging lopsidedly and providing sufficient cover for both the belladonna patch and the grassy area beside it. Dan’s apparently dropped the remaining pieces of twine, so I head over to him and squat down to pick them up.

“I hope we’re not doing any night-gardening,” he says over my shoulder - well, over my head, I guess, and I look up to find him staring down at me, quirking an eyebrow. For a single amazing moment, I’m imagining him naked again, imagining myself on my knees in front of him. Why on earth did I have to find him naked the first time I ever saw him?

I duck my head back down, cursing myself and fumbling with one of the strings. Suddenly, my fingers can’t figure out how to work quite right.

“Do you need help?” He asks, softer and closer, and I turn to find him squatted down beside me, hand extended. And now I’m back to hating this lighting...I’m sure he can very clearly see the blush on my cheeks, the way I’m trembling as I hand over a trowel.

“Just, uh, tie one end around that and the other we’ll use to-” I break off, pointing up at the tarp.

“Ah, tie it down. Kinky,” I glance back to Dan just in time to see him wink, then desperately wish I hadn’t. I choke out something that I’m convinced sounds enough like a laugh, then set to work with my handheld rake.

In a matter of minutes, all the garden tools have been prepared, and Dan’s already stood at one corner of the tarp, fumbling around for the end with the eyehole in it - apparently, he’s chosen the end farthest from any light, and it’s clear he’s having some trouble.

Before I can even think to ask, Susan’s set a light on him, shifting it slightly from its original spot facing the sliding door - I vow to thank her later.
“Thanks!” Dan mumbles aloud, still focused on tying the twine. After a moment, he’s grinning over at me triumphantly, and I widen my smile to match. “Are you going to make me do it all myself?” His grin fades to pursed lips, and he crosses his arms - but there’s just a hint of laughter behind his tone, so I roll with the joke.

“Well, you did mess up my ward, you deserve to pay for it!” I lob the next garden tool toward him, which he jumps away from with furrowed brows and the most offended look I can imagine. Even though my aim was so horrible that it was nowhere near hitting him. I have to cover my mouth with a hand, trying my best to stop the chuckle that threatens to spill out.
Dan

I’m still barely processing my idiotic need to make bad sexual jokes when Phil tosses a trowel at me, the strand of twine trailing behind it in the air - admittedly, my reaction is a bit excessively dramatic, but I’m still hung up on my stupid mouth - and I went and bloody winked as well...my brain doesn’t want to acknowledge that, nor Phil’s casual mention of witchcraft. Again.

I frown at him, giving my thoughts a moment to collect themselves. Do I dare to try to respond to the ward thing? Or just gloss over it? I’m afraid I’ll let something slip about how absurd the whole thing is, and he’s overreacting, and magic isn’t real, but I don’t want to offend him. And I’m actually really enjoying the banter, if I’m being honest with myself - it’s light and easy and fun.

“Fine,” I groan, oddly happy to play along. It’s been a long time since I had fun. I bend down to grab the projectile, peeking up to find Phil just...staring. And grinning. At me. Unbidden, a rush of heat attacks my cheeks, and I make sure to turn away to weigh down the next corner of the tarp.

By the time I’ve finished and spun back to Phil, the cool night air has - hopefully - cleared the redness away. He doesn’t say a word, just hands me the next garden tool with a soft smile on his face, and we - or I - finish the setup rather quickly.

“So, what,” I turn around to find Phil’s settled back, sitting with his knees curled up by his chest as he watches me. The attention makes me pause, clear my throat. “We just, uh, sit out here all night? Is that the plan?” Ultimately, I do feel pretty awful about ruining the...the ‘ward’ he’d been working on. Even if it had been a fire hazard...but he was clearly upset about it, upset enough that he evidently plans on guarding the belladonna. All night. And I feel bad enough about it that I plan on joining him.

“Yes,” I interrupt, waving a hand toward him and dropping down on my ass beside him. “Yes, it’s my fault.” He doesn’t seem inclined to argue back, so we just sit quietly for a moment. Then, without warning, he flops onto his back - the movement draws my attention, and I narrow my gaze at him, trying to decide if he’s fainted again.

But his eyes are wide open, staring up through the mostly-clear material of the tarp and up at the night sky. I follow his line of sight, craning my neck up but not quite willing to lay. Something about the idea pricks at my curiosity, sends excitement through my stomach, but a part of me feels it’d be too close, strangely intimate. So I stay sat up.

“Wow,” the word comes out on a breath, my breath, as I exhale; I don’t think I’ve ever seen the stars so clearly from within the town, even though the view is a little blurry through the makeshift tent. In fact, it’s almost prettier, the plasticky fabric turning the sky into a starry-night-like masterpiece.

There’s a twinge in my neck, then, and I don’t even hesitate to lay back on the cool grass this time.

“It’s pretty great, isn’t it?” Phil’s voice beside me tempts me to turn, but the sight above me is too intriguing, shifting with each slight breeze, and I don’t dare look away. Instead, I angle my head toward him just a bit, eyes still focused on the sky.

“It’s...wow,” I say again, for lack of a better word. Everything in my chest feels open and clear and loose and empty, but not in a bad way - empty in the ‘waiting to be filled’ kind of way, the kind
that speaks of amazing potential. *I was ready to admit my life was over, but maybe it’s the opposite? What if this is the beginning of my life, what if it’s only just starting?*

The future stretches out ahead of me, as empty and full and possible and impossible as the mesmerizing sight above me, and it’s not til I hear slow, deep breathing nearby that I manage to tug my gaze away.

“Phil?” I whisper, because he looks to be asleep now, chest rising and falling gently. His hands are folded across his chest, head lolling to the side just a bit, and I let myself stare at this new masterpiece for a few moments. *Just a few moments, really.* I insist - but moments turn to minutes turn to however long, and I think my eyes drift shut but I can still see Phil, in my head, and it’s actually kind of nice.

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For the second time in as many days, I wake to slobber all over my face. Not mine.

I grunt, wiping at my cheek and sticking my hands out somewhere in front of me. They land on soft, thick fur, and my eyes fly open as I scramble back: Mellix is stood there, mouth wide and tongue dangling out, giving me what I can only describe as a canine grin.

“Bloody wolf!” I grumble, sitting up and rolling my aching shoulders - it’s apparently just before dawn, with the way the light’s coming over the horizon, so it seems I’ve fallen asleep on accident. I glance between Mellix and the belladonna plant, both of which seem unharmed, before climbing to my feet and taking a few unsteady steps toward the house.

“Don’t eat that!” I call - quietly - over my shoulder at the wolf. *Phil should sleep a bit longer, he’s probably still tired.* I’m not entirely sure what *caused* the fainting spell, now that I’m thinking about it, but he’d been exhausted all day afterward. He definitely needs rest.

I make a quick trip to the bathroom before rummaging around the fridge, resigned to being *awake* with the way the light’s already spilling into the house. And I’m certainly not going to get any more sleep with Mellix sitting outside. I glance over my shoulder, hand poised over the carton of eggs, to find the wolf curled up beside Phil, head resting on his chest.

“Yeah sure, he wakes me up, but he’ll let Phil sleep in,” I grumble, returning my attention to the fridge. I pull the eggs out, thinking to make Phil some breakfast - *he did the same for me yesterday,* I justify in my head. Although I’m then reminded that I technically already returned the favor late that afternoon. *Well, he’s letting me stay here, it’s the least I can do.*

Just as the fridge door shuts, I realize my dilemma - apparently, I can’t get the damned stove to work for me, and I’ve no clue how the fire pit outside works; I drop my head back to groan at the ceiling before shoving the eggs back in the fridge. *Fruit, then?*

I pull out the assorted berries I’d collected yesterday, popping a few in my mouth before scavenging in Phil’s cupboards. When my eyes land on the oatmeal, I break out into what I’m sure is a purplish-red stained grin and set to work.

“You’d better bloody work,” I point and glare at the microwave, sticking the bowl full of soaked oats in and poking at a few buttons. When it pings to life, whirring and spinning and *doing its job,* I grin, then stick my tongue out at the stove in a show of childish anger.

“It does work, you know, just requires a bit of witchcraft to get it started,” the voice behind me makes me jump, and I whirl around to find Phil rubbing at his eyes and making a pointed glance
toward the object of my frustration. Before I can properly frown and respond to his quip, he’s moving on. “Oatmeal, then? I actually have some cinnamon-” he breaks off, coming to stand beside me and pull open a cupboard over my head.

It takes me...far too long to realize I should probably move aside, give him space to search, but he’s warm and I’m still a bit tired and he’s not shoving me away, so I sort of just stay. A very real and frightening urge seizes me then, and I almost drop my head to rest on his shoulder.

But he makes some discontent noise, then spins away and marches toward the stairs, disappearing to go who knows where for who knows- oh, probably the storage room, probably for that cinnamon. I’m certainly a fan, but he really doesn’t need to go to all the trouble.

It’s not til the microwave beeps and I’m shifting toward it that I realize Phil’s left the cupboard open. Actually, it’s not til the damn thing nearly pokes my eye out, and I jolt back in surprise to avoid it.

“Got it!” There’s a triumphant shout from the landing of the stairs, followed by heavy thumps as Phil makes his way down. I’m about to shut the cabinet doors when he rushes over, shaking his head at me. “Nonono, don’t do that, leave it open til you’re done with the cinnamon,” he holds up a tiny jar, “then put it away, then close it.” I think my mouth is open, but I’m not sure what to say, exactly, so I just take the cinnamon and navigate around Phil and the open cupboard to get to the microwave.

I wince as I pull the bowl out, setting it quickly on the counter and waving my hand wildly in the air - thanks for distracting me, Phil, or I’d have remembered to be careful with the burning hot oatmeal. Unexpectedly, he grabs my hand to hold it still and examines my fingers. If I didn’t burn anything before, now everything feels like it’s on fire.

Phil just squints at my hand, running his fingers gently across my palm - there’s a bit of a red spot, right where I’d been holding the bowl, and he pauses there.

“It doesn’t hurt,” I say quietly, biting my lip. This should not feel so significant; I’m torn between wanting to pull my hand away and wanting him to hold it tighter, to use his grip to drag me in and against his chest, and-

“It shouldn’t blister or anything,” Phil finally decides, breaking my train of thought. And just in time, too. I’m a fucking guest, I shouldn’t be pining after him, I shouldn’t be anything toward him aside from polite and grateful. For a moment, he continues just holding my hand there, but then he’s let go and I’m a bit glad for the sudden rush of cool air as he steps away. And a bit disappointed.

“The uh, the oatmeal, did you want anything else?” Phil rushes the words out, facing away from me and digging through the fridge. “Eggs, chicken, bacon maybe?” He pulls out a package, wiggling it in the air. I clear my throat, let my hand finally drop to my side.

“I’m good, uh, did you want some of the oatmeal?” I gesture to the other bowl I’d set out, intending to spoon some into that and bring it out to him. A breakfast in bed, of sorts. Now that just sounds suspiciously romantic, I decide, in wake of the whole hand-holding thing.

Phil spins around from the fridge, just beaming at me. I might be losing it a bit, because I want to step in closer. I step to the side instead.

“You made me some as well? Yeah, that’d be great,” either he’s aware of my discomfort - or would it be lack of a reasonable amount of discomfort? - or he’s just being polite, because he
abandons the fridge and moves out of the way. I swear I can feel his eyes on me, a prickle at the back of my neck as I spoon some of the oatmeal into the other bowl.

“Here, before it gets cold,” I hand it over, complete with a spoon, and he’s still just bloody **grinning at me.** Before he can properly respond, I turn back to my own oatmeal and sprinkle it with a hefty helping of cinnamon, then march over to the door - I really don’t have many options for places to eat, and being inside feels a bit claustrophobic at the moment.

I take a few deep breaths of air once the door slides open for me, then head over to the same table where we’d eaten yesterday. On the way, I pass Mellix, who doesn’t give me much more than a lazy stare before settling his huge head back on his paws. I’m pleased to find that my heart rate doesn’t jump at the sight of him - because I’m not scared, and it’s silly that my body ever reacted as if I were; admittedly, my lack of reaction might have more to do with how fast my heart’s already racing.

The soft whoosh of the door sliding back open behind me sends my damn heart rate **skyrocketing,** then, as Phil evidently follows me out to the table. Which is stupid, because what was I expecting to happen? I settle in the same chair I’d sat in yesterday, then frown as I realize I’ve not remembered to get myself anything to drink. *And that would be sort of rude and awkward to stand up the moment Phil sits down, wouldn’t it?* The thought is tempting, though, if it means I can keep running away from the way my brain - and body - keep reacting to being around him.

There’s a clink, then another and another, but I don’t look up from stirring my oatmeal. When Phil finally sits down across from me, I can’t help myself, lifting a bite as a pretense for peeking up at him.

“I brought you some orange juice, if you want it?” He’s smiling softly at me, and my lips stutter out air as I try to salvage my attempt at cooling my spoonful of oatmeal. I nod, shoving the still-too-hot bite in my mouth and dragging one of the glasses closer.

“Thanks,” I manage to mumble, eyes watering just the slightest bit; the oatmeal is *way* too hot, and I can feel it burning my tongue, but the last thing my overwhelmed head needs right now is a heaping helping of embarrassment. Phil just hums in acknowledgment, then digs into his own oatmeal - I notice a few apple slices poking out, and I regret not thinking to add them to my own breakfast. **Oh well.**

The orange juice holds an acid bite, but it’s cold, and does wonders to soothe my tongue. I *really need to be careful with hot things.* And of course, my immediate reaction to that is to glance up at Phil. *Including that one,* Warmth flushes my cheeks, and I hope I can blame it on the slowly rising sun.

Really, it’s actually quite lovely outside - cool with a light breeze, but warming up, and it promises to be a bright, clear day. *Couldn’t have been like this two days ago, could it have?* The cold, icy wetness soaking me to the bone makes a reappearance in the form of a flashback; I shiver before lifting more oatmeal to my mouth, desperate to warm up as if the chill had actually returned.

“Did you want to eat inside?” My eyes focus - *they’d unfocused?* - to find Phil frowning at me, his own bite poised in front of his face. I blink before realizing he must’ve seen me shiver, must think I’m cold.

“No! No, it’s good, I mean, I was the one who came out here to begin with,” I shrug, staring back down at my bowl and warming now from the outside as much as the inside. *Although, I guess if I hadn’t been so cold that night, I might never have stumbled into Phil’s house.* For some reason, that thought makes me shiver again, and I glance up when I hear a clink.
Phil’s let his spoon fall back in the bowl and he’s just watching, eyes narrowed; then he twists his lips before standing and heading back to the house. I follow his progress until he disappears up the staircase, then I stare at the door for a while longer. It’s not til it slides open again that I duck my head back down, quickly shoving another bite of oatmeal in my mouth and hoping he didn’t notice.

“Here,” I only look up when I hear his voice, close and warm-sounding - really? A person can sound warm, can they? - to find him brandishing a hoodie in my direction. More afraid of looking silly - or having to explain the real reasons behind my shivers - than of being a bit too hot, I smile and take it. It’s bright green, nowhere near my usual color scheme, but I’m not about to complain.

And it smells fucking amazing.

It’s a bit lavendery, but a laundry detergent kind of lavender, and it mixes with a hint of strawberry that must come from his soap and a soft natural scent that I imagine belongs to Phil. Which means he’s worn this recently. I suddenly want to bury my entire face in it.

I don’t, of course, because that would be incredibly embarrassing and weird and I am not falling for the random guy who’s just been nice enough to take me in for a bit. Just for a bit, I remind myself, until I have a plan. Besides, the guy thinks he’s a witch.

I try to hold all this in the forefront of my mind as I continue eating, but every bite sends a waft of that smell up to my nose and it blends with the cinnamon oatmeal and frankly it’s very distracting. The only thing that manages to clear my senses is the orange juice, and I end up finishing it well before I finish the food.
Dan’s shivering concerns me - he said he’s not cold, but I got him a hoodie anyway; what if he’s sick or something? It’s warm out now, but what if he caught something the other night, when he’d been soaked to the bone wandering through the forest? He’s downing his food, and drinking the orange juice like it’s water and he’s stuck in the desert, and I’m really not sure what to do.

*I suppose I could spell some more juice for him.* But I dismiss the idea as soon as it occurs - it’d be a waste of my energy if he isn’t sick, and it wouldn’t do him any good. *I’ll wait a bit, then see.*

“How’s your foot this morning?” I ask, hoping to open up the conversation a bit; it hits me like a train, just then, that we’ve barely actually talked - I know almost nothing about him. *Including whether or not he’s a witch…* the thought keeps popping up at the back of my mind, annoying and persistent even when I try to forget it.

His eyes go wide, like he hadn’t been expecting me to talk, before he lets his gaze drift upward, and he hums in consideration.

“Good, actually, *really* good,” he finally decides, looking back at me. “Whatever you put on it, it’s made it not hurt at all.” For a moment, his eyes narrow, then they’re completely normal again and I wonder if I’d just imagined it. I take a sip of orange juice, hoping to cover my moment of confusion.

“Good! You should, uh, test it out today, take the bandage off,” I realize a bit of mysterious taunting has snuck into my tone, but I’m just excited to see his reaction when he realizes it’s not just ‘not hurting’ but fully healed. It’s been ages since I dealt with natural, unspelled healing, but I’d guess cuts like that would’ve taken at least a week to heal properly - and that’d be just to scar over, never mind nearly *disappear.*

Dan glances down at his foot - I assume, because he looks below the table - then nods. A moment later, he’s stood, empty bowl and glass in hand as he heads toward the door. I shovel the last couple bites of oatmeal in my mouth, crunching on an apple slice, before rushing to follow him. *I don’t want to miss it, if he does it right now.* A grin creeps up my face.

By the time I’m inside, the water’s being switched off and there’s a clink as Dan loads the dishwasher. It’s not til I’m stood beside him and he jumps that I realize I should’ve probably said something - it seems he gets a bit skittish sometimes.

“Sorry! Didn’t mean to scare you,” his lips tug down in a frown at the implication, and I can see the argument he’s about to make about not being scared. *It’s sort of cute that he thinks he’s such a tough guy.* “I just finished as well,” I cut him off before he can get started, and he steps aside to make room for me at the sink. Once my own dishes have been put away, he drifts over to the sofa, and I briefly wonder why he waited for me to finish; before the thought can even fully form, I squish it and the accompanying feelings very deep down.

“Alright, have a look, then,” I say, unable to contain my excitement - it turns into a full grin that leaves Dan scrunching his brows in confusion-meets-wariness; he must decide it’s not worth commenting on, though, because then he’s crossing his leg to unwrap the bandage. I realize I’m literally holding my breath in anticipation.

“What the *fuck*?” Dan mumbles, staring at his foot like it’s growing a hand or something. *It isn’t, right? Surely the spell couldn’t be that off?* I take a step closer, but Dan just flinches away at the
movement. I exhale slowly, trying to keep my heart calm. *He’s just surprised, that’s all!* It doesn’t stop the pit from forming in my stomach.

“Cool, right?” I ask, voice too full of enthusiasm that I can’t even properly feel. *Oh god, please don’t hate me!* The thought hadn’t even occurred - he said he was okay with me being a witch - but now I’m second-guessing myself, doubting everything at the way he rubs his thumb over the smooth skin. If I didn’t know to look, I’d never have guessed it had been sliced up barely a day ago.

“What the fuck did you do to me? Is this some, I don’t know, some fucking genetic experiment or some shit?” Dan’s voice gets louder, and he stands, still glaring down at his foot as he sets it carefully on the floor. Steps on it. Bounces on it. Then his eyes turn to me, wide and wild and mad. “What the fuck?”

“I- it’s just, I thought you’d—” I fumble for words, for any sentence, and try to beat back the waves of doubt and fear coursing through me; it’s not fear that he’ll hurt me, I don’t think he’s violent - *but what the hell do I know?* - more fear that he hates me, that he’s like all those other horrible people who think I shouldn’t even exist, that I’m some-

“Wait, genetic experiment?” My brain finally latches on his earlier words, rolling them around on my tongue. “No, I told you, I’m a witch, I—”

“Witch? Phil, you’re fucking delusional, jesus!” He says it, loud and exasperated, like he knows me, like this is another argument in a long series of arguments we’ve had on this subject for years. Like we’ve known each other for years. The most I can manage is to drop my jaw. I know he’s not seen much witchcraft before, but-

“Sorry, wait, you don’t believe me?” My brows lift high up my forehead before I glance around at the house - the *sentient house* that opens and shuts doors, that turns on lights and starts the fire pit. The kitchen, with spelled appliances. I glance at his foot, which, as he literally just saw, has *completely healed in a day*.

He just frowns, giving me a look full of pity and frustration, like ‘how could you not see how silly you sound’. I almost walk away right then.

“Phil,” his tone matches the expression, and I momentarily feel like a child being chastised for playing make-believe for too long. “You believe you are, and that’s fine, but you can’t just…” he gestures at his foot, wiggling his toes for emphasis, and I only glance down briefly before staring back up at his face. At least it has the common decency to look confused at his accusation.

“You think—” I exhale a puff of breath, almost laughter but not quite. *What does he think? Clearly he doesn’t believe me, but what is it he thinks I’m doing? Or have done?* “What do you think, then? A genetic experiment...” I shake my head, then flop down into the armchair across from the sofa. Just the discussion is making me- wait. *Exhausted.*

“What if I can prove it?” I blurt out before he has a chance to answer. He sits down as well, one eyebrow raised as he watches me. A giddy lightness suddenly replaces the pit in my stomach, and a grin replaces my frown. *I can prove it, I’ll show you!* At the very least, it seems I’ve got him interested, his eyes narrowing as he twists his lips.

“Right, sure, go on then,” he waves a hand at me, and my smile falters. *How? It’s clear that spelled healing and houses and appliances aren’t proof enough, or wards or- as the idea blooms in my head, I squint at him. Yeah, I could probably do it, and I’ve got the belladonna now.*
“What would make you believe me?” I ask, just for good measure. Maybe he’ll even request something simpler, something I can manage without as much effort. Then he’s squinting back at me, tapping his chin. I wonder for a moment if he’s just doing it to humor me, to make a show like he’s thinking but he’s really about to burst out in laughter and dismiss me again.

“Make something appear, or fly, or-” I stand before he’s even finished, a smirk already curling my lip as I head outside. For a moment, I assume Dan’s still just stood in the lounge, confused at my leaving, but he must follow a minute later - I notice the audible pause after Susan opens the sliding door for him. I’m almost tempted to turn around and watch him - if he’s such a skeptic, I’d bet he’s examining the door for any sign of, well, not spells.

“Come on, I need you, otherwise you won’t believe me,” I shout, though I’m staring out toward the forest - it’s a good day, clear and bright and not too windy. Perfect. Then Dan’s at my side, and I spin to find him glaring at me, but I can’t be bothered to do anything but smile in his face. I’ll prove it.

“Go find a stick, like a big branch, and bring it back,” I gesture toward the forest, and Dan quirks a brow again before frowning at the tree line, then back at me.

“By myself?” For the first time in awhile, I notice a tremor in his voice, and his false bravado seems to melt away. To me, anyway. “I mean, if I’m not with you the whole time, you could just set something up to trick me,” he tacks on, obviously an afterthought but a fair argument anyway.

“If I do go with you, you’ll say I tricked you for sure,” I shake my head. “Mellix, can you go with Dan, please?” I know he doesn’t love the wolf, but if he’s actually afraid to wander the forest during the day, it must be far scarier to him than Mellix is. The wolf’s ears perk up, and he stands, stretches, and trots over to us.

“This is the only way?” He suddenly sounds much less sure, more obviously worried than he’d been even a minute ago. Mellix just whumps his tail against my side, and I run a hand across his back, scratching between his shoulders. Is it the only way? I guess not, but it’ll make him believe me for sure.

“You’re the one who doesn’t believe me,” I point out, “so I don’t think it’s even necessary.” At this, he frowns at me, then stalks off toward the trees.

“Come on, you stupid wolf!” He shouts back over his shoulder, and Mellix makes a sound I usually just assume to be a grumble before loping off behind him. Figuring it’ll only take a few minutes - the forest is littered with destroyed branches and debris - I quickly light the candles around the belladonna plant to get the ward started, then head into the shed to grab some gloves.

The belladonna leaves I pick go into a small bowl, along with several other oils and herbs, then I set the entire thing on fire while I wait for Dan to return.

As expected, it’s not long before he does, though he definitely looks to be struggling. I glance down at the bowl, where the last bits are burning to ashes, and decide it’s safe enough to go help. Or at least offer.

“Okay, I want to help,” I say as I jog over, “but I don’t want you to think I’m trying to-”

“Jesus just fucking carry this end,” he groans, hefting one side of the branch toward me. It’s a bit cliche and inelegant, but it’ll do. Besides, he wants witch? This’ll give him witch, a hundred and ten percent.
When we’ve finally lugged the piece of wood back to the garden area, Mellix unhelpfully bouncing around us, I’m a little sweaty and Dan is puffing out breaths as he wipes at his forehead. It’s only then that I realize he’s still wearing my sweatshirt. And the same clothes he was wearing yesterday. Oh, I guess I am as well. It’s been quite a morning, so far.

“Okay, I maybe should’ve thought of this before, but do you want to go change and shower or anything before we go?” I ask, but Dan just frowns at me.

“Go? Go- no, you know what, let’s just do this already, and-” he pauses beside the belladonna, where the candles are lit and the ward’s slowly manifesting. “Are you really going to leave these here again?” He’s waving his hand at them, the whole movement full of exasperation, and I resist the urge to argue with him again. Nothing’s going to set on fire unless I want it to, quit worrying!

Instead, I pick up the bowl, warm in my hand and full of ash.

“Do you want to watch, to make sure I’m not doing anything tricky?” I offer, gesturing at the stick, and Dan just sighs before he nods and joins me. We both crouch beside it - or, I do, and Dan follows suit a moment later - and I’m about to dip my hand into the ashy mix when another thought occurs.

“Okay, you do this bit, and I’ll tell you what to do, okay? The witchcraft doesn’t come til the end.” I hold the bowl out toward him, and he tilts his head and squints at me before sticking his fingers in the ash and waiting for my instruction.

“At the very front, do the, uh,” I struggle for a moment, trying to decide how to describe the symbol. “It’s like an R that fell down the stairs?” I try, and Dan’s lips part as he stares at me. “Uh, okay, how about-” I break off, then slowly reach for his hand.

The second I wrap my hand around his, I swear there’s lightning between our fingers, but that’s probably a combination of infatuation and wishful thinking; I ignore Dan’s sharp intake of breath - he hasn’t pulled away, and he surely would if he was uncomfortable, right?

I draw the mark slowly and carefully - because it has to be just right, it has nothing to do with wanting his hand in mine a bit longer - then let him collect more ash on his fingers and move onto the next symbol; we repeat the process til about halfway down the stick. He stays completely silent throughout the whole thing, right until the end.

“An R that fell down the stairs, I get it,” he comments, voice soft and a bit spaced out. I let his hand go, and he brushes the remaining ash on the grass beside us, then stands. “So is that it?” He’s just staring down at the branch, evidently unimpressed. I try to hide a smile, but it doesn’t really work.

“Be patient,” I chuckle, nudging my shoulder against his leg; I’m still crouched down. Then I wrap a hand around the thick wood, imbuing it with the spell to make it fly.
Honestly I don’t know what to expect - I mean, I can handle the ‘magic healing’, that’s clearly just some advanced tech or medicine or whatever, but what Phil’s got us doing now…

It feels like something.

Maybe that was just having his hand on yours for the past five minutes, my brain notes, and I fight the blush it brings to my cheeks.

“Alright, I’m being patient,” I mumble as Phil grips the stick. Frankly, I’m a little bummed that there haven’t been more fireworks - I mean, if this is how he’s going about proving magic exists, it’s not nearly as flashy as I’d hoped. The least I can get for my troubles of fake-believing is a show.

There’s a moment, then, when the breeze dies down and everything falls silent, the forest goes still, like the earth is holding its breath; but the next second, it’s gone, and Phil’s standing up beside me and just grinning like he’s done the magic already and ‘wow aren’t you so impressed’. I shake my head at him.

“Well, come on, we don’t have all day!” He sounds way too excited for whatever he has planned, and I can’t find it in me to properly rain on his parade. Until he straddles the fucking stick and waves me over.

“You did not just enchant a fucking broomstick,” I stare, open-mouthed, at the branch. Which looks nothing like a broomstick, admittedly, but in the context of witches and sticks, it’s the first thing my brain jumped to. He thinks he can fly?

I have to suppress the urge to burst out in a fit of laughter when he waves me over again. Oh my god, he’s fucking serious.

“Uhm, here,” he shuffles back as I walk over, sort of in a fugue state with how hard I’m trying not to react. I notice he completely blows past my comment. “It’ll probably be easier if you’re in front.” I shake my head at him, swinging a leg over the hanging front half of the stick and wrapping my hands around the wood.

Oh my god, I can’t believe I’m actually humoring him? What’s he going to do, hop around for a bit and tell me we just flew around? The image in my head makes me cough out a laugh, too horrible and hilarious not to acknowledge, but I try to turn it into a proper cough. I don’t know if I’ve managed to convince Phil, because he’s behind me and I can’t see his face.

“I’m, uh, do you mind?” I hear the words about a second before warm hands reach around to wrap my middle, and I find that I really don’t mind at all. I have to resist the urge to sink back into his chest, and all thoughts of where we are and what absurdity is happening fall from my mind.

“Alright, ready?” And then it’s gone, that moment of peace, and I steel myself for whatever comes next - to be fair, I did not actually expect us to start flying.

I sort of end up screaming.

Then a hand clamps over my mouth, turning the sound into a loud vibrating hum, and my throat closes up as I try to swallow the terror. Which only serves to open a gaping pit in my stomach, because the trees are disappearing below my line of sight, and we keep getting higher and Phil’s just-

“Hey, you alright?” The scream has died in my chest, turning into some kind of hyperventilating
black hole that I can’t fill with air quickly enough. Phil’s voice behind me is sort of steadying, until I remember that he’s the one doing this, he’s the one making us float up, somehow- oh god, magic is real, this is fucking happening, holy fucking-

“You’re shaking, should we go back down?” I’m shaking? I don’t dare remove the vice grip I have on the branch under us to check, too terrified of falling off, but my breaths come in shuddering gasps as Phil removes his hand from my mouth and lowers it to my stomach. When he pulls me back, tighter to his chest, I don’t have the capacity to be anything but grateful.

Grateful, and a little calmer. My hands don’t move, my entire body still rigid and stiff as the wood of the branch beneath us, but if I stare very hard at the now-unmoving line of trees and focus on slowing my breaths, they seem to actually do as I ask. I keep my eyes wide until my heart’s no longer pounding in my ears, until I can actually feel my hands again, before shaking my head just slightly.

“I’m, uh- no, I’m okay,” my voice is tight, my whole damn body is tight, but this is...I’m fucking flying, holy shit! Well, I guess hovering, technically. Floating. “How do we, like, move?” I mumble, still staring at the swaying tops of the trees in front of us. I can’t even process how I might feel if I looked down, so I avoid that entirely.

Phil chuckles, and his chest rumbles against my back and his breath comes out warm on the back of my neck - this time, when I shiver, it has nothing to do with the height. Though I’m still very much not thinking about that right now.

“Well, where do you want to go?” He’s talking, not even very loud, and I suddenly can’t focus on anything but his lips right next to my ear, the way his body curls around mine. Fuck, if we weren’t already in the air, my heart would be soaring right now.

“Where- uh,” I clear my throat, blinking a few times as I try to process the actual meaning of his words. “Wherever,” I manage, finally.

“Alright, well it’s controlled by whoever’s on it, so go ahead and lean forward a-” he breaks off suddenly, gripping me tighter this time, as I lean toward the front of the makeshift broomstick and we fly forward at an alarming pace. My eyes go wide, and I lean back into Phil again, grateful when we slow to a stop over a patch of evergreen trees. I swallow thickly.

“Sorry,” I barely choke the word out, and I can’t even hear it with how loud my heart is pounding. But Phil just giggles behind me - a tighter sound than his earlier chuckle, and I realize I’ve probably scared him as much as myself - and pushes his chest against my back gently until we’re just tilted forward the slightest bit.

This is much smoother, and we glide slowly over the forest at a far less terrifying speed. I make a concerted effort to keep my eyes in front of us, but each passing moment tempts me to follow the trees as they disappear below us, just to see how high up we are. I’m sure it’s not-

Nope. No, fucking hell no. My hands, if they’d ever loosened their grip on the branch, constrict to a white-knuckled tightness, and I suck in a breath. High, we are really fucking high up, holy shit. Despite the fear it sends curling through my stomach, I can’t tear my gaze away from the ground below us - though it only appears in patches between the scattered trees - and I’m suddenly imagining every horrible way we could fall and splatter.

“You okay?” Phil’s voice at my ear again, and the world falls away like it did before. Apparently, I’ve pushed farther back into his chest, and we’ve slowed to nearly a stop over a wide clearing. Looking down doesn’t seem quite as scary, now that I’m hyperaware of Phil’s arms wrapped
around my stomach and holding me against him. “How about we take a break, yeah?” For a moment, his chin rests on my shoulder, and I can feel his throat moving against it in small pulses as he talks.

I don’t exactly respond - a bit too caught in the moment - but apparently that’s answer enough, and we start a gentle descent. It’s not til we’ve reached the ground that I realize my legs have clenched up, hooked around each other in an attempt to hold myself on the branch. They feel stiff and sore when I extend them to stand.

As soon as my feet are firmly planted, Phil’s arms leave me, and he steps away. Belatedly, I realize I should probably drop the stick, and it lands with a heavy thump on the grass between our legs. Then the warmth of Phil fully disappears, and I turn to follow his movement - it doesn’t look like he’s going anywhere; when he starts kicking his legs around, I realize he’s sort of stretching. After a single step away from our landing spot, I decide it’s probably for the best if I do the same.

We wander around the clearing in silence for a minute, and I focus on working the ache from my hamstrings, not letting my mind think about anything else. Later, I can process everything that just happened later.

“So?” Phil calls, and I whirl around to find he’s laid back on the grass, eyes closed and face turned to the sun. I’ll admit, my body finds extra energy somewhere, and I rush to join him.

“So?” I offer back, quirking a brow I know he can’t see as I plop down beside him, though I opt to sit instead of lay.

“Believe me now?” I watch his lips curl into a smirk, though he still doesn’t open his eyes.

“Oh shut up,” I smack his arm, a pathetic attempt to satisfy my sudden desire to touch him without really touching him. Now his eyes fly wide, then squint at the brightness before they land on me, and he pulls a horribly wounded expression; his hand even lands on his heart, like I’ve truly gone and broken it. I would never.

“So!” I clear my throat, desperate to move on to anything else, to get my mind off Phil. Well, to get my mind off my body being on Phil’s. There’s a tense pause before I realize I’ve not actually managed to move on. “The, uh, I mean we just-” I blow out a breath. “We just fucking flew.” Now I do properly flop back on the grass, hands rubbing across my face.

“We did,” he confirms, and I can hear the laughter in his tone.

“You weren’t fucking with me, or delusional,” I say, incredulous.

“I wasn’t.” This confirmation is sharper, and a little hurt. Shit, I hadn’t meant-

“I mean, witchcraft? Magic? Spells?” My hands gesture nonspecifically in the air, and I squint an eye open to watch Phil’s face. His lips are pursed now, not turned up in the same smug grin as earlier. “I mean, you can’t be surprised I didn’t believe it,” I add, suddenly defensive - surely he sees the way it sounded, at first?

“I-” for a moment, his mouth just opens and closes, then he exhales heavily. “You’ve got a point, I guess.” His tone is careful, neutral, and I frown. Then he’s sitting up, pushing himself off the ground and walking back over to the branch. “We should probably head back,” he calls over his shoulder, voice tight.

“Oh, uh, right,” I agree, though I’d sort of be happy to hang out for awhile. But maybe the spell has
a time limit, or- maybe he just doesn’t want to sit around and talk to me. I stand, shaking out the residual soreness in my legs, then try my best to act casual as I head toward him.

He gives me a half-smile as I approach, then gestures at the space in front of him on the makeshift broomstick. I try to smile back, but I feel like it comes off sour, so I just quickly straddle the branch and wait for his arms to wrap me and pull me close again, for us to float upwards. The second happens much the same as before, but the first is...

I try not to sigh, but I still end up blowing out a breath as we lift up into the air - Phil has one arm around my waist, but it’s light and he doesn’t hold me very close to him. The breeze feels cold in the space between us.

The entire flight back is a quick and tense affair - due to both my death grip on the branch and the tension between Phil and I. *He can’t be mad that I didn’t believe him without proof, can he?* But he doesn’t make any move to tug me closer, doesn’t say a word the entire short trip, and we land in the garden mere minutes from when we took off.

Mellix bounds over, some animal or other dangling from his jaw, and Phil’s quick to pull away and scratch the wolf’s ears. There’s a sickeningly wet thud as he drops his catch, and I decide to cut my losses and head inside before Mellix has any ideas to repeat his wake-up call from the day before.

“I’m, uh, gonna shower,” I mumble as I pass the two; when I get no acknowledgment, I frown and head inside. It’s not til I’m halfway up the stairs that I realize the door - hell, the whole house - is magic, and I suddenly feel watched. My skin tingles as I carefully retrace my steps back outside and take a deep breath. *Can the house see out here as well?*

“Hey, uh, Phil?” I realize I’m almost whispering, but it must be enough to get his attention, because he turns and purses his lips at me as I approach - he’s still stood with Mellix, a hand resting on the wolf’s head. “I have a, uh, question.”

He just nods, and I lick my lips, eight times more uncomfortable than I’d been even just an hour ago. It’s not really cold, but my hands tuck into the sleeves of Phil’s hoodie and I cross my arms over my stomach.

“Do you, uh, I mean, can the house-”

“Susan,” he cuts me off, then waits for me to continue. At the very least, he doesn’t seem as angry now, or as *whatever* as he’d been earlier. Mostly just...a little irritated.

“Susan,” I correct myself, “can she, uh, like *see* me?” A small blush creeps up my cheeks, heat mixing in with the embarrassment and general uneasiness swirling under my skin - I’m very much hoping I don’t have to explain any further, but Phil must understand my concern.

“She’s aware of things, like if you turn the shower on or go near the door or something,” his hand runs through Mellix’s fur, “or if this guy gets up on the sofa when he knows he’s not allowed,” Phil smiles, then, just for a second, and there’s a light glow in my chest just seeing it. “But she can’t actually, uh, *see* anything, don’t worry,” he turns back to me, the grin fading into a soft look. “Besides, she’d have already seen you, if that were the case,” he adds.

I swear his cheeks turn as red as mine.

“Uh, right, okay, thanks!” I spin on a heel, speed-walking back toward the house before that conversation can go anywhere more mortifying. It’s not til I’m safely locked in the bathroom, hot water fogging up the mirror, that I let myself recall the horrifying awkwardness of Phil’s and my
first encounter.

“Oh god, Susan,” I groan at the house, “why didn’t you do something?”
I’m not mad. I mean, I’m sort of mad. But not like, mad mad.

I guess I understand that he might’ve thought I was trying to trick him, and I definitely went to lengths to prevent him from thinking that when I spelled the branch, but...he thought I was delirious? That I had deluded myself into thinking I was a witch?

It’s not til Mellix whines at me that I realize I’m clutching a fistful of his fur tight enough to probably be uncomfortable. I exhale, loosen my grip.

“Sorry boy, I just...I can’t believe he actually thought-” but I cut myself off, because it doesn’t matter. Right? Now he knows, he knows I’m not lying or tricking him or...well, he knows. And he obviously believes me. He believes me now, anyway, my brain interjects.

Mellix just nuzzles my shoulder, then drags his catch - a demon pheasant - over to the freezer behind the shed. With another exasperated sound, I run my hands across my face and head inside - Dan’s showering now, but I need to clean this yucky feeling off me as soon as he’s done.

For a moment, I pause at the top of the landing and just frown at the closed bathroom door. I don’t know if I want to actually frown at Dan while he can see me, so I just do it now, hoping it’ll get rid of some of my frustration. I can’t tell for sure if it works - or, really, if it even would work - because there’s a soft noise I can just barely hear over the stream of water, and I step closer, curiosity replacing everything else in one big sweep.

I stay as quiet as possible, leaning so close to the door that I’ll be pressing an ear up against it if I get any closer, but all I can hear is the shower. Maybe I am delusional, I joke to myself, but it sounds too bitter, so I shake my head, hoping to reset my brain. Just as I’m turning away, planning to wait in my room to wait - maybe tidy up a bit, for Susan’s sake - there’s another sound.

And it is much louder.

No, my eyes fly wide, and I try not to let my jaw fall to the ground. Surely he’s not- but there it is again, still louder than before, something that sounds a lot like a moan, and I swallow thickly. I really shouldn’t.

A moment later, my ear’s back nearly against the wood of the door, and I can almost swear the next moan is followed by a soft whine; the twitch in my pants should be enough to make me walk away and pretend I never heard a thing. But I don’t move, except to take in a shaky breath. I wonder what he’s thinking about. I remember my own fantasy the morning before, and it doesn’t do anything for my self control.

Though I definitely never told it to, my hand finds its way to the front of my pants, hoping to relieve a bit of pressure at the sudden image of Dan, skin hot and wet and glistening as he leans heavily against the white tile, his hand stroking his own cock like I’d been doing to myself just yesterday. It’s absolutely unreal to imagine, the fantasy-Dan in my head moaning just as the real one does on the other side of the door, and I find myself slumped up against the door frame.

Oh my god, what am I doing? I barely have the thought, the split second of clarity, before there’s a high-pitched keening on the other side of the door and fuck if I’m not imagining Dan coming now, imagining myself pressed up against him as he does, and I push off the wall toward my own room, slamming the door and locking myself in.
For a very brief moment, I debate waiting til Dan’s done so I can go run a very very cold shower and shock myself out of this. But I can’t get him out of my head, and I don’t think this is a problem that’ll just disappear on its own, so I double-check the lock and flop back onto my mattress. I can’t believe I’m going to do this again.

Less than a minute later, I’ve pushed my jeans and boxers down to my knees and I’m back inside the fantasy of Dan, hot, wet, panting, and this time it’s my name that falls from his lips as he moans, it’s my hand on both our cocks, jerking us off together, and I can’t hold back the low sound that erupts from my throat when I come.

I really really hope Dan’s still showering is the first clear thought that comes to my mind, and I lean across my bed to grab some tissues from my bedside table to clean up; it’s a hasty job, since I’ll be showering soon anyway, and I quickly tug my pants back up before running a shaky hand through my hair. He’s been here two days, and I can’t stop thinking about him for more than a few hours, jesus.

For the first time since moving out into this house, I’m regretting not setting up a mirror in my room - I would really prefer to know whether I look as flustered as I feel right now. I lift a hand to my cheek, twisting my lips at how warm it feels. Well, maybe Dan’s already done, and I can just run into the bathroom without even seeing him. With that thought sitting front and center in my brain, I pull open the door of my room.

The hall is silent, as is the bathroom across the way, and I take a few hesitant steps toward it - it’s hard to say if the light is on or not, as there’s plenty of natural light spilling in from below the staircase and the window at the end of the corridor. But if it’s unlocked...I reach a hand out, holding my breath, then turn the knob.

Which gives under my hand, so I twist and push through the door as quickly as I can manage.

“Oh! Uh,” the voice behind me as I slip inside and slam the door makes me jump, and I whirl around to find Dan - naked from the waist up - staring at me. The steam from the shower still lingers, making everything twice as warm and uncomfortable as it would be otherwise.

“Ohmygoshsosorry!” I rush the words out, but I can’t manage to move, to turn back around and walk out the door - I’m stuck, shock holding me in place and honestly I swear the universe is just forcing me to have as many embarrassing encounters with Dan in as short a time as possible...

“I’m, uh, it’s- did you, uh, need, uhm-” Dan breaks off, staring down at the floor, then the ceiling, anywhere but at me. I don’t think I’ve blinked, and my eyes appreciate the time I’m giving them to take in his appearance.

It’s pretty much exactly how he’d looked in my fantasy, except a little drier. A little more covered. Just a little.

“Sorry, I should, uh- when you’re done?” I manage to break my paralysis to point awkwardly at the shower, and Dan’s lips part slightly, like he’s about to say something; but he doesn’t, he just turns around and twists the handle to get the water going. For one single fleeting second, I let myself wonder if he’s planning to shower with me, and god wouldn’t that be amazing?

But then he’s sliding past me, still damp and warm and a little red - from the heat of the shower or embarrassment at being barged in on, I have no idea - and I step aside to let him pass; the momentary thrill follows him out into the hall.

I am so, so screwed.
I’m very tempted to stay under the hot stream of water until it turns cold, hoping to put as much time between now and that embarrassing encounter as I can possibly manage, but I’m pretty sure Dan would notice if I never left the shower. *Even if it would be easier to wrinkle up into a raisin instead…*

I still spend far longer under the water than could probably be considered normal.

By the time I’ve managed to get dressed, I’m absolutely exhausted, and it’s barely the afternoon. *I need a nap.* I decide, which I’m aware enough to know has more to do with my desperate need to avoid Dan than actual need for sleep, but I reason that, well, I can deal with it later. Right?

I’m just settling on my bed, about to switch off my light, when there’s a knock on my door.

> “Phil? Can we, uh, talk?” I know it’s Dan on the other side - I mean, who else would it be? - and I am very tempted to just ignore him, pretend I’ve fallen asleep already. Pretend the past...however long never actually happened. ”*Please? I, uh, I wanted to apologize.*” And there goes my resolve.

> *Why does he want- oh. Right.* He must be wanting to apologize for being rude about the witchcraft thing - or that’s what I hope, at least.

> “Door’s unlocked, you can come in,” I shift so I’m sat near the middle of my bed, legs crossed as I wait for him. There’s a soft click, then he steps into the room, and I try to keep my expression as neutral as possible. Even from here, I can tell his hair’s still damp, though bits are starting to dry and turn a bit fluffy; curls stick up at odd angles like he’s been running his hand through them. *I wonder what that would feel like?* Now I’m doing my best to keep my face neutral for a whole other reason.

> “I just, I wanted to say-” he breaks off, pointing at the spot beside me on the bed. I nod and watch him perch himself on the edge, clearly uncomfortable. “I shouldn’t have, uh, said what I said.”

> He’s been focused on his hands, which are sort of clenched in his lap, but he looks up now, locks eyes with me.

> “What you said?” I assume I know what he means, but if this is an apology, I’d really prefer it’s a proper one. With all the words all together, so I know he understands why I’d been so frustrated - *although I didn’t think my being upset was that obvious, it’s been far too long since I’ve had to spend long periods of time around people. I need to work on controlling my expressions better…*

> “When I, uh,” his gaze drops back to his lap, “I said it was silly to believe you, about being a witch,” he mumbles through the whole thing, and his voice drops near to a whisper at the word ‘witch’. “But you have to agree, it sounded.”

> “I don’t,” I cut him off mid-sentence, curt and far ruder than I’d normally ever be. My lips twist as I try not to let myself go over the top - *he didn’t know, he’d never been exposed to witchcraft.* But it still bothers me that he’d been so flippant about it. “I don’t have to agree, I don’t think you can make excuses for not accepting me. This is who I am, and I don’t care if you don’t like it, but if you want to stay here, you have to just deal with it.”

I’m suddenly back in primary school, ranting at every parent who gave me uncomfortable stares; in high school, finally dredging up the courage to stand up to the bullies who I couldn’t bear to attack no matter how many times they called me a freak; in my hometown, standing my ground against the whole of the city council who’d made decisions about my life for me.
“Phil, I’m not- I don’t-” Dan’s voice drags me back to the present, and I realize I’ve been holding my breath and my brows are scrunched down in anger. Actual, real anger. At Dan, who’d done nothing other than trust his knowledge - his ignorance, really - over the word of a stranger. I exhale.

“Sorry, I know, I just- I think it’s been a long day, I’m going to take a nap?” I hope my face has softened into something kinder, something more me. But Dan’s expression gives nothing away, brown eyes staring back at me for a moment before they close, before he nods.

Then he’s stood, walking out the door, closing it behind him.

Even as I lay back on the pillow, I can’t help but think I’ve screwed everything up.

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Fortunately, I sleep - it’s fitful and certainly not the best sleep I’ve ever gotten, but it’s something. Given that my pillow is spelled with lavender, which usually does a fantastic job of calming me down, that conversation must’ve really stressed me out.

It’s not til I’m out in the dark hallway that I realize the sun must’ve set, meaning I’ll likely be up halfway into the night; I take a deep breath and steel myself for whatever’s waiting downstairs - Dan and I have been on opposite sides all day, and it’s bothering me. I much preferred the easy, light banter we’d had yesterday evening, under the night sky.

I have to do a double-take before I notice him, literally sat upside down on the sofa with a nearly empty glass of wine on the floor beside his head.

“Phil!” He shouts, fumbling to sit upright - or, apparently, to drape himself across the arm of the sofa and grin up at me; I haven’t quite managed to take the last step down the staircase. “You didn’t tell me you had alcohol,” his cheeks are bright red, and there’s a little rosy patch on his jaw as well, and he gestures grandly toward the bottle sat beside the glass of wine.

For a moment, it’s all I can do not to frown - it’s spelled alcohol, of course, and much stronger than any regular wine. But Dan looks far too happy and carefree, so my frown ends up turning into a disbeliefing smirk.

“Yeah, alright, that’s enough of that- no, no,” I end up rushing around to snatch the bottle away before he can get to it, which in and of itself says a lot about how drunk he is already - he’s literally an arm’s reach away, while I have to walk all the way around the end of the sofa.

“No, Phil, come on, it’s good!” His vowels have gone long and whiny, and it’s actually kind of adorable, so I end up grinning at him, even as he’s pouting up at me. Then his eyes go sort of unfocused, and he slumps back into the cushions behind him.

“Have you had anything to eat since earlier?” Concern, a strangely parental kind, flares up in my chest; he just stares up at the ceiling, tilting his head back and forth, before finally shaking it.

“Okay, right, let’s get some food in you?”
Alright, fine, I’ll admit I feel better after having something in my stomach aside from the wine. The very good wine, which Phil’s gone and left unattended as he brings our plates to the kitchen. I take careful, quiet steps backward, pausing beside the bottle and my mostly-empty glass.

My eyes haven’t left Phil, and I grin the moment he turns on the tap. Then I’m squatting down beside the coffee table, hoisting the bottle - which feels a bit heavier than it did before - and pouring wine into my glass in splashy, burbly glugs. Which the sound of the water does a very nice job of covering.

Once I’ve gotten it nearly up to the rim - and I’m praising my own steady hand - the water shuts off, and I rush to set the bottle down with a hard clink.

“Dan!” Phil sounds a hell of a lot like he’s just caught his dog - wolf? Beast? - chewing on something he shouldn’t be, and I feel a lot like I’m that dog, so I gulp down a sip of the wine and stand quickly, hoping to avoid being chastised.

Phil’s just stood right behind me, which scares the shit out of me, and I jump away with a start. Wine sloshes very close to the edge, but fortunately doesn’t spill over, and I end up letting out a whoosh of breath that turns into a low laugh.

“Don’t scare me, Phil, that was close!” I go on the offensive, hoping to distract him from the very obvious glass I’m still holding in my hand. He does not look amused. “I had my food, I’m fine, okay?” I frown and cross an arm over my chest, but the effect isn’t nearly as menacing as I would prefer, given the offending glass of wine prevents me from completing the angry arm-crossing look.

“It’s spelled,” he dips his head, giving said glass a very pointed look. “It’s much stronger than whatever you’re used to.” And that does it for me. I am perfectly capable of holding my liquor, thanks. I say as much aloud.

“Right, but it’s not-” he breaks off with a sigh. “Fine, but that’s the last glass, trust me.” He’s still frowning at me, looking very stern and like he might could use a glass himself.

“Okay, sure,” I agree, though I don’t even really know what he said. I brush past him - very literally, as our shoulders end up bumping - and into the kitchen to pull another glass from the cupboard, then return to where the bottle’s sat in the lounge. Phil makes some noise of annoyance when I set it down, and he’s still bloody grimacing, so I shove my wine at him and pour myself a fresh glass.

“There, now loosen up a bit, grumpy,” I lift my own glass and clink it against the one he’s still yet to do anything other than twist his lips at. “To new beginnings!” I offer, and Phil’s brows scrunch down into a look of confusion before he finally lifts his own glass for a very tiny sip.

I take a large drink of mine, just to compensate.

“Hey I have an idea,” I offer, dropping back onto the sofa - my wine sloshes, but stays safely in its glass, and Phil just stands there, squinting at me. “It’s a game, it’ll be fun, you do know what games are, don’t you?” I quirk a brow at him, and either that or the teasing must get to him, because he rolls his eyes and plops down in the armchair.

“Yes, I know what games are, what game did you have in mind?” He takes a more normal-sized
sip this time, and I try not to grin.

“Twenty questions, you don’t want to answer, you drink,” I tilt my glass at him and wait. He’s just as curious as I am, surely he’ll want to play. I have lots of questions. Probably more than twenty, but it’ll have to do for now.

There’s a moment where Phil’s face scrunches up and his eyes drift off to stare somewhere else, but then they lock on mine, bright and wide and blue and maybe a bit mischievous.

“You first,” I offer, because I’m generous like that.

“Alright, tell me about yourself.”

“Not a question,” I grin at him. He frowns.

“Fine, what was your life like, before?” There’s no clarification, because there doesn’t have to be one. Before you got kicked out, before you did whatever you did. But it’s fine, I can do this. I started this game, I can finish it. I won’t be cowed by the first question.

“Boring, really, I spent most of my time on the internet. Hated school. Got bullied.” I shrug. Phil doesn’t say anything. I don’t know if I expected him to. There’s a beat of silence. “Alright, my turn, then. Why are you out here?” I stick my pinky out from where it’s holding my glass and gesture vaguely around us. “In the middle of nowhere?”

There’s barely a second of hesitation before Phil takes a sip - a very large one, I notice. I don’t think I do a good job of keeping the surprise off my face.

“How do you feel about me, actually?” He says almost immediately; his eyes have locked onto me, a hard stare that I’m not sure I know how to interpret. The words, however, send a wave of heat to my already warm cheeks. Did he know? Oh fuck...

I mean, I hadn’t been that loud in the shower, right? I’m not being that obvious, am I? The real question, though, is whether or not I drink. I’m very very tempted to.

So I do.

Phil just frowns at me, so I shake my head as I swallow.

“I needed some, uh,” I lift my glass, “to actually answer this honestly?” I expect I should feel nervous, or anxious, or awkward or embarrassed, but everything just feels warm, like someone’s stuck a fire behind me and it just keeps following me around. Not that I’m actually going anywhere. Phil’s brows lift at me.

“Oh, right, I should probably actually answer.

“Fuck, I’m really into you,” the words spill out of my mouth of their own accord, and I’m surprised my tongue doesn’t trip over them. In fact, it pronounces them with a remarkable clarity that only registers once Phil’s eyes go wide and he swallows thickly. Then my eyes have gone wide, and my lips part like they’ve got something to say, but absolutely nothing comes out.

Holy shit, did I really just say that out loud?

Apparently I did, because neither of us has moved, like the world around us might crack and crumble the second we do.

“Oh,” Phil finally squeaks out, and it’s enough to startle me into motion, and I end up downing the rest of my wine in one go - to be fair, it’s very sweet, more like a juice than alcohol, so it’s not
much of a challenge to finish it. My drinking must set something off, because then Phil’s stood up beside me - hadn’t he just been over on the armchair? - and taking the empty glass from my hand.

“That’s, uh, probably enough for now. You should, maybe, uh, you should sleep, I think,” he’s in the kitchen now, and I frown at him.

“I don’t wanna,” I grumble. “Why?” My face scrunches up even more when he returns with a glass of water.

“I think you’ve had a bit much,” his whole everything is tight and a little patronizing, voice and motions and the look he’s giving me. Almost like pity.

“M fine,” I push away the water, and he sighs and sets it on the coffee table. “I feel fine,” I argue again, though he’s not said anything to the contrary.

“Well, I’m tired, then,” he says, and it sounds like a lie. But maybe that’s cause his voice sounds blurry, and lies probably sound blurry too, like they’re not fully formed yet. Because they’re lies. I wish I could see him, see how blurry he looks, because then I’d know if he’s lying.

But everything is dark, and I think I’ve closed my eyes. Something under me smells nice, like a flower, but I can’t figure out which one. It doesn’t smell blurry at least. Not a lie.

“Just get some sleep, okay?” Now his voice doesn’t sound so blurry, it sounds close and warm and happy but maybe a little not happy, I can’t tell for sure. Something in between. I’m still trying to figure it out when sleep comes for me.

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The moment I’m aware enough to recognize I’m awake, I’m desperately wishing I wasn’t.

My head’s throbbing in the kind of way that says I shouldn’t even attempt to move, and my stomach’s churning in the kind of way that says if I don’t, I’ll end up hurling my guts all over the floor. Or wherever’s nearest.

I end up basically falling off the damn sofa, which sets my head spinning and just generally makes everything twelve times worse, but I manage to pry my eyes open - to a horrendously bright light pervading the room - and scramble over to the sink before my stomach decides to empty itself of whatever contents it had.

I end up heaving for a troubling amount of time - or maybe my brain is just not keeping track properly - before my body’s done and shivering and I collapse against the cupboards under the counter. Everything feels hazy and too cold and too hot at the same time, and I can’t keep my eyes open for more than a moment without the light sending a spike of pain through my head.

I’ve decided this is by far the worst wake-up call I’ve ever gotten, bar none. Not even the chickens compare.

This feels like about the point in time I’d be groaning or grumbling or doing something to express just how disgusting and awful I feel, but I can’t even dredge up enough effort to manage that, so I just lean heavily against the cupboards, resigned to my fate.

Until a very loud stomping announces, probably, Phil coming down the stairs. Jesus fucking christ, did he do something to me? Did I eat something that made me sick?
“Dan?” His voice is far too loud, bouncing around inside my head and amplifying itself with each passing second, and I think my face screws up in a grimace. Which only serves to make everything hurt worse. And then the thumping gets louder and closer and fuck I want to just shout at Phil to stop already, but I don’t even know if I can open my damn mouth - I still haven’t even managed to open my eyes.

“Are you-” I wince again, and he goes quiet for a moment. “Are you alright?” He’s whispering, now, which isn’t great but at least he’s not yelling anymore - or, more likely, speaking at a perfectly normal volume that my throbbing skull can’t deal with for whatever reason.

Somehow, through some feat of herculean effort, I shake my head - a horrible mistake, I realize as soon as I’ve done it, because even behind my eyelids I can feel the dizziness and continuous ache get that much worse.

Phil doesn’t respond, but I hear the soft - well, softer - creaks of footsteps heading elsewhere, away from me. Good, let me die in peace. Because pain like this, surely I’m dying, my brain feels as though it’s shriveling up inside my head and sucking the rest of my innards along with it.

For a while, there’s mostly silence, aside from some creaking that sounds way too loud for where I’m fairly sure it’s coming from, somewhere upstairs. So I get to sit and wallow in pain and suffer for a while, which is loads of fun and I want to punch something except that would require so much effort and would literally make everything worse.

Then the stomping returns, which I’m again assuming means Phil, and something very strong and pretty horrible-smelling accompanies him.

“Here, drink this,” he’s still whispering, but my eyes fly open - he’s crouched down beside me, blocking most of the light, and holding out a greenish-brown mixture in a small cup. He wants me to fucking what now? But he’s shoving the concoction toward me, and the earthy, mucky scent assaults my nose and sends a wave of nausea through me.

“Can’t,” I manage to croak out, and the literal fucking vibrations of my own voice set my head to throbbing again, if it ever stopped. I clench my eyes shut, trying to fight back the roiling in my stomach - at least there’s nothing left, even if I did get sick right now.

But there’s a hand on mine, forcing a cool glass into it, and it’s not til Phil’s helping me lift the disgusting drink to my mouth that I realize how shaky I am, how damp my palms are. How I’m literally shivering.

“It’ll help, I promise,” Phil’s voice sounds way closer this time, but I still can’t open my eyes again - too much, too loud and bright and definitely too gross a smell, but the cup’s being lifted to my lips and some of it slips down my throat and it’s awful but I manage to choke it down.

I expect it to unsettle me even further, but the moment the mixture hits my stomach, it settles - in fact, it’s so damn instantaneous, I suck in a breath and my eyes fly open. And, somehow, the light doesn’t seem as bright, my head doesn’t feel as horrible, and everything comes into focus.

Particularly Phil, leaned very very close in a way that, had I not literally just hurled my guts out, might tempt me to lean in and capture his lips with mine.

“Better?” Those lips say, and I blink a few times. You can not be falling for him, not allowed. You’re already taking advantage of his hospitality…

I nod, then clear my throat a couple times, not trusting myself to talk right away.
“Let me get you some water, yeah? That’ll help as well,” Phil stands up beside me, and I’m able to take in my surroundings - not that they’ve changed much, I’ve just never seen them at the angle of ‘slumped against the cupboards’ before. Well, it wouldn’t matter what my feelings for Phil are, he’s just seen me get sick in the middle of his kitchen and nearly pass out on the floor - no way he’d ever feel the same way I do.

“Here,” a hand appears in my face, holding a tall glass of water, and I take it with surprisingly steady hands. *Shit, whatever Phil gave me, it was-

*Magic. It was magic.*

I take the glass carefully, staring intently at it, hoping to be able to tell if he’s magicked this one as well. Unfortunately, it looks for all intents and purposes to be a perfectly normal glass of water. I stare a little harder.

And I *swear* it starts to bubble, or maybe I’m just shaking it a bit, or there’s a hint of a glow or glimmer or *something*. Then Phil’s dropped back down beside me with a frown.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to get more of-” he hikes a thumb over his shoulder, toward the staircase.

“Oh god-” I cough for a moment, doing my best to properly clear my throat, “no, no, it’s- you didn’t, uh,” I point at the glass and wiggle my fingers in what I hope is a gesture he’ll understand. He squints, then his eyes widen.

“Oh! No, I didn’t, it’s just regular water,” he twists his lips and glances off to the side, and I wonder if I’ve done something wrong. *Something other than puke in his sink and collapse on his floor, you mean?* I lift the glass to my mouth, then end up chugging it in a few thirsty gulps once I realize how parched I am.

It’s not til I’ve finished the glass - which he takes from my hand and turns to fill again - that I finally get the confidence to ask what I’ve been terrified to ask since my brain started working enough to form coherent thought.

“What *happened* last night?”
"What do you mean, ‘what happened’?" My hand fumbles on the faucet as I turn it off - I’d made him go straight to sleep, spelled pillow and everything, to prevent anything from happening. Did he think I’d taken advantage of his drunken state or something? I wouldn’t, not ever.

“Like...you didn’t, I don’t know, curse me or anything, right?” His voice drops low at the word ‘curse’, and I have to resist the urge to roll my eyes. Instead, I hold the glass in front of his face to take.

"Just because it was spelled doesn’t mean I did something to you,” I point out. Then take a very very deep breath in and exhale fully. It’s not fair to be rude, he just doesn’t understand. He might very well think I cursed the wine. “The wine was just spelled to be stronger, that’s all.”

“Wait, the- were we drinking?” He sputters over his sip of water, then coughs for a moment. “I don’t-” an audible silence descends around us as it sinks in.

“You don’t...remember?” I take a step back as he scrambles to his feet. “You don’t-”

“No, Phil, I don’t remember, why don’t I fucking remember?” The hangover cure - quite literally - seems to be working well, as he’s taken to pacing around the lounge with his water in hand, frowning down at the ground.

“Well, you did have a couple glasses-” I start, but he pauses to fix me with a hard gaze.

“Yeah, I’ve never blacked out after a few glasses of wine before, jesus christ,” he’s back to pacing, but all I can think is that he doesn’t remember. He has no idea what happened. What he said.

‘Fuck, I’m really into you.’

My heart skips a beat just thinking about the words - last night, I’d barely been able to function, my head was spinning so much, I’d barely slept with his voice running through my head. And he doesn’t even remember.

“You don’t remember anything?” I have to know. “We played- uh, you wanted to play twenty questions,” I watch him carefully, hoping for any sign. But he’s just shaking his head, downing another sip of water. The glass is nearly empty again.

“Nothing,” he says once he’s swallowed. “Why didn’t you tell me how strong it was?” At least he’s moved on from the whole ‘cursing’ thing. As if I’d waste my time cursing alcohol to make people black out when it does that plenty well on its own.

“I did,” I chuckle, and he just whirls around, clearly insulted that I’d insinuate he didn’t listen. Which he didn’t, but it’s not like he’d remember. Oh my gosh, he really doesn’t remember...

For a brief moment, I’m worried - what if the admission had been a product of alcohol and not his actual feelings? I still can’t believe how wildly he’d misinterpreted my question - I’d only asked to see if he was just pretending to be okay with me being a witch. I hadn’t even thought about the other implications of my words.

Alcohol lowers inhibitions, it doesn’t tell people to make things up. And, honestly, that’d be a pretty strange thing for him to pull out of thin air, given my question...he could’ve just said he liked me fine, or something else. Anything else. A grin creeps up my face.
He told me, and he doesn’t remember.

“Look, it’s not funny, I can’t remember anything, Phil!” Dan’s voice has gone high pitched and whiny, and it’s suddenly the funniest thing I’ve ever heard. Maybe that combined with delirium at this absurd situation, and the high of knowing Dan actually likes me! Whatever the case, I end up breaking down into a fit of giggles that I can’t control, not even when Dan’s whacking my arm and calling me some names I don’t really hear because he’s close, very close, and I’m almost tempted to just tell him that he told me. But where’s the fun in that?

Instead, I smack his arm back, and hope I’m smiling just the right amount to say that I’m only teasing. And not too much, because I don’t want to give anything away just yet. This’ll be a fun game, I think.

Dan pulls back and grumbles something about needing more water, then situates himself at the sink; I let myself watch him for a moment, admire the way my grey t-shirt hugs-

Wait.

Before I can think twice, I’m climbing the stairs two at a time and heading to my bedroom. I can’t believe I made him wear the same clothes literally since he got here, I’m a horrible host! I pull a bright blue shirt and an old pair of jeans from my wardrobe, then whirl around for the door. Maybe... I grab a pair of pants as well; if I’d be uncomfortable wearing the same underwear for at least two days in a row, he probably is as well.

When I emerge and take the first few steps down the staircase, I glance up to find Dan at the bottom, staring up at me. His lips part, then clamp shut as he ducks his head and steps back. Now that I’m watching for it, I notice his cheeks flush.

“Thought you could use some fresh clothes,” I hold them out as I descend, and he lifts his head. And his eyebrows. “Although I’m wondering if I should’ve gone for a pink shirt instead, I like that color on you,” my heart’s racing as I speak, as I flirt - I never thought that’d be happening, definitely not with a random stranger who’s staying in my house, but maybe I can get him to admit he likes me when he’s sober as well.

Maybe he will, if he knows I like him too. But given how nervous I am just from giving him a compliment, I doubt I’d be able to actually say I like him. I can see why it took my spelled wine for him to say it.

There’s a beat of hesitation, where Dan’s hand is stretched out toward the clothes, where he completely stops and sucks in a breath at my words; the whole atmosphere changes, turns almost electric, and I’m too afraid to move, to break the spell of the moment.

But Dan’s not, apparently, as he grabs the clothes and rushes up the steps past me. Before I’ve even turned around, the bathroom door’s slammed shut and I can hear the rush of water as the shower turns on.

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“Hey, Dan?” I call up the stairs after what feels like quite a bit longer than a shower should probably take. Granted, the water’s turned off, but he’s definitely still holed up in the bathroom - I haven’t heard the door, and he still hasn’t come downstairs.

Not two minutes after he’d made his escape, I’d gotten a call from Javier that the sprinkler system had started to - for lack of a better word - droop. Good thing I’ve got all this belladonna fresh and
But I’ve been waiting for Dan to get done so I can let him know where I’m headed.

“Dan?” I try again. Javier’s more than patient, and I know the last spell I put up will hold for a while yet, but I told him I’d be over soon and I feel bad making him wait.

“Yes?” I can barely hear his voice, but it’s there. Then the door creaks open, just enough for him to poke his head through and stare down at me. Even from here, I can see water drip from his curls to the floorboards. “What’s up?”

“I have to run into town for a bit, fix up the sprinklers at the garden center, will you be good until I get...” I don’t finish my sentence because Dan’s face has scrunched up, and he’s tilting his head at me. “Is...is something wrong?” For the life of me, I can’t think what I might’ve said to get such a look of confusion.

“Garden center?”

“Yeah, the-”

“Phil,” he rolls his eyes, talking right over me, “I’ve been gone for two days, they can’t have put up a whole garden center in that time,” he’s still not stopped frowning. When he steps out into the hallway, I realize he’s very much not fully dressed - still lacking a shirt, though he’s lifting it and tugging it down over his head.

“I mean, I guess there was that one building under construction, but- Phil? Hello, earth to Phil?”

After hearing my name a second time, and realizing Dan’s halfway down the stairs and waving a hand in my face, I manage to blink.

“Sorry, uh,” I was enjoying the view, why’d you go and cover it up? I’m very tempted to say it aloud, but- well, why the hell not, I guess? “I was enjoying the view,” I stutter out, far less smooth than I’d sounded in my head. My cheeks flush, even though the goal here is to get Dan blushing.

Which he does. Then he stomps down the rest of the steps and past me into the lounge, lips pressed tight in a line. I can’t decide if that’s a bad thing or not.

“There’s no bloody garden center, Phil, whatever you’re doing, you can just tell me the truth.” It seems we’ve switched back to our original discussion, and I whirl around to find him standing behind me, arms crossed and face still very red - although I’m wondering now if it’s from anger or frustration, or whatever he thinks I’m-

“What- Dan, I’m not-” I break off, mouth hanging open - he can’t be serious, can he? Why would I lie about that? And the garden center’s been there for ages, Javier’s celebrating the tenth anniversary in early October.

“Dan,” I try again, staring hard and doing my best to be as serious as possible. “Do you know what year it is?” Maybe he has some really adverse effects to the spelled wine, and he’s gone and forgotten a whole lot more than just last night...the pressure of having to help someone with amnesia suddenly weighs on me, terrifying and huge. I’d do it, though. Maybe I could find some spells that would help, I’ve never had to-

“Do I know- fucking, what? Phil, of course I know what year it is, jesus, I also know there isn’t a bloody garden center in Seawraithe.”

Oh.
“Dan,” I feel like I’m talking to a frightened animal, the way his eyes go wide when I say his name. The way my hands drift up like I’m trying to calm him down before I’ve even said anything. “The town, it’s not Seawraithe, that’s like...four hours’ drive away, it’s Wrathburn.”

I pause, waiting for his reaction. Which is to tense up, to go completely still, with his lips parted and his chest expanded like he’s sucked in a breath and can’t let it out. His skin loses all the flush from earlier, and his eyes, already wide, somehow go wider; with a huff, he drops heavily to the sofa.

“I’m not...I mean, I can...” he’s let his gaze drop to his knees, to where his hands have turned white from gripping them tightly. Now I’m the one holding my breath, waiting - I can’t tell if he’s angry or upset or-

“Can I come with you?” He blurts out, head whipping up, eyes locking on mine, and I stare for a moment; I’d normally never think to describe brown eyes as sparkling, that feels like a blue-eyes kind of thing, but his are. It’s entrancing.

“I- uh, yeah, of course, I don’t see why not,” I shrug, finally able to react like a normal person. I’m almost tempted to tell him my thoughts, but he looks a little overwhelmed already, and I don’t know that I should add anything else to that right now.

His whole face lights up, lips curling into a bright smile that’s suddenly making me wish I had a camera so I could capture it, keep it somewhere forever. Oh well, guess I’ll just have to do what I can to keep it on his face, then. It’s contagious, and I can feel my lips mirroring his.

“Just give me like, two minutes, I need to get everything for the spell,” I hold up a finger, then two, and Dan nods - possibly too enthusiastically, but it’s endearing and my own grin only widens. Then I’m heading off to the shed to grab my gloves - I’ll need some of the belladonna, plus a bit of the lavender I’d collected- wow, was that only two nights ago? Three?

By the time I emerge from the shed, gloves in hand, Dan’s stood outside and bouncing on his toes a bit. My grin returns in the form of a smirk, but I’m sort of excited to have him coming with me. Or his excitement is infectious.

“Anything I can help with?” He asks as I head toward the belladonna, though his lips purse in an almost-frown as I stoop down beside the patch. “Is that- I mean, are you sure that’s safe?” I can hear the concern in his tone as he stands behind me, well away from the ‘killer plant’ that has, admittedly, caused us a lot of trouble up to this point.

“Yeah, don’t-” I grab the few leaves I’ve clipped and stand, only to find him right behind me, far too close. I nearly fall back into the plant just trying not to step into him, I hadn’t realized he was right there. Fortunately, he jumps back first, eyeing the plants in my hand with a squint and a frown. “Uh, don’t worry, it’s for levitation,” I squeak out the end of my sentence.

“Wait, are we flying to town?” His eyes go wide again, though I can’t tell if it’s from fear or excitement. I sputter out a laugh.

“‘For- wait, are we flying to town?’” His eyes go wide again, though I can’t tell if it’s from fear or excitement. I sputter out a laugh.

“No, no, it’s for the sprinkler system,” now his face scrunches in confusion, and I’m about to explain further when he waves a hand in the air.

“I’ll just, uh, when we get there,” he stares back at the plant. “Is there something I can help with, though? Preferably something that won’t kill me?” His eyes flick up to mine, lips pursed now, and it’s pretty clear how anxious he is about the belladonna.
“Actually,” I hold up a gloved finger, then return to the shed; may as well get this bit taken care of before we leave, especially if it’ll make Dan more comfortable. Once I’ve discarded my gloves and got the leaves in a bowl with a bit of oil, I set them alight and head back out to where he’s still stood, following my progress across the garden. “Will you watch this for a moment? I need to go get a few other things,” I set the bowl down in the grass, straightening up to find him nodding.

“I shouldn’t put it out, right?” He smirks at me, and I can’t help the giggle that comes out. Which seems to only make his grin widen, so mine does as well, and before long we’re both just stood staring at each other with bright smiles on our faces; I’m quite enjoying taking in every line and angle of his face, but he seems to have other ideas, as he clears his throat and nods down at the bowl, breaking the moment.

“Right, I’ll keep an eye on it, sure,” he says. I give myself one last peek at the blush creeping up his cheeks before I head inside for the last of the supplies.
Dan

I can actually go into this town...the thought’s still circling around in my head twenty minutes later as we approach said town - Wrathburn, not Seawraithe. I can’t decide whether to be excited or terrified; a town where nobody knows me, sure, but I don’t know anything either. What if they’re all witches like Phil? Phil being a witch I can handle - okay, I can sort of handle - but an entire town full of people who could, I don’t know, attack me at will? Make me fly? Make me forget things?

I still haven’t forgotten about last night - well, I have, but that’s the point. I have never, in my entire life, blacked out so thoroughly that I couldn’t remember anything the next morning. What happened? He said we played a game...that in and of itself makes my cheeks flush hotter - they’re already red from walking down into town, but they’re even warmer now. Oh god, what did I say?

Because I’ll be the first to admit to myself, I can be absolutely mortifying when I’m drunk.

“Alright, the garden center’s over this way, unless you’d like to walk through town for a bit?” Phil’s voice interrupts my spiral of embarrassment - basically a reliving of every horrible thing I’ve ever done when intoxicated - and I glance up to find our gravelly path has turned into more of a road that leads through a myriad of shops and small buildings. None of which look at all familiar.

My cheeks basically split I’m grinning so hard.

“Any preference?” The voice again, Phil’s, and I turn toward him with wide eyes.

“Uh, oh, we should- I mean, garden center first?” I offer, because that’s what he’s here for, and it would be rude of me to drag him along with me, no matter how much I’d love to explore. Explore without any fear - in Seawraithe, those who wouldn’t report me to the authorities would certainly judge me, and that’s nearly as bad. Or, god forbid, they’d pity me…

“Alright, we can cut through here, then,” Phil turns down a side street, more an alley between two leaning buildings, and I take a final glance at what’s most likely the main street of the town before following behind him.

Everything here feels like more than Seawraithe: taller buildings, though only by a few stories, brighter signs, a warmer atmosphere. Homier. Safer. Or maybe I’m just projecting, it’s hard to say for sure - objectively, it could just be a nicer, larger version of Seawraithe. But it feels like it’s so much better.

It’s not til I nearly walk right into Phil that I realize he’s stopped, standing in front of a large storefront with a giant glass greenhouse behind it. A bright green sign floats above the doorway, reading “Garden Centre” in curly blue lettering, and it takes me a moment to realize it’s quite literally floating, with absolutely nothing holding it aloft.

Is he a witch, then, too, this Javier guy? A twinge of jealousy spikes through my chest, which is stupid and silly because I don’t even know this guy, I don’t even know anything about him - hell, I barely know Phil; but the fact that he and Phil might have something in common, a thing I could never truly understand about Phil, doesn’t settle well in my stomach.

“Coming?” Phil’s poking his head out through the door - which, I’ll be honest, I hadn’t even realized he’d opened and walked through - and I rush to follow him inside.

The entrance to the shop is, admittedly, far more mundane than I would expect of a witch: it’s
mostly just a bunch of plants sat in pots of various kinds, and the greenhouse backs right up to it - the entire back wall opens to rows of plant beds, and sunlight filters in and lightens the entire store.

 Granted, I’d say it’s mundane, but what would I know? Clearly, I didn’t even guess at Phil being a witch...

“Phil! Hello, thanks for coming, and who might this be?” The voice makes me turn from my cataloguing of the shop - lots of plants, lots of plants - to find an older man leaning heavily on the counter beside a register. Phil’s already stood across from him, though they’re bothin staring at me.

“Oh! Uh, I’m, uh...Dan, I’m a...” I’m not even sure what to say - a friend of Phil’s? Not exactly, given we barely know each other. An acquaintance sounds a bit odd, given the friendly manner in which he’d greeted Phil.

“He’s a friend,” Phil supplies, and I won’t lie, my chest feels a bit light and warm at the word. “You said the sprinklers were-” he cuts off mid-sentence as he turns toward the greenhouse, and I follow his line of sight; oh, yeah, those are not suspended properly.

The sprinkler system looks a lot like the one in Phil’s home garden, though it’s more extensive. It’s also hanging into several of the taller plants, causing some to bend and arch toward the floor, and Javier just laughs at the way Phil’s jaw drops.

“You didn’t say it’d gotten this bad! I was just here the other day!” Phil’s already slinging his backpack to the ground and digging through it for whatever things he brought for the spell, but Javier just clucks at him and waves a hand in the air.

“You were in a hurry, didn’t have your supplies, and I wasn’t about to ask you to make the trek twice in the same day,” his voice is gruff, but I can see the edge of a smile under his thick moustache, and he quirks a brow in my direction. I’m not at all sure what to make of the look, so I give him a tight smile and join Phil.

“Anything I can do to help?” I offer, because if I have to just stand around and make small talk, it might kill me. Why had I been so desperate to come into town again?

“No, I’m- actually.” Phil pauses with his hand on a tin I know to contain the ashes of the belladonna plant, then he hands it over to me. “You can help with this, we need to make lots of the same symbols as we did yesterday, on the branch?” I stick out my hand purely on instinct, and he sets the tin in it, and our fingers brush for a second. It’s unfortunately very thrilling.

“Uh, right, sure,” I clear my throat, hoping I can excuse away the blush creeping up my cheeks as a product of the humidity of the place. “An R falling down the stairs, right?” I check, and he glances back over his shoulder at me, just grinning. Shit. Why did I have to fall so hard and fast for him? My stomach can’t decide between knotting up and spinning around in a dizzying whirlwind.

“Exactly, and maybe every couple feet or so should do it?” He points at the nearest sprinkler head, and I stand to find it’s hovering about at eye level. Then I nod and set to work.

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I don’t even realize I’ve nearly finished til I turn to find a lack of sprinkler piping and an abundance of Phil - namely, his face, which is a bit too close, eyes a bit too wide and blue and cheeks a bit too flushed; just the heat and humidity, I’m probably flushed as well.

If I wasn’t, I sure as hell am now.
“Thank you,” his tone is full of sincerity, and a light smile touches his lips. I’m suddenly tempted to touch them as well. Maybe with my lips. *Nope, no no no, he’s letting me live in his home, I’m not taking advantage...*

“Sure!” I blurt out as I stumble back, “uh, anything else?” The tin in my hand feels uncomfortably warm, and my palms have started to sweat. Phil just shakes his head.

“No, the rest is, uh, a spell, so...” he trails off. *Right, can’t be much use for that bit, then.* I take a step to the side, then another, then I’m back by Phil’s backpack and crouched beside it, sticking the warm tin of ash back inside.

“Never did like this bit,” the voice startles me, and I stand to find Javier leaning over the counter. I must look confused, because he nods at where Phil’s still stood by the sprinklers. *The magic bit,* he clarifies. For a moment, all I can do is stare at him; then my stomach swirls with anger - Phil’s immediate reaction when he’d mentioned being a witch was how others were quick to judge, apparently that includes the people he goes out of his way to help.

“Always makes my ears pop,” he frowns, sticking his pinky in his ear and wiggling it a bit. My mouth, which had been open to defend Phil, clamps shut. Then I glance between Javier and Phil - the latter has already turned back toward us, and I notice the sprinkler pipes floating up higher behind him.

“All set, Javier!” Phil’s voice comes out bright and clear, and he’s grinning at us both. *No, at Javier, not me.* “Anything else need re-upping or just that?” He stoops down to sling his bag back over his shoulder, and I watch the movement as though it’s going in slow motion. Something about this whole encounter feels...*off.*

“No, thank you, Phil, you take care now!” He waves a hand at us, bright smile poking out under his bushy moustache, then he’s turned away toward the greenhouse.

“You too, Javier,” Phil’s voice isn’t quite as jovial, but it’s certainly pleased and fond. I find myself wanting to grin as well, but then we’re out the door and into the slightly cooler air and all my fuzzy warmth melts away. “Did you want to walk around for a bit, then? Or just head home?”

Excitement swoops in and engulfs everything like a tidal wave.

“Explore, please?” I realize only after I’m staring at Phil that my eyes are wide and I have something like a pout on my lips - but if he thinks it’s as odd as I do, he doesn’t say, just grins at me and gestures toward the alley we came through.

I set a brisk pace - or at least, it feels brisk, but the kind of brisk that has me wanting to walk even *faster* because I just sort of assumed I’d never get to be in a real *town* again, even if it isn’t Seawraithe.

*Wow, I was really dramatic about the whole exile thing, wasn’t I?* I mean, it hadn’t even occurred to me at the time that I could just go find another town to live in, even though it seems stupidly obvious now. *Granted, I was cold and wet and sure I’d be devoured by wolves or something...*

To be fair, that last bit had been a little too close to reality for my comfort. *Speaking of...*

“What does Mellix do all day?” I’d barely seen him after Phil sent him away, and I don’t recall seeing him *at all* this morning. I glance over to find Phil staring up at the sky, so I look up as well. Which was a pretty shit idea, because the sun’s surprisingly bright, and I end up blinking a sunspot from my eyes as I wait for an answer.
“He does a lot of hunting, mostly,” is what I get when he finally opens his mouth, and I’m thrown back to the lovely surprise the wolf had left me two mornings ago.

“Really, that’s it? Just hunts all the time?” It seems like a lot of time to spend hunting, given it’s only for himself and Phil. “Do you have, like, a huge appetite or something?” I let the bright windows of the stores we pass tug at my vision, mostly little boutiques and clothing or jewelry shops. A pub, though the windows are dim as it’s the middle of the day still.

“No, there are, uh…” Phil trails off, and I look back to find his face scrunched up in concern. I do not like the frown.

“There are uh?” I quirk a brow at him, but that only serves to make him purse his lips, then turn away.

“It’s probably not anything you should worry about?” He tries, voice high and tight. So, naturally, I am very worried.

“Phil,” I stop walking and cross my arms at him. He pauses as well, though he doesn’t turn toward me. “Phil,” I grab at his arm, force him to look at me. “Now you have to tell me, what the fuck is Mellix hunting?” Visions of black creatures swim in my head, clawing their way toward me from the shadows of impossibly tall trees, and I shiver in spite of the sun’s warmth.

“It’s-” Phil finally finally looks at me properly, and I’m not sure what he sees there - I can’t even fathom what my face might look like right now - but he cuts himself off and sighs. “They’re just demonic animals, it’s not- it, you don’t-”

“Demonic fucking animals?” I nearly shout, and Phil glances around before grabbing my hand and pulling me off to the side, down another small side street. Not that there were many people around or anything.

“Phil, you have a giant-ass wolf hunting demons and you didn’t think that was worth mentioning?” I can feel my breaths coming in faster than they should be, and I’m vaguely aware Phil’s hand hasn’t left mine, but all I can think about are how the shadows probably were coming for me that night, and I wasn’t just being paranoid. Oh god, I really could’ve died...or worse. What would demons have done-

“Dan, Dan, breathe,” I can hear his voice, but only barely, and all I can really see are amorphous blobs of red and black crawling toward me from every corner. “Dan,” it’s not til two hands are gripping my face, warm and soft against my skin, that I manage to refocus. To find Phil’s eyes only a few inches from mine, a bright blue that matches the sky on an unusually clear day.

“You can’t just not tell me that,” I squeak out, though I can already feel every inch of my body flushing with heat at the closeness of Phil’s face to mine. His eyes flick back and forth between mine, then he releases me and steps back just a bit. Still closer than he’d been before, or maybe it’s just wishful thinking.

“Are you okay?” Somehow he thinks that’s the important thing here, so I cross my arms at him.

“I’m fine, except for the fucking demonic beings you neglected to mention!” I realize I’m near shouting again, but I can’t be bothered to care. He can’t just-

“Oh, because you took me being a witch so well, I’m sure you’d have handled demonic animals just great,” he grumbles, and I frown even harder because he has a point. Although it’s much easier to believe in something you fear than something that seems too good to exist.
Which is exactly the kind of bullshit philosophical thing my brain would come up with when it’s been pumped full of adrenaline.

“Well, you still should’ve told me,” I argue, though it’s not much of an argument at all. “Jesus fucking christ,” I realize the moment I release the tense grip I’d had with my arms crossed that I’m sort of shivering, so I purposely shake out my arms and legs in an attempt to cover my nerves.

“They can’t- I mean, they won’t- uh, that’s why Mellix, uh...” I think Phil’s trying to be reassuring, but the fact that he can’t land on a sentence is not helping at all. But an idea springs into my head, and I kind of hate how much I hope I’m right.

“You have like, wards or whatever up?” My voice comes out small and scared and I hate it, but he’d done whatever spell to put wards around the belladonna, so maybe he’s got some protection for his house as well.

“Of- yeah, of course I do,” his eyes go wide like he’s actually offended that I’d suggest otherwise, but a whoosh of air escapes my lungs and literally all my muscles relax. Then Phil’s brows scrunch, and he twists his lips at me.

“But...” I start for him, because can see the ‘but’ coming, the way he’s just staring, like there’s a puzzle he’s trying to figure out. Like he’s trying to decide how exactly to break some horrible news to me. At my word, though, he blinks and his entire face goes neutral, bordering on surprised based on the way his eyes widen slightly.

“‘But’? But nothing, of course I have wards up?” Now he’s the one looking confused, which seems all kinds of unfair, because he’d clearly been about to say something else. Or had been thinking something else. Which he is now very much not saying to me.
Phil

I can’t believe I’d forgotten about the wards. And the fact that Dan had no problem getting through them. How had he managed that? It’s more than obvious he has no exposure to witchcraft, unless he’s really really good at acting. Like, really good.

But I don’t know if I should mention it at all - either he’s a witch and he’ll know I’m onto him, or he isn’t and he’ll think that anyone or anything could break through my wards. And I don’t want him to look that terrified ever again. I promise you’re safe with me. I want to say it aloud, but it doesn’t feel light and flirty enough to get away with.

“I promise you’re safe,” I decide that’s close enough without being too much, and Dan squints at me for a moment before giving me a tight nod. The way his hands shake, though, says he doesn’t really believe me. Oh! I’ll show him what they look like, when we get home. Demonic animals aren’t even that scary, once he sees, he’ll be fine. I file that away in the back of my mind for later.

“Did you still want to walk around a bit? We can head back if you’d rather,” I offer, because in spite of the pink tinge to his cheeks, he looks a bit pale. But he only shakes his head.

“No- I mean, I want to walk around more, if that’s alright?” He asks like he’s worried I might say no, and I have to hide my grin by turning back toward the street.

“Of course it’s alright, whatever you want,” I say before I can think about the implications of the words. They’re true, though. I think they are, anyway. After a very audible pause, there’s a shuffling behind me and then Dan’s at my side again.

“So what is there here? Garden center, obviously,” Dan’s voice doesn’t sound quite as tense as it had a minute ago, and I’m glad we’re moving on - I hadn’t realized just how much that would affect him, nor how much him being so upset would affect me.

“Garden center, uh, lots of shops,” I gesture at the street, laden with boutique storefronts and way-too-expensive clothes that really only get bought by passing tourists who believe they’re handmade and ‘authentic’.

“Wow, just clothes? That must get-” he breaks off mid-sentence, and I follow his gaze to the record shop - though it honestly barely deserves that title, as it mostly sells old CDs, which seems like the worst niche to sell into; records are vintage and cool enough to sell, at least.

I don’t even have to ask to see how clear Dan’s interest is, though, as he’s already walked halfway across the street toward the rusty-red painted door before I even notice he’s gone; because he’s too far to hear, I let out a sigh. Of course, that’s the place he wants to go into.

I hang back a bit, though I do at least follow him across the street. The jingle of the bell as he opens the door sets my teeth on edge for no good reason - shop owners have every right to refuse business on any grounds, after all. I lean against the stone of the side of the building and wait for Dan to reemerge.

Which takes far less time than I expected, given how excited he’d been to get to the store.

“Phil?” I turn at his voice to find he’s peeked halfway out the door, gaze scanning the street until he finally finds me. Then his face scrunches up in confusion. Great, here we go. “Aren’t you coming in?” Contrary to his words, he steps fully outside and walks over. I push off the wall and
try to force a smile to my face at the same time.

“Nah, just thought I’d hang out out here for a bit,” I hope I sound casual, in spite of the way my stomach has twisted up in knots. I’m not sure Dan’s buying it, with how his lips tug down in a frown.

“If you’d rather go home, we can-”

“No! No,” I rush to say, because he looks about to apologize. “You go ahead, they just, uh,” I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment in the exact way I know he’ll probably notice but I can’t be bothered not to. “They aren’t a fan of, uh, me.”

“Not a fan- oh,” for a brief moment, Dan’s expression shifts to something entirely neutral, then his whole face turns bright red, and I watch him clench his fists at his sides. Before I can say anything, he’s whirled around and stomping back toward the door, and I have to practically run to catch his arm before he can go back inside.

“Please don’t!” I try to keep it more of a whisper-shout, but he shrugs me off and reaches out for the doorknob, so I grab his hand and drag him off past the windows of the shop. It’s not til I’ve pulled us down a quiet side street and well away from the record shop that I stop, though I don’t dare drop Dan’s hand.

He is still very much fuming. I don’t know that I’ve ever seen a person so angry, honestly, but he looks like he’s literally about to explode; I can practically feel the tension in the air around us.

“Dan, please, it’s not worth-”

“It’s not worth it? It’s not worth it, is that what you were about to say?” He’s spitting the words out, and I know he’s not mad at me, but they’re acrid and they sting anyway. I nod. He yanks hard at my hand so I stumble close, far closer than I should be, but I have absolutely no interest in pulling away all of a sudden.

“You are the kindest, most caring, most helpful person I have ever met,” he grits the words out like they hurt to say. “Don’t you ever say you aren’t worth it. You are absolutely worth it, and they,” he points back toward the shop with the hand that isn’t currently still clasped in mine, “deserve the wrath of all the demonic hellbeasts for thinking anything less of you.” His chest heaves with the force of his words, with the heavy breaths he’s taking to fuel his anger, and I’m living for the gentle touches as he brushes against me.

“You are amazing, Phil, amazing, and you can’t just let people get away with-” he breaks off, staring down the alley back toward the shop, and waves his hand in a ‘you know what I mean’ kind of way before turning back toward me.

Apparently, he’s now realizing exactly how close he is, that his face is only a few inches from mine, that he’s still gripping my hand tight in his; he sucks in a breath before stepping back. If his face was red before, it’s a right tomato at this point.

But then, I’m sure mine is as well - he thinks I’m amazing? It’s the closest to a proper admission he
likes me that I’ve gotten while he’s sober, and it’s also simultaneously a lot more than that. I’ve never had anyone so ready to jump to my defense…

“Sorry, I-”

“No, no, don’t apologize!” I rush my words out, hoping he doesn’t misunderstand. “It’s just, I’ve dealt with it already, I’d rather not keep having the same argument when I know exactly how it’ll end every time,” I inhale then exhale slowly, hoping to calm, well, everything. My nerves can’t decide whether to feel frazzled from Dan’s reaction or from the fact that he still hasn’t let go of my hand.

“I just, I mean, Phil,” he practically whines my name, and I have to try not to grin. “You can’t just let them get away with…with, uh, what-” his face scrunches up. “What exactly did they-”

I hold up my free hand, cutting him off mid-sentence.

“I’d rather not, if that’s alright?” I’m already feeling emotionally drained, I don’t think I can have that conversation right now. Dan clamps his mouth shut and nods, though, which I greatly appreciate. Probably because he knows what it’s like to have things you don’t want to talk about.

“Maybe we should just head back now?” He suggests, and I nod. At which point - I think maybe simultaneously - we both realize we’re still holding hands. I don’t let go first. “Oh, uh, sorry,” Dan says as he does, and it’s probably sappy but I miss the feeling of his hand in mine already.

“It’s fine, I grabbed you first,” I shrug as he turns. “And I didn’t mind,” I tack this on at the last second, right before saying it would make things more awkward, which earns me a little surprised noise from Dan that I wish I could put on repeat and play forever; it was really cute, and I want to hear it again.

But he’s already heading back toward the alley, and I can’t think of anything else clever or flirty to say, so I let the silence surround us instead as we head out of town.

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It’s not til we’re back, stood outside the house, that I remember- well, a whole bunch of things all at once. Dan’s been glued to my side since we got out of the town, and I’ve only just realized it’s because of the forest around us.

“Did you want to see what the demon animals look like?” I offer, which probably sounds a lot like it’s coming out of nowhere, but Dan’s shoulder bumps mine as he turns, and I find him nodding. Then shaking his head. Then nodding again. I lift my eyebrows.

“No, just dead ones,” I clarify, which seems to be a comfort in itself, with the way he exhales.

“I do, I think, but like, they can’t, uh, hurt us? Right?” A tremor has returned to his voice, making it sound a lot like it had earlier, and I’m very tempted to reach for his hand. Or hug him. Or offer some kind of comfort.

“No, just dead ones,” I clarify, which seems to be a comfort in itself, with the way he exhales.

“Okay then,” he waves a hand in front of him, gesturing for me to go first, and I only take a second to remove the ward so Dan can step through as well. That’s the other thing…but that can wait. I need to make sure he feels safe first.

Instead of heading inside, I lead him round back, to the freezer sat behind the shed - Mellix has caught a few unnatural beasts lately, and I doubt he’s eaten them all yet. Dan pauses beside me, and I pull the lid of the freezer open with as little preamble as I can - they really aren’t all that
frightening, and I don’t want to give him any reason to feel tense.

Oh, crap, the harpy...

It’s a grotesque-looking vulture thing, larger than a vulture really, and with an almost-humanoid face, so of course it’s the thing sitting on top. Couldn’t have been a demonic chicken or something, could it? The vast majority of demonic animals look like their unpossessed counterparts, usually with some black patches or red eyes that separate them out. Harpies, and a few water creatures, have the distinction of being possessed beyond the point of recognition.

“Fucking hell, Phil, that’s what’s out there? That-

“No, no,” I slam the lid shut, then turn to Dan. “Harpies are...rare,” not entirely a lie, “and most demonic animals look like regular animals, I promise, as soon as Mellix gets back, I’ll-” I’m cut off by a whine, and I tear my gaze away from Dan’s horrified expression to find the wolf trotting over.

Were you just waiting to make a dramatic entrance, then? I project the thought, and Mellix snorts before dropping whatever he’s caught.

A deer - demonic, with zebra-like stripes down its side; the wolf sits back on his haunches and grins at us.

“Okay, see, that,” I point at the carcass, “is a demonic deer.” When I turn, Dan’s stood behind me, far closer than he’d been before, and he’s peeking over my shoulder, wide-eyed, at Mellix. My words must get through to him, though, because his gaze drops to the ground; aside from a slight twist of his lips, he looks significantly less disturbed than he had with the harpy.

“That’s- it just looks...normal?” His brows scrunch as he steps around me, apparently to get an unobstructed view of the animal. I nod, even though he’s not looking at me.

“Like I said, they usually do, and they aren’t really that dangerous,” also not entirely a lie, “mostly just annoying, like they’ll go out of their way to cause problems. This deer would give a gardener hell, for example.” Now Dan turns back to me, then glances back past the shed and onto my own garden, eyes wide.

“No! Not my garden, because of the wards, but like...a regular garden,” I clarify, and his shoulders slump a bit in what I hope is relaxation.

“You’re, uh, you’re sure they can’t get in?” He finally turns back to me, brows furrowed just enough to form a little crease above his nose. I want to poke it. I don’t.

“Things can only get past the wards if I want them to,” I assure him, confident in a way that I really shouldn’t be given how his eyes narrow at me. I end up putting the pieces together just a second too late.

“But I got in, without you even around,” Dan takes a step back, away from me and Mellix both, and I open my mouth to say something but nothing comes out. Because I don’t know what happened, I don’t know why. I don’t know how to explain that in a way that will make him feel safe.

I hate the way his hands start shaking again, the way his eyes go wide and his head starts on a swivel, watching both us and the trees around us; it’s still the middle of the day, but he looks as though he’s back in the forest in the dark, terrified and searching for somewhere safe. It’s safe here, I promise!

“Phil, please tell me there’s an explanation,” his words come out hoarse and thin, barely above a
whisper, and I can hear his breathing speed up from several feet away - several feet, because he hasn’t stopped moving back yet. It’s not til I take a step toward him that he freezes, locks eyes with me.

“I don’t...I don’t have one,” and it breaks my heart to say it.
I don’t even know what’s happening anymore - is Phil a murderer, like I’d originally thought? A serial killer who lures unsuspecting wanderers? But then, why me? He’d been shocked to see me, so does he just let anyone in, then?

Or his wards aren’t as strong as he’s claiming - and I’m still in danger. Either from Phil or one of the demonic beasts, but I’m not safe here. Except I still have nowhere else to go.

The town? It had been quaint and comfortable, a lot like Seawraithe, but is it even safe from the demon things? If they’re prejudiced against witches, they wouldn’t have a ward around the town, would they? Would it even be effective?

Questions cycle through my head without answers until I’m dizzy and pretty sure the entire forest is spinning around us. Phil seems to be still, at least, as does Mellix. The giant wolf. Jesus christ, what have I gotten myself into?

“I’m sorry, I wish I understood what was happening,” Phil’s talking again, giving me exactly zero answers, which is incredibly unhelpful, and I can feel my heart rate spiking astronomically. It’s not til he takes another step toward me that I realize I’ve been moving again, away from him; when I turn my head to check behind me, I freeze - the trees have gotten closer, surely coming to drag me into their depths to be devoured by one of those harpy things.

“Dan, can you- wait, hold on, just-” Phil’s voice filters in through my fear, and I decide he’s far less terrifying than demon spawn. At least a serial killer is something my brain knows how to handle, something familiar if not frightening - just less frightening than something I can’t properly conceptualize.

Hands land on my arms, warm and soft and a stark contrast to the sharp cool air I’ve been sucking into my lungs, and it’s grounding; I turn back to find bright blue eyes looking into mine in much the same way they’d been when we were in town.

“Just breathe,” he says, so I do, inhaling and exhaling as I stare at Phil and try to reign in my fears. He’s had plenty of opportunities to kill me, if he wanted to, as have whatever demon things lurk in the forest, the rational piece of my brain chimes in, and a part of me doesn’t want to accept that, but it’s calming. Chastising my own overreaction is calming.

Slowly, the world comes into clearer focus, and the furrow between Phil’s eyebrows smooths out - I must look less freaked out, then. He doesn’t release his grip on my arms, though they loosen a bit, and I’m glad for the physical contact. It’s helping more than I’d care to admit - mostly distracting me, making me wonder what he’d be like in bed, if he’d be rough or gentle.

I can’t decide, and I don’t get the chance to ponder it any longer - or even reprimand myself for thinking about him like that - before Phil’s speaking again.

“Let’s get you inside, okay? Water and something to eat, I think. Mellix?” The wolf’s ears perk up behind him, then he makes a grumbly sound before nosing open the freezer and depositing the deer inside. A moment later, he’s heading toward the forest, and I’m almost almost wishing he’d come back; having visible proof he’s keeping us safe would be reassuring.

“Where’s…” I trail off, letting my gaze follow Mellix into the treeline until Phil’s hands leave my arms. Then I’m sharply focused on Phil again.
“Hunting, as much as he can,” he nods, twists his lips, then wraps a hand around my back in a way that I’m sure means he’s going to hug me - and fuck I really could use a hug right now - so I lean into him and wait.

“Oh! Uhm,” Phil’s arm hovers close enough around me that I can feel the ambient warmth, but I’ve already buried my head in his shoulder; my hands - in spite of how they’re shaking - manage to reach up and pull myself tighter to him. I don’t know if this counts as something I shouldn’t be doing, but I decide it’s a completely platonic gesture and I just need some comfort, damn it.

I almost want to pull away, to see Phil’s face, to try to guess what he’s thinking, but I absolutely do not do that; a moment later, his arms have fully wrapped around me and I’ve honestly never felt more safe in my entire life. Which is odd, given my predicament, but there it is.

We stay that way for long enough that I’m able to catalogue every single spot we’re pressed together, which is both calming and exhilarating in itself, and I have to be the first to separate us when it becomes just a bit too much to handle. I think my cheeks are flushed by the time I loosen my grip on him.

“Do you want to go in?” Phil lets me go, but doesn’t step far away, just enough to watch me. Enough for his gaze to wander my face in a way that feels like he’s stripped me bare, but- well, I guess he doesn’t have to imagine what that’d look like...the idea of him thinking about me fully naked, though, has turned from an embarrassing memory into a thrilling fantasy.

Instead of speaking, I nod and hum, and his hand returns to my back - oh, he’d been...guiding me inside...if I wasn’t blushing before, embarrassment has sent a fresh wave of heat up my cheeks and I’m sure they’re bright red now. But he doesn’t at all seem bothered by the hug. What if...

I don’t dare let myself imagine too much, hope too much - I’ve used all my luck on finding a person kind enough to let me stay here indefinitely, it’d be a waste to even think it could be something more than that. That I’m not the only one who wants it to be something more.

The sliding glass door - or, I guess, the regular old glass door which the magical house slides open for us, though that’s a mouthful - lets us inside, and I slump down on the sofa as soon as I’m near enough. Even if it means losing Phil’s touch on my back; it doesn’t feel like it’s disappeared, though. Warm heat spreads from the spot up to my shoulders, and my muscles relax as I lean back into the cushions.

I sort of drift for a bit, vaguely aware that Phil’s stood in the kitchen doing something, but I can’t for the life of me pin down what it is. All I can really do is feel warm and calm and a little sleepy, but not so much that I’m ready to actually pass out. It almost reminds me of waking up in the morning, the softness of that feeling - well, the softness on the days I’d actually enjoyed waking up.

“Here, have-” Phil appears in front of me, and my eyeballs do a horrible job of refocusing. What’s...there’s a cup of tea - chamomile, it smells like - and a sandwich on a plate. My limbs feel fuzzy as I try to reach for them. Everything moves, but it’s more like it’s all going in slow motion. Even my brain, though it does eventually settle on a very concrete thought.

“Did you...uhm...do something?” I manage to get out around my thick tongue. Phil’s frowning, though, and I realize the food and tea have disappeared. There’s a hand on my chin, tilting me every which way, and my skin suddenly feels far hotter than it had a minute ago. Was that a minute, or longer?

I find myself frowning as well, brows scrunching together.
“I didn’t- I mean, yes,” Phil finally admits, which should set me on edge - how dare he use magic on me without my permission! - but I just don’t have the energy to be properly angry. “But you’re...I mean, you aren’t reacting well,” his words sound a bit clearer, and I’m able to shift under his gaze and touch - because he’s still touching me, his hand hasn’t left my chin.

“Why’d-” my voice comes out hoarse, unexpectedly, and I clear my throat and lick my lips. At least whatever he’d done has begun to fade, leaving my skin cool and clammy in its wake. “Why’d you do that?” I hope I sound properly indignant, that I’ve been able to force my features into something angry. In a burst of effort, I pull my chin from his hand.

“I’m sorry, it was just supposed to be a calming spell, I didn’t-” now he looks properly concerned, though, and his gaze drops to his hands like they’ve done something they shouldn’t have. For a moment, I debate just...accepting his apology. But there’s still a core of heat burning in my stomach, and it’s begging for somewhere to go.

“You can’t just magic me like that!” I blurt out, and the warmth coils out and across my skin. “I mean, fuck, how am I supposed to feel safe if you could make me nearly pass out whenever you want?” I really hadn’t meant to be so honest about my sudden fear, but the words spill out before I can stop them. Phil looks...well, shocked would be an understatement, with how he pulls away from me, with how his eyes and mouth both go wide.

“I- I’m-” he sputters for a moment, like he’s entirely lost for words, and I’m about to snark back at him, but he beats me to it. “You’re right, I shouldn’t have, I need to, uh…” he trails off, glancing around the lounge before looking back at me. “Tea and a sandwich, on the table,” he gestures behind him before standing abruptly, then rushing around to the stairs. At the top, he pauses, and I glance up at the sudden lack of sound.

“Are you alright?” My neck’s bent at an awkward angle to see him, but his brows furrow and his lips twist, and he does genuinely look concerned.

“I’m okay,” I nod, and he nods back at me, then disappears. A door closes a moment later. Am I okay?

What the fuck just happened?

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Phil doesn’t return til I’ve finished both my sandwich and the tea, but I’m feeling much less...well, I’m not feeling shaky or hot or high, so I consider it an improvement on my previous state. I watch him descend the stairs, since I haven’t had any real reason to move just yet, only to find him grinning at me.

“What have you done?” I ask, immediately wary. Phil’s smile only falters for a moment before somehow getting brighter.

“I haven’t done anything! Just needed to, uh…” now his gaze wanders the lounge, and my eyes narrow at him. “Cleaning Mellix’s room!” He finally supplies, back to grinning at me.

“You are, by far, the worst liar I’ve ever met,” I deadpan. He frowns at me.

“You are, by far, the worst liar I’ve ever met,” I deadpan. He frowns at me.

“‘I’m not! I was getting all the fur up,’” he glances down at his shirt, the same bright red one he’s had on all day. For a moment, we sit in silence, until he pulls off a single wolf hair and holds it up triumphantly. “See! Fur!”
I don’t bother arguing - if he wanted me dead, I’d have been dead ages ago. No real point in stressing about it now.

“Sure, fine, whatever, just no more spells, thanks.” I wave a hand at him in dismissal, a little exhausted still - the spell he’d put on me must be meant to last, although I feel more drained than ‘calm’. Maybe magic just affects people differently...I’m reminded of Javier’s ear-popping issue, something I’d never noticed when Phil did spells. Must be it, then.

“Of course, only if you ask or say I can,” he nods. If I weren’t watching for it, I might not have noticed the way the corner of his lip curls up. I want to be mad, but it was clearly well-intentioned, and he’s said he wouldn’t do it again. I exhale a deep breath.

Then stand, which seems to take a considerable amount of effort, but I manage it. Phil ends up right next to me a second later anyway, and I flinch away on instinct.

“Sorry! Sorry, I just thought-”

“That I might fall, it’s fine, I get it,” I curse myself for the unintentional reaction, suddenly thrown back to when he’d just passed out and my first impulse was to make sure he didn’t pass out again.

It’s stupid, so so stupid, but I let my foot catch so that I stumble just a bit; Phil’s quick to grab my arm, to reach around me and keep me upright even though I’d really been in no danger of collapsing.

Maybe I just missed the few minutes of being in his arms earlier. And I’m a self-indulgent piece of shit. Isn’t that what got me into this whole debacle to begin with? Minimal impulse control.

Somehow, I can’t be bothered to properly chastise myself this time.

“Hey, yeah, are you alright? Do you need to sit again? More food, or water maybe?” Phil’s voice has gone just slightly higher than usual, and I turn to find him very close - which, objectively, makes a lot of sense given the way he’s supporting me against him. Even though I’m perfectly steady on my own feet. I may not be for long, with how close he’s holding me...

For a moment - probably two moments, or maybe three - I just stare and desperately wish for the courage to say how I feel. It’s on the tip of my tongue - fuck, I’m so into you - and I swear, I swear I almost say it, I’m so damn close.

“You’re feeling warm again, here, let me get you some water,” Phil breaks the moment, guiding me back til I’m sat on the sofa again, and I swallow my words down to sit in a hot pit at the bottom of my stomach. They don’t settle well.

The water he brings back is nice and cold, though, and it helps cool everything down. My emotions and frustration fade from burning coals to the slightest simmer.

“So, uh-” I watch Phil as he perches himself in the armchair across from me, lips twisted and hands fiddling absently in his lap. “Wait, first, feeling better?” His gaze flicks up to meet mine, and I take another long, slow sip of the water. Then nod carefully. Whatever he’s about to say...it’s already got my nerves on edge.

“I have to go on a trip,” Phil starts, which is not at all what I expected him to say - I mean, I guess it makes sense that he’s got a life outside the past three days with me, but it feels weird to hear about it. I sort of enjoyed existing in this little bubble.

Bubble...oh god, what if the wards don’t work when he’s gone, and that’s why he’s so nervous
about telling me? Fear claws its way up my chest, and I can feel it worming into my head and contaminating every thought. When his lips part again, I brace myself against the sofa cushion, knuckles already turning white from my grip on the near-empty glass; in an attempt to redirect my nervous energy, I down the last of the water.

“And I want you to come with me.”
I realize I’m holding my breath, but he has to say yes. He’ll say yes, right?

I mean, what he doesn’t know is that this trip can’t happen without him. It doesn’t have a purpose without him. But I’m not really sure he could handle knowing that just yet.

“Ease him into it,” Peej had said. How do I ease him into something like this?

“Can’t you just do that for me?”

“Even if I could, it wouldn’t matter. That’s not how it’ll play out.”

“But what do I do, how do I ‘ease him into it’?”

“You’ll figure it out.”

Sometimes, I hate having a seer for a best friend.

“You, wait, you want me to go with you?” Dan’s sort of sputtering over his glass of water, and I realize he must’ve dribbled some out, as he’s wiping at his chin and his cheeks have gone a bit pink.

“I, uh, yeah, I do,” I supply very helpfully. His eyes are already wide, but his brows lift up his forehead and his lips part just slightly. “Please? I’d rather not go without you.” I literally can’t go without you, actually. I don’t say that bit, though - too hard to explain. And my original statement seems to be enough to have Dan ducking his head and staring very intently at his glass of water, so I count it as a win.

“I, uh, I mean, sure, but where? And when?” He leans forward to set the empty glass on the coffee table, then rests his elbows on his knees to wait for my answer. Well that was easy. I try not to grin.

“To see my best friend, Peej. And tomorrow morning? If that’s alright with you?” My lips curl up anyway, too excited not to show it in some way, and I think my feet are bouncing a bit on my toes. Dan frowns for a moment, though, and I worry I’ve said something wrong.

“Well, it’s your trip, you don’t have to plan it around me. Besides, I’ve got nothing going on,” he smirks and sweeps his hand out around us. That’s a good point, I only realize my error after he’s mentioned it, but he doesn’t seem too preoccupied with the fact that I’d asked what worked for him.

No, he’s busy being a bit of an ass, more focused on the fact that I’d even bothered asking when he literally has nothing to do.

“I don’t want to impose, though. But if you want my company...” his tone turns soft and a little unsure, and he’s glanced down to play with his hands. I thank whatever gods are out there for another opportunity to flirt.

“Of course I want your company,” he peeks up at my words, brown eyes barely visible behind his thick eyelashes. “I, uh, I really like...being around you.” I had been so close, I’d almost just gone and said it, but I changed my mind at the last second. Actually, I’d changed my mind twice, because my original thought was to say something about how he’s nice to look at, but that felt so insincere - not untrue, definitely not untrue, but sort of tacky. And he’d gone and looked at me like
that, with those gorgeous brown eyes, and I had to say something more meaningful.

But apparently not that meaningful, as I’d been unable to actually say I like him. He looks flustered anyway, the color of his cheeks deepening to a pretty shade of crimson as he opens and closes his mouth.

“But yeah, tomorrow morning,” I feel too anxious just waiting for a proper reaction from him, so I stand to end the moment. “Did you want anything else to eat? I think I’ll make some pasta or something for dinner…” I trail off, heading toward the kitchen and lighting the stove before I’ve even gotten close to it. I need somewhere to direct all my nervous energy.

“Oh, uh,” I hear his uncertain tone behind me, and I’m a little glad not to be the only one affected by my comment. “Actually, yeah, I’m still really hungry, that’d be great. Can I help at all?” I hear soft footsteps just before turning the sink on to fill the pot.

“No, that’s-” I break off and hold a finger up, then wait for the pot to fill all the way. Once I’ve turned off the water, I try again. “No, it’s fine, I’ll just-” I stop again when I turn to find him right behind me, though he does stumble back a step. “Right, uh, it’s alright, you should rest anyway,” I nod at the sofa, but he just frowns at me and crosses his arms.

“First the wine, now this? I’m not helpless, y’know,” he grumbles. Oh, I know you aren’t.

“Actually, could you just watch this? I wanted to get started on some packing anyway,” I decide, turning back to the stove and setting the heat to low; otherwise he’s just gonna pout and, although it’s cute, I don’t need a pouting Dan. I don’t need any kind of excessive emotions from him at all, if I can help it.

He doesn’t say anything, but I can feel his presence at my side a moment later, and I step aside to let him...well, watch. It’s not actually a task I need any help with, as Susan won’t let anything catch fire, but it’ll keep him occupied.

I also hadn’t actually planned on packing yet, but I may as well now that I’ve said it. As I head up the stairs, I take a final glance down at Dan: he’s stood by the stove, studiously watching the pot, and I smirk to myself - his dedication is endearing, if a little unnecessary.

Once in my room, I realize I’ll probably need to be packing double, since Dan has absolutely nothing to his name. That’s what we should’ve done in town, gotten him some clothes. For a brief moment, I debate postponing the trip, but it’ll take a good couple days to get to PJ’s anyway, and he’s a busy guy, I’d hate to make him wait for us.

With a sigh, I pull open my wardrobe and grab my backpack - it’s probably in the top five most useful spelled things I own, whenever I do travel far enough to need it.

By the time Dan’s voice reaches me, I’m nearly done shoving most of my clothes in the bag - best to be prepared, after all. I’ve still got a few more things I want to throw in, but it can wait til later.

“Phil!” Dan calls again, and I rush back out into the hall, sliding on socked feet, and hurry down the stairs.

“Oh, yep, coming.” I mumble, paying more attention to my feet than anything else - I’m the clumsiest person on the planet, honestly.

Which is how I fail to notice the actual reason Dan’s yelling until I get to the bottom of the staircase and finally look up.
To find that there’s water absolutely everywhere, the fire on the stove has grown to a good foot in height, totally engulfing the pot, and Dan’s stood halfway to the lounge and dripping wet. It looks like a nightmare right out of the Sims, and I can’t decide whether to laugh or call the fire department. Not that they’d come for me, though…

I opt to do neither of those, instead rushing forward to twist the knob of the stove and turn the fire off. Which actually works, unexpectedly - I’d been thinking I’d have to do some kind of fire suppression spell, which would probably take longer to prepare than I’d care to admit, given how little I have to actually use spells like that. Because Susan…

“Susan, what happened?” I announce to the ceiling, surprised to find I’m actually out of breath. Fortunately, I’m not shaking, now that the immediate danger has disappeared. But there’s just a sort of creaking sound that I’ve learned to interpret as a shrug, so I redirect my attention to Dan.

Who looks absolutely horrified. And soaked.

“Dan, what…what happened?” I’m still trying not to laugh, though the adrenaline racing through my system makes that very challenging. His mouth hasn’t closed, and I wonder if he’s been stuck like that since whenever…well, whenever whatever happened happened.

“I, I don’t- I was just- and then,” he gestures at the space in front of him, mimicking an explosion, eyes wide and generally just looking utterly shocked. After a moment of staring at his hands, he looks up at me, and all my desire to make light of things dissolves into thin air: he doesn’t look shocked, he looks terrified.

“Are you okay?” I rush forward, looking for any sign of injury - fear suddenly overwhelms me: he could be burned, or something could’ve hit him and he might have a concussion or a cut or something, or-

“I’m, I mean, no, I’m not, but I’m not like…hurt,” his breaths come too quickly, but he’s at least able to form mostly complete sentences. Before he can stop me, I’ve grabbed his shoulders and I’m scanning him from head to toe, searching for anything off.

Surprisingly, Dan stays still and silent until I’ve nodded, satisfied there’s nothing to indicate he’s been injured. His breathing has slowed as well, which I take as a good sign. When he shivers, however, I decide that is very much not a good sign, because duh, he’s still soaking wet.

“Wait here,” I order, though he doesn’t look like he’s planning on going anywhere anyway. Fortunately, I have a whole load of blankets in my room, and I’m back downstairs with the fluffiest one I could find, along with a change of clothes, in record time. And I’m only a little winded. Thanks, adrenaline!

By the time I return, Dan’s not moved - as I asked - but he’s slumped over a bit and wrapped his arms across his chest. I take all of three seconds to shove the clothes in his hand.

“Get out of those wet clothes, yeah?” My lips tug down in concern, mostly for him but also for the disaster behind him - I want to know what happened, but not til he’s changed and dry and warm.

“Trying to get me naked again?” He mumbles, and my eyes fly wide. A split second later, his do as well, and then he’s gone from pale to bright red; he opens his mouth like he might have something else to say - or like he might be about to apologize - but then clamps it shut and rushes past me and up the stairs.

I’m too stunned to follow his progress, literally frozen in place until I hear the bathroom door slam.
shut. Did he just...flirt? I’m a little miffed, I’ll be honest - I’m the one who’s supposed to be flirting, he’s the one who’s supposed to be all flustered. Although, to be fair, I guess he was as well.

With the distraction of Dan removed, though, I’m finally able to take in the scene in the kitchen - it’s really not bad, just...wet. The stove and pot seem undamaged by the raging fire, though they’re set up to withstand witchcraft, so I’m not surprised. Aside from that, it looks like the water just...well, like Dan said, sort of exploded everywhere.

“Susan, can you clean this up or do you need help?” I ask toward the window - I never expected to need her to deal with flooding, so I haven’t really checked whether she can handle it on her own or not.

When the floorboards shift under me, though, I grin. Of course she can handle it, I shouldn’t have doubted her. Already, the puddles on the floor have begun to shrink, water seeping between the cracks and into the ground below. By the time I check the stove, it’s dry as well, with the empty pot the only remaining evidence of...whatever happened.

“Okay, you don’t know what happened, then, but will it happen again?” I ask the space around me; an answer comes in the form of the flame flicking to life below the pot, fortunately very tame.

“Alright, if you say so.” I fill the pot again and set it to boil, though I squint at the fire; I fully plan on staying down here this time.

“Are you, uh, is that...maybe not the best idea?” The voice behind me makes me whirl around, but it’s just Dan - I’m not sure who else I thought it might be, now that I’m staring at him. In fact, I’m not even sure what he’s talking about, now that I’m staring at him - his hair is still wet, curling up on his forehead, and I may or may not have grabbed a slightly-too-small shirt. Which clings to his chest in the best kind of way.

“Hm?” Is all my brain manages to come up with, and only once Dan’s lifted a hand to point at the stove.

“The fire, I mean, are you sure that’s a good idea? With how it sort of,” he makes the explosion hands again, “like ten minutes ago?” I peek back over my shoulder at the very tame fire and the pot of water, then turn back to Dan. Who hasn’t moved any closer from his spot at the bottom of the staircase.

“It’s fine, it won’t happen again, I don’t think,” I shrug, because I trust Susan to know if something will go wrong. Although, she didn’t know last time…

“How reassuring,” Dan scoffs and edges his way over to the sofa; I notice his eyes never leave the hob behind me, in spite of his offhand comment. Because it’s draped over the armchair and comes into view as I watch Dan, I also notice the fluffy blanket, and I rush to get it for him. Although he looks significantly less chilly now.

*Or maybe not...*as I get closer, with the way the thin t-shirt is stretched across his chest, I can see his nipples poking out; it takes a serious amount of self control not to stare. *I wonder if they’re sensitive…*

“Phil, shouldn’t you be watching the, uh, the fire?” Dan’s voice startles me out of my thoughts, which is probably for the best, as I was already halfway to my bedroom and ready to do unspeakable things to him. *Get yourself under control, Lester!*

“Uh, right, uhm, here,” I practically throw the blanket at him, and it miraculously lands in such a
way that his chest is blocked from view, which breaks the spell enough to allow me to turn around and focus on the stove. Not that there’s much to actually focus on: it’s still just a small flame. Steam rises from the water, but as I get closer, it’s clearly not yet boiling.

My cheeks sure are, though.
Dan

I refuse to take my eyes off the stove - since Phil clearly isn’t as concerned about it exploding again - though I do make an effort to curl myself up under the blanket he tossed at me. Which might be the fluffiest, fuzziest blanket I’ve ever had the pleasure of encountering. It’s almost enough to distract me from the imminent danger in the kitchen.

*Almost.*

“Phil, I don’t—” I wince when the flame flares up, and Phil looks back over his shoulder at me with a frown.

“I just turned up the heat, it’s okay,” he sounds like he’s talking to a child, which I am *not*, thank you very much, so I frown right back at him. Then cross my arms, though I realize too late that it doesn’t have any effect because I’m fully hidden under the blanket.

“Yeah, well you didn’t watch it explode everywhere, so I’ll stay safely over here and avoid the wreckage, thanks,” I grumble. Not that he’d actually asked me to do anything this time around, but I’m trying to emphasize my point. I don’t know if it’s working.

Phil adds some dry noodles to the water. It’s definitely not working.

“Just don’t blame me when everything goes to shit again, I tried to warn you,” I add, trying to force my tone into something that says ‘I told you so’ without actually saying it, but he’s just stirring the pasta and ignoring me. Well, maybe not ignoring, but certainly not taking me seriously.

“What even happened?” Phil finally turns around, leaning against the countertop to face me. I stare studiously at the flame flickering under the pot, waiting for the inevitable disaster.

“Like I said, it just, I don’t know, *exploded*, out of nowhere,” I shake my head at him. I’ve already explained it. I’d really just been stood there, lost in my own head, and it had sort of...erupted. Water everywhere - not too hot, fortunately - and a huge fire not a foot from my face, then I’d jumped back and shouted for Phil.

“But there was nothing, like, nothing *happened*?” He tries again, tilting his head at me and widening his eyes like he means something. I just frown harder at him.

“No, nothing *happened*.” In spite of the chill it brings to my chest - Phil gave me a very thin shirt - I move my hands out from under the blanket to make air quotes. “I can’t just *feel* when magic happens like Javier can,” I cross my arms, since he can now see me do so.

“Yeah, he’s mentioned that,” Phil comments absently. Then he’s twisting his lips, staring intently at me, and it makes me want to sort of burrow into the sofa cushions and never come out again - I’m not sure why, but his eyes have gone dark and intense.

But a moment later, he’s turned his attention back to the pot, stirring slowly, and I allow myself to suck in a breath. *What was all that?* First he’s implying something ‘*happened*’, then he’s staring at me like...I don’t even know. Like *something*. Something unnerving and-

“That’s all, then? It just exploded?” Phil’s voice interrupts my train of thought, which is probably for the best, because it’s gone entirely off the rails and down a path it should *not* be going. The same path it had gone down earlier, when my mouth had the audacity to suggest he’d been trying to get me naked. Again.
Now I’m actually wishing for some demonic hellbeast to come grab me and drag me away, because surely being devoured couldn’t be worse than my earlier embarrassment - I’d spent at least three minutes in the bathroom splashing my bright red face with cold water, but all the heat comes rushing back just remembering what I’d said. What I’d implied. Oh god, what had Phil thought?

“Uh, right, yeah,” I mumble, now that I’ve actually remembered he asked something. Jesus christ, how had my brain even come up with that? Why would it-

Oh.

Okay, so maybe my mind hadn’t been entirely blank when the disaster happened - just...mentally elsewhere. In bed. Phil’s bed. With Phil. With Phil. I may have let my fantasies get a bit carried away, but he’d asked me to fucking watch water boil, I can’t be blamed for my thoughts drifting.

“If it’s not too much trouble, would you mind getting the sauce out?” I blink at Phil, who’s still stood stirring the pasta, and try to process his words. Right, like I’m about to come over there, anywhere near- “You don’t have to, if you’re worried about- I mean, it won’t happen again, but I understand if you’re-” he’s turned around, lips tugged down in a half frown, and that’s enough to get me up off the sofa.

“I’m not scared,” I interrupt, “I just don’t bloody fancy being soaked again,” this comes out as a grumble as I tug the blanket around my shoulders and make my way to the fridge. And stay as far from the stove as I can. But not because I’m scared.

“Right,” Phil’s voice holds the tone of a smirk, but when I turn to glare at him, he’s studiously focused on the pot in front of him, lips pressed into a tight line. I glare anyway. Then direct my attention to the cool air floating out from the fridge, searching for- oh, right there.

There’s a glass jar full of something tomatoey, which I assume to be the pasta sauce, so I pull that out and set it on the counter before retreating back to the safety of the lounge.

“Actually, could you heat it up as well? I’d normally do it on the stove- well, I suppose I could-”

“No, it’s fine,” I rush to whirl around, blanket fanning out behind me like a cape, and do my best to remove the metal lid without losing the blanket. I don’t need Phil lighting another fire on the stove, thanks. Once the glass jar’s sat in the microwave, I take a few steps back toward the lounge again.

“It’ll explode if you just leave it, you have to stir it every so often,” Phil calls over his shoulder - though he’s not looked up from the pasta - and I purse my lips into a line. Can he not tell I’m trying to get away from the danger zone, here? But he’s gone and said the word ‘explode’, and I’m definitely not about to let any more explosions happen if I can help it, so I situate myself beside the microwave and watch the sauce.

The moment it starts steaming, I pop the door open, then give Phil and the stove a wide berth to get to the silverware drawer. Which Phil’s already pulled open by the time I arrive.

“Thanks,” I mumble - just because he’s apparently decided to be an ass doesn’t mean I have to be one as well. By the time I’ve made it back to the microwave, the sauce has cooled enough that I can tug it closer and stir, though the angle’s a bit awkward. Then I slam the door and hit start, watching carefully for the first signs it’s getting too hot.

Fully heating the sauce only takes a minute or so in total, given it’s a pretty small jar, and I leave it to sit in the microwave once it’s done.

“Anything else you want me to do?” I realize my tone is definitely bordering on rude, but he’s the
one purposely forcing me to stay in the kitchen when he knows I’m not scared, but he knows I don’t want to be around the stove. Unfortunately, I’ve got a hand clasping the blanket around my neck, so I can’t quite cross my arms for added emphasis.

Phil glances over, eyebrows arched up his forehead - I assume at my attitude - then twists his lips and lets his gaze drift, clearly trying to decide whether or not I’m needed.

“Actually, there are lots of things I want you to do,” his eyes rake down my body and back up, slow and heavy and fuck he’s making it really hard to stay annoyed. What were we even talking about? My mind has already drifted, cheeks flushing with warmth and making me regret my decision to keep the stupid blanket around my shoulders. Fuck, he wants to-

My thoughts disappear in a puff of smoke, quite literally, as the flame on the stove expands to engulf the bottom of the pot, and I jump back with a tiny yelp - arguably one of the most embarrassing noises I’ve ever made. Phil startles as well, flinging water from the spoon across the kitchen floor, but then he’s just grinning at the stove.

“Nothing related to the pasta, though,” he clarifies, as if I wasn’t already fucking reeling, and it takes three tries to get my feet moving back toward the lounge - only three because the fire did it again, just like he said it wouldn’t. It would’ve taken...quite a few more attempts if it hadn’t. If I’d just had to stand there and process what Phil said.

Oh my god, did he mean what I think he meant? Or am I just hearing what I want to hear? I mean, he could just be talking about having me help out around the house more, right? I swear I should be melting with how warm I feel, and I can’t even sit down, suddenly full of energy I need to pace to get rid of.

“Pasta should be done in just a bit,” Phil’s voice pulls me from my head, sounding just as natural and light as it had before...before whatever that was. He also seems entirely unconcerned with the way the flame had jumped again. Maybe it’s just...normal? But then, why was he surprised?

My brain, entirely overwhelmed by the past ten minutes, decides the best course of action is to just shut down, so I end up wearing a groove in the floor of the lounge just walking back and forth. I at least have the common sense to discard the blanket on the armchair, though - my skin feels like it’s caught fire, and I’m sure I’m embarrassingly red by now.

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There’s not a table to sit at inside, unless we sit on the floor at the coffee table, so Phil’s bringing our plates out to the table in the garden. I’m trying to be okay with it.

Already, the sun’s dipped low on the horizon, no longer visible behind the treeline, and the shadows shift in exactly the right way to convince me they’re full of demonic animals. Even though my rational brain continues to repeat that they can’t hurt me, they can’t even get to me, not with Phil’s wards.

Supposedly.

“So these wards...” I gesture around us with my fork, then stab more of the noodles and shove them in my mouth. I hadn’t realized I was so damn hungry until I’d had the first bite, and I’m really hoping Phil’s made enough for seconds.

He blinks at me for a moment, chewing his own bite, and I watch his Adam’s apple bob as he swallows.
“Right, nothing can get in,” he emphasizes. I hear the ‘but’ trailing at the end of his sentence, though, so I quirk an eyebrow at him and point at myself, once again with the fork.

“Okay, yes, except you.” Another dangling sentence that he seems keen on ending, with the way he shoves pasta in his mouth. I shake my head at him, eyes wide - he’s being very far from reassuring.

“Why me?” I ask after a beat of silence when he seems determined to keep eating and not answer my implied question. I stare hard until he swallows, but he’s going for another bite, so I reach across the table to smack his fork down. “No, answer me, why me? Are the wards, I don’t know, broken or something?” I can feel the fury rising in my chest, riding on a wave of fear and confusion.

“No! No, they aren’t- uhm, it’s a bit…” he looks past me, then down at his plate, then anywhere except at me. “Complicated? Hard to explain?” He lands on these words, and I’m about as far from reassured as I could possibly be.

“Try,” I grit out, pressing my lips into a line. We aren’t getting up from this damn table until I know what’s going on. Phil just blows out a breath, then folds his hands into his lap. Finally, finally, he locks eyes with me, and I’m starting to feel a lot more afraid than angry.

“It’s cause you, uhm, you…” I lean forward, anticipation setting my nerves on edge and sending my heart rate skyrocketing.

“What, did I do something? Break something?” Now I’m concerned - what if I’m the one that’s somehow made us unsafe?

“No, it’s- ugh, Peej said ‘ease you into it’, how the hell am I-”

“‘Ease’- Phil, what are you on about? Spit it out,” there’s a tingling sensation at the back of my head, making everything feel fuzzy, and I hate that there’s a tiny little piece of me that knows before he even says it.

“You’re a witch, Dan.”

I mean, I don’t believe it though.

“Sorry, I’m a what?”
Phil

I might actually kill PJ. He could’ve at least warned me.

“How’s- yeah, I mean, that’s why you could…”

“No, Phil, I don’t think you understand, I would know if…” he trails off; in spite of the way he’d started off angry, maybe a little offended, his tone fades into confusion and... is he afraid?

“It’s okay! It’s fine, I promise, it’s, uh, it’s…” but now I’m trailing off, because I don’t even know what he’s thinking, I don’t know what I’m supposed to say. I don’t know how to help.

“How... but…” it’s like watching a rollercoaster in face form: everything stretches and moves through a hundred different expressions, one after the other, and I can barely keep up. After a full minute, though, he settles on a blank stare - somehow, that’s more worrying than anything else.

“Dan? Dan, are you-”

“I’m fine,” his voice sounds the exact opposite, though, low and empty and sad. My brows furrow.

“I don’t think you are, but you will be, okay?” I stand from my chair and kneel beside him, eternally grateful for my height and the low chairs, and wrap Dan in a hug that he didn’t ask for but definitely looks like he needs. For a moment, I’m afraid I’ve only made things worse - he goes completely rigid - but then he’s slumped against me; the whole thing is the worst kind of awkward angle, but I refuse to move until he asks me to.

“What does that even mean, though?” He finally breaks the silence, though his voice is still very quiet, and drops his head to my shoulder. I wish I knew how to be more comforting, but every bone in my body is screaming to kiss his cheeks, his forehead, the top of his hair, something because that’s what I should do, right? That’s how you comfort someone you like?

I settle for rubbing a hand across his back in what I hope is a soothing motion.

“I mean, do I have to go to, like... Hogwarts or something?” Dan mumbles, and the feeling of his lips against the skin of my neck is almost enough to make me forget what he actually said. Almost.

I sputter out a laugh, which I realize is about as far from helpful as I could possibly be, so I pull back to give myself a moment to calm down, and also to look him in the eyes.

“No, not-” I break off, fighting back another giggle - Dan looks positively offended, so I bite my lip in the hopes it’ll distract me. “You don’t, uh, go to Hogwarts or anything,” somehow, I keep a mostly straight face while saying that, “but that’s why we’re going to see Peej tomorrow, actually.” His brows tug together, shifting everything from annoyance to confusion.

“What, is he like a magical trainer or something?” A huff of breath snorts out my nose - as if PJ would have the patience for training new witches. Dan frowns again, and I realize I really need to stop the whole ‘laughing every time he says something ridiculous’ thing or he might actually make something else explode.

Because that’s what had happened - whatever had been going on in his head, it was something intense enough to inadvertently make the fire expand to three times its height. And he has no idea how to keep that in check.
“Not exactly,” I twist my lips until my face feels mostly relaxed, no longer tense and fighting off a grin. “He’s sort of...I mean, he’s a seer, but that’s not-” Dan’s eyes go wide at the word ‘seer’, and I shake my head. “I’ll explain on the way, but he can help with controlling...uh, well, your magic?” I don’t love the word ‘magic’, it sounds like I’m implying it’s a thing that isn’t real, that doesn’t exist, but I feel like ‘magic’ is something Dan would understand better, for now.

“My- jesus christ, I have magic,” at least he sounds awed by this instead of terrified, which I suppose is a good first step. Then he’s staring right at me, and there’s a solid second of eye contact before he launches himself at me and we both end up falling back to the grass behind me.

My shoulders thump heavily on the ground, but I don’t even dream of complaining because there’s a weight on my chest and arms wrapped around my neck and I could literally live in this moment for maybe the rest of my life- but then it’s all gone, just as quickly, and Dan’s horrified face stares down at me.

“Oh my god, I’m- are you okay, holy-” his brows arch up in concern, lips parting like he’s got more to say but he’s not even sure where to start - I don’t at all mind the way his eyes rove my body, even if it’s clearly just to search for damage from his attack.

“It’s fine, I’m alright,” I let out a soft chuckle, and his whole face softens as he blows out a breath. I expect him to extract himself from me - we’re still very close from our hips down - but he stays still for a very long moment, and I get to watch the movement of his chest in that way-too-tight shirt as he takes several deep, slow breaths.

For a single second, just one, I let myself imagine how he’d look in bed, on top of me - his cheeks would be flushed red, a lot like they are now, and I think he’d bite his lip just like that. I imagine how he’d sound, and that’s all it takes before I’m shifting under Dan, desperate to get him off— get him off me, not get him off, I shout at my brain, doing everything in my power to stop him realizing I’m growing hard with his hips so close to mine.

Fortunately, thank god, he takes the hint and scrambles off with a muttered apology and a slight frown. And I feel bad, but not as bad as I’d feel if he-

Well, he does like me...

I stop that train of thought before it’s even gotten started - I refuse to put Dan in an uncomfortable position when he’s not even admitted he likes me. Well, not while sober, anyway.

“Oh, uh,” I look up at Dan’s voice to find him glancing around, at which point I do the same; it’s dark now, I hadn’t even noticed the sun fully setting - I’d been a bit distracted, to be fair. I watch said distraction as he leans over the table and stabs at his pasta. His grimace the moment after he’s taken a bite says enough.

“Cold?” I supply, and he nods. I make an effort to move as much as possible when I stand, so it won’t be so obvious when I adjust my pants to conceal the semi that refuses to go away. I even go as far as brushing off my jeans, just to be sure I don’t look at all suspicious. Which I realize is probably suspicious in itself, but it’s too late to go back now.

“Do you, uh, want to heat it up, then?” I offer, still trying to find my tongue. Trying to imagine it anywhere except on Dan’s, on his lips or skin or- stop, stop stop stop!

He nod, and I make myself walk over to the table and pick up my plate. Dan does the same, and we return inside. This time, Dan eyes the stove like it’s made of tentacles - not afraid, just...confused.
“I did that?” He asks, eyebrows raise as he gestures at the half-full pot on the stove, and I grin at him.

“You did, though I have no idea how,” I shrug, which only makes him frown. I want to pry - PJ had suggested, after I explained my suspicions, that emotions might be the root of his particular variety of witchcraft - but that might not get the best reaction. Especially if he’d been mad, intense emotions can be really volatile, and he still doesn’t know what he’s doing.

“Can I do it again?” Now he looks hopeful, and all my concerns dissolve. Well, they don’t really, but they get shoved to the back of my head because I want to say ‘yes’, I want him to have whatever he wants, if it means he keeps looking at me like that, like I’ve given him the whole entire world.

“Well…” I twist my lips, actually pretending to consider the implications - but I might get what I want, and he can get what he wants, and Susan can take care of it if things get out of hand again, right? “Okay, alright,” I relent, then dump my pasta back into the pot; after Dan does the same, I add a bit of water and some more sauce, to cover the rest of the pasta, and gesture at Dan.

Who just stares at me, then at the pot, then back at me.

“What, do I say magic words or something? I didn’t do that last time, but I don’t-”

“No,” I chuckle, but I’m secretly a little worried - I’ve never had to teach someone else how to do a spell before, or how to use their witchcraft, what if I get it wrong? “Uhm, okay, just...what were you thinking about before? When it happened last time?” I suggest - I don’t want him to get too emotional, but we have to start somewhere.

I do not expect his face to flush bright red, for him to duck his head.

“I, uh, does it matter?” He mumbles, and my brows shoot up my forehead. Oh, now I have to find out…

“It does, Peej thinks your, uh, powers,” another word I can’t really stand, “come from your emotions.” At this, his eyes go wide, and he sucks in a breath. Wow, something serious, then. Was he really mad at me or something? Or scared from the demons, maybe. That’d make sense…

“Okay,” he says carefully, drawing the word out, “well do I have to tell you, or can I just...like, think it? Feel it?” I watch the way his eyes shift back and forth, not really meeting mine, and try not to sigh too loudly.

“Sure, also don’t, uh, feel it as intensely?” Which sounds like a horrible explanation, but I have to somehow get him to be more...toned down. “Whatever it was last time, it was too much, that’s why everything...” I mimic the explosion like he had the first time, and he nods, biting his lip.

Then he stares at me for a minute, like a solid full minute, and I’m about to say something when he looks over at the stove. Then he jumps back with a yelp as the fire flares to life, a little larger than there. And I hadn’t been the cause.

“Did I just-” he points, glancing between me and the flame, and I grin and nod. Wow, he’s got way more control than I ever did before I went to PJ. But he’s a lot older than I’d been, and it honestly wasn’t a challenging spell, the stove just requires a bit of energy directed toward it and it knows what to do.

But Dan’s smile is worth all the easy witchcraft in the entire world.
“I just fucking did that, holy shit!” He’s laughing and sort of bouncing on his toes, though he’s still staying back. “Can I do anything else?” He looks a bit like a little kid, now, chest puffed out like he’s holding his breath and waiting for his mum to tell him he can keep the puppy as long as he picks up after it.

“Maybe let’s eat first?” I chuckle when he nods, then full on laugh the moment his stomach growls. “Yeah, that as well, you have to eat to keep up your energy,” I move to the stove to stir the pasta, which has already warmed enough to start steaming again, so I turn the knob to cut off the flame.

“Right, that makes sense,” Dan sounds like he’s nodding - it’s just that tone of voice - and I smile as I add a large serving to his plate and hand it over. Before I’ve even gotten my own food, I hear a clink and scrape, and I turn to find he’s already shoveling a bite into his mouth.

“Hungry?” He says by way of explanation, talking around the pasta, and I huff out a breath of laughter before grabbing my own plate and walking past him.

I’m about to head outside - Susan’s already slid the door open for me - when Dan makes a small noise behind me. I turn to find he hasn’t moved at all, though his mouth is no longer full of pasta.

“Would you rather we-”

“If we could?” He interrupts before I’m even finished, and I nod. Apparently, none of this has changed the fact that he’s still concerned about...whatever it is he’s concerned about. Surely not the demonic animals, now that he’s seen how uninteresting they are?

But if it makes him more comfortable, I’m okay with it. I just hope he’s not afraid of the forest anymore, or the next couple days will be...challenging.
Dan

I’m a bloody witch. I don’t even know what that means except that I can do stuff like Phil can, but holy fucking shit.

I made a fire literally from nothing, nothing except willpower.

*Willpower and some...emotions.*

Even now, sitting across from Phil at the coffee table - thank fuck he hadn’t insisted on sitting outside, now that it’s pitch black out - my face flushes red just remembering what I’d had to think about to get that flame.

To be fair, I’d tried to start with something tame: Phil’s hug. Which was calming and comforting, but not...well, clearly not *enough*, given the lack of fire on the stove. So I’d let myself get lost in a fantasy of how that tackle outside could’ve gone, and that had done the trick - right about the moment I’d imagined his hips rolling up into mine, the fire had burst to life under the pot, startling me from the daydream. I’m not proud of the sound that came out of my mouth, but I’d been surprised, damn it.

*Great,* I shove a very large bite of pasta in my mouth, *so apparently my magic comes from being horny.* I wonder how I’m meant to explain that to PJ, or to Phil...*oh my god, I can never ever tell Phil...jesus christ.*

“Can I ask what you were thinking about?” Phil’s voice makes me nearly choke on the pasta, and I swallow it in a thick lump. Of course he wants to know... “I just, I’ve never helped someone else with their witchcraft before, so I didn’t really-”

“Oh!” I interrupt, which was a shit idea, because now he’s setting his fork down and watching me with wide, expectant eyes. And I don’t even know what to say. I just wanted him to stop worrying. *Shit shit shit...* “Uh, I was...it was something emotional, like you said,” I purse my lips when his face falls, but god I can’t just tell him ‘oh yeah, I was fantasizing about you!’ because holy fuck that would be worse than embarrassing.

“Oh, okay!” I hate the way Phil sounds, chipper but so fake, and I hate that it’s because I’ve disappointed him. I sort of want to tell him, or at least say that I promise he doesn’t want to know, but that’d open a whole can of worms. I almost say it anyway.

“So!” He plows right along, focused more on his pasta than on me, and I frown down at my own plate. “We should get to bed early, it’ll be best to leave right at dawn, if we can manage it,” Phil takes a bite, offers me a close-mouthed, tight smile. I try to return it.

“Sure, sounds- uh, wait, *why* are you making me get up at some godforsaken hour of the morning?” I’d been too busy processing his expressions to actually listen to his words; now that I’ve heard them, I’m wishing I hadn’t. *Dawn? Is he mad?*

“Oh! Well, it’ll take a couple days to get there, and-”

“A couple *days*? Jesus christ, Phil, does he live on the fucking moon or something?” I’d been expecting a few *hours*, maybe, not a whole bloody expedition.

“No, he’s just-” Phil sighs, then, and sets his fork down with a clink. “He doesn’t like visitors, goes well out of his way to avoid them, so getting there is...tedious?” He offers the word like it’s
not quite right but he doesn't know what else to say. I tilt my head and lift an eyebrow at him.

“Okay, it’s, uhm, we have to sort of hike around the river first, then we-”

“Hike.” It’s not even a question, just a total acceptance of my fate, and I flop back onto the hardwood floor, almost grateful for the slight pain on the back of my head as I land. “Phil, you didn’t say this trip would involve exercise,” I groan at the ceiling, which groans right back at me, and I’m about ready to have a heart attack til I remember that Susan exists.

“Well, it’s just for a bit, through the forest, and then-”

“Phil,” I sit up in a rush. “We’re hiking for two days, in the forest?” I hope my voice isn’t trembling, but two days means at least one night, and it’s...I don’t know if I can handle that. If my eyes are wide, his go wider, like I’ve just caught him cheating on a test or something.

“Well, yeah, but it’ll be- I mean, you’ll be perfectly safe, don’t worry,” his whole face relaxes into something that looks a hell of a lot like pity, and I shut down immediately.

“I’m not worried, I just didn’t realize we’d be going fucking camping. Can’t this Peej guy just come to us, if he hates visitors so much?” I scoff, stabbing at the slowly congealing pasta on my plate. I suddenly have absolutely no appetite.

“He’s...particular,” Phil answers, which isn’t an answer at all. I stab at my food again just to hear the clink. “Are you, uh, still working on that?” I glance up from my pasta - which I’m very much done with - to find him halfway stood up with his own empty plate in hand. Instead of responding, I climb to my feet and bring my own dishes to the sink, Phil trailing behind. I’m not trying to be rude, but none of this is settling well with me at all.

Once I’ve cleaned my plate off, I step back and let him do the same; his shoulders seem tense and tight, and I know it’s my fault but...jesus christ, being a witch and the wards and the demon animals and hiking through the forest in the middle of the night...it’s a lot. It’s maybe too much.

I collapse into the armchair with a much louder huff than I really intended, letting my head fall against the- oh, the blanket. In desperate need of comfort, apparently, I pull the thing around me and bury my face in the fluff. It’s not til there’s a soft chuckle above me that I bother looking up.

Phil’s stood at the end of the chair, smiling down at me in the most fond way, and it freezes me like a deer in headlights. I want him to look at me like that all the damn time.

“I’m gonna head up to bed, are you fine down here?” His voice is just as soft as his eyes and it might very well melt me; I want to say ‘no, take me with you, please’, but I can’t do that. I can’t, right?

I almost say it. Or something other than ‘yeah, I’m fine’.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I chicken out, apparently. Then watch Phil nod and make his way upstairs. I do not stare at his ass, either, thank you very much.

“Night, Dan!” He calls down from the top of the staircase, and it startles me enough to blurt out a ‘night’ back at him. I don’t feel much like sleeping at all, but I resolve to try, since I have to somehow go through with this next stage of my...witch training, or whatever it is. Holy fucking shit, I’m a witch. What the actual hell…

Even as I’m climbing to my feet to resituate myself on the sofa, I can’t help but grin. A part of me
wants to see what all I can actually do with my powers, but that would require...oh shit, had anything happened while I was wanking in the shower the other day? Red hot embarrassment creeps up my cheeks, and I’m not so sure I need the blanket anymore. Or maybe I do need it, to bury myself in so I never have to see the light of day again.

Speaking of lights...it’s still quite bright, with the ceiling lights all on, and I’m about to stand to make my way to the switch, but-

“Susan, can you get the lights for me?” I whisper, hopefully loud enough that she’ll hear but Phil won’t, because I feel a bit silly talking to a house. When darkness envelops the entire floor, I grin. Then frown.

“I did not think this through, did I?” I ask to nobody.

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I don’t sleep. At all. Instead, I spend the entire night flipping between staring at the blackness in the general direction of the sliding glass door that leads out to the garden and staring at the armchair across from the sofa because I am not scared, not at all. But my frazzled brain refuses to sleep.

By the time Phil comes downstairs, I’ve already started poking around the kitchen for something to eat - something that does not require any heating, because I’m not sure I trust myself with any kind of magic. I’ve just decided to have an apple, hoping Phil will be in the mood to make something more substantial, when footsteps on the stairs make me turn.

He looks exhausted. I know why I didn’t sleep, but I can’t imagine what’s got him so tired.

“Coffee?” He grumbles, as if he’s expecting me to have already made some. Although, the way his voice sounds, gruff and low, I might very well end up conjuring a cup out of thin air - granted, I’m not even sure how I’d do that, or if I’d end up starting a fire on accident. How do I choose what to do with my magic? Can I just...think about it and it’ll happen, or-

I’m distracted by Phil stopping right in front of me, staring at me with wide blue eyes, and it takes me a moment to realize he needs me to move.

“Oh! Sorry,” I shuffle aside, then take a bite of my apple as Phil pulls out a coffee press and a canister of what I assume to be coffee. Because I’m not really feeling like moving, or blinking, I just watch him pour some grounds into the press and fill it with water from the sink; a moment later, he’s stepping back and gestures at the machine.

“Sorry, what?” I swallow my half-chewed bite of apple and frown at him.

“How?” I squeak out. “Won’t I just...set it on fire or something?” It feels weird admitting I don’t know what I’m doing, but I really don’t want anything to explode again. Fear for my safety - and Phil’s - trumps my embarrassment.

“No, just, uh,” Phil squints, then fully squeezes his eyes shut. “Think about, like, heating the water,” he mumbles after a moment. Then he’s back to watching me. I stare hard at the water, but I can’t really concentrate. Is it supposed to feel different than making fire?

The last time, it had felt like fire, like I was literally the actual flame. But I’m worried if I do it like that, or just do exactly what I did last time, I’ll end up burning something. I try anyway. Jesus, if I
have to fantasize about Phil every damn time I want to try to use my powers, this is going to be a very frustrating...life...

Maybe I can just...Phil said emotions, maybe I can just try to be really happy instead. I close my eyes, mostly because Phil’s still staring and it’s making me nervous, and try to think of a time I was really happy.

I fall miserably short, and I cough out a bitter chuckle before I realize I’ve done it.

“Something wrong?” Phil asks, and my eyes fly open to find him frowning at me.

“Just, uh- no, nothing’s wrong, just trying to-”

“Whatever you thought of last time, that should work,” he waves his hand at me, and I’m surprised at how impatient he’s acting. Shit, he must’ve had a bad night as well, then. I squeeze my eyes shut again, but I still feel strange thinking about Phil like that. Especially because I know he’s watching me, waiting for me. And what happens if I take it too far, or do it wrong, and set the whole kitchen on fire?

Nerves squirm in my stomach, and even the idea of Phil isn’t doing a great job replacing them. After what feels like ages, there’s a hand on my shoulder, and Phil’s giving me a tight, sort of pitying smile, which makes my stomach drop out entirely. Wow, first day of training, not even proper training, and I’m already failing...

“It’s early, we can practice more later.” A moment later, steam is rising from the top of the press, and I glare at it while Phil rummages around in the fridge. “Want anything more than an apple?” He offers, and I turn to find him staring over his shoulder at me and the long-forgotten fruit I’m still clutching in my hand.

“Please?” My voice comes out strangely hoarse, so I clear it and nod at him. This time, he emerges with the carton of eggs and sets it out beside the stove. Once a pan joins it, he’s back to staring at me.

“Want to give this a try?” He’s glancing between me and the pan, but I shake my head immediately.

“Probably best to wait, like you said,” I decide, “I’m a bit tired anyway.” That’s a much better explanation than ‘I’m not sure I should be fantasizing about you this much’ and ‘I’m terrified I’ll set the whole damn house on fire with how carried away I want to get’. Nope, ‘I’m tired’ should do just fine.

“Didn’t sleep well?” He’s frowning now; a flame flicks to life under the pan a moment later. Belatedly, I remember to shake my head, because he’s asked a question.

“Not really,” I supply, though my eyes are still trained on the fire. He hadn’t even looked, I wonder if it’ll take me long to get that good. But surely Phil’s had his whole life to practice, he’ll probably be far better than me for...pretty much forever. I’ll probably never run out of things to learn from him.

For a moment, I imagine us sat in the garden, him showing me something simple yet amazing - making a flower grow, maybe - and being sat pressed up against him, trying to replicate his actions. Failing once or twice, maybe catching something on fire - look, I don’t have a lot of imagination to work with, here, I’m not sure what exactly could go wrong - but finally, finally, I’m able to do it as well. And he’d grin at me like I just did something remarkable, when he’s the one
who showed me how to do it, when he can do it so easily.

“Dan!” Phil’s shout shocks me back to reality, to the present, and my eyes go wide as I take in the scene: the flame under the pan has, once again, fully engulfed the object it’s meant to be heating, and Phil’s stood back a ways, glancing between me and the fire. The moment it registers, the flames die down, back to their original height and intensity.

I can’t even blink, I’m so shocked - apparently I don’t have to be turned on to manage some magic, which is a stupidly satisfying relief. It’s not til Phil’s doubled over in a fit of giggles that I realize I’m smiling, then chuckling as well, our joint laughter echoing around the kitchen.

“Guess you figured it out, then?”
Okay, I hadn’t expected Dan to explode the stove again, but at least he’s getting the hang of whatever’s allowing him to tap into his witchcraft. And neither of us had been hurt - the flame didn’t even feel as hot as a normal flame of that size would - so I’m counting it as a win. Especially with the way Dan’s just grinning.

“Yeah, I think I’m getting there,” he says finally, and I’m really tempted to ask what he’s been thinking about, but I’ve already asked a few times and it’s pretty clear he doesn’t want to say.

“Am I good to make the eggs?” I ask, a little joking but also a bit serious - if he’s not feeling under control enough, we should probably skip anything that’ll require the stove. For a moment, his face scrunches up in an almost-frown, and I’m about to tell him I’m just kidding, but then he’s tilting his head at me.

“Probably, but do you have anything I could do to keep me distracted?” I open my mouth, then look around for - right, the coffee. When I point, he nods again, then busies himself searching for mugs. I work on the eggs, cracking a few into the pan, then sort of watch them out of the corner of my eye; I’m more focused on Dan, on the curve of his shoulders as he leans over the counter, on the way he bites his lip as he pours.

I am very very overwhelmed by the need to touch him.

“Dan, do you mind, I need a spatula?” I satisfy my need by tapping his shoulder, and his head whips up; for a moment, he just stares, then he’s stepping back, tugging the drawer open and fishing around inside. “Thanks,” I smile once he’s handed it to me, and he just smiles right back before turning to refocus on the coffee. Which, he seems to now be noticing, doesn’t actually require any more attention.

“Oh, uh, here,” he holds up one of the mugs, which I take with another smile - well, actually, my smile never left, as I’m quite enjoying watching him do something as simple as pouring coffee. Something tells me I’d enjoy watching him do anything.

But the smell of coffee drifts up to my nose, and I end up taking a very big sip, which breaks my line of sight for a moment.

“Thank you,” I say - I’d really needed that, given how little I ended up sleeping last night - but he just shrugs.

“I mean, you made it.” Which is a valid point, I suppose, but I feel like I should be thanking him anyway. Or maybe I shouldn’t thank him - he is the reason I didn’t end up sleeping well, after all; I’m having a very tough time wrapping my head around the fact that he’s a witch as well. Funny, I was right from the beginning...sort of.

It’s amazing that the universe brought him here, that I trusted my gut and let him stay, that everything had happened just the way it did to get us to this point - but I wish that’d been all that kept me tossing and turning and staring up at the ceiling. The rest of the night I’d spent in half-dreams about the future: sometimes, Dan setting the whole house on fire on accident, or getting angry at me for doing a bad job of teaching him about his witchcraft, or just up and leaving. That last one had me crawling out of bed and sneaking down the hall into my store room to call PJ.

“But what if he does?” I’d explained to a frowning close-up of PJ - apparently, he’s got a mirror
beside his bed specifically for emergencies. He hadn’t looked pleased about my ‘emergency’.

“Phil, I’m not- just go back to bed, I can’t tell you what does or doesn’t happen, you know that,” he’d grumbled, squinting at me - he hadn’t been wearing his glasses, so I’m sure I came across as a blurry pale blob.

“But if something bad were going to happen, you’d-”

“Good night, Phil.” A moment later, his face had disappeared from the full-length mirror in front of me and I’d been left to stare at an exhausted reflection of myself, sat cross-legged on the floor.

At which point I decided there was absolutely no point in sleeping, so I’d set about preparing some probably-unnecessary but possibly-useful spells for our trip.

“Phil? It’s, uh, is that-” I refocus with a blink to find Dan cradling his mug in his hands, glancing between me and the stove beside me. Where the eggs have definitely gone a bit too crispy, but the fire winks out a moment later, leaving the food steaming up into my face.

“Thanks- oh, did you?” It clicks as soon as the word’s come out my mouth, and I turn back to find him grinning at me, then taking a very smug sip of his coffee. “Showoff,” I nudge him with an elbow, making his drink slosh in its cup, and he gives me an irritated ‘hey!’ before stepping back. He’s still smiling though, and I decide that maybe him being a witch will be a lot more fun than I expected.

As long as PJ can help him get some control. As long as I can do a good enough job teaching him. Otherwise...I try to keep my grin bright and teasing in spite of my fears; I scrape the eggs from the pan - not my favorite, eggs, but healthy and good to prepare us for the long day ahead - and pass a plate to Dan. I swear, once we get back, pancakes. I’ve been craving them for days, but it’s just been one thing after another since Dan arrived and I keep forgetting to get some flour from town.

The sun’s not yet come up, though the sky is a sort of lilac color that looks really pretty but means we should probably eat quickly, so I opt to settle down at the coffee table in the same spot I’d sat last night. Somehow, last night seems very far away. Probably because I didn’t really get any sleep.

Dan sits across from me, poking at his eggs with a fork and lifting a bite to his mouth. I know I shouldn’t bother asking, but I do anyway.

“Are they alright?” I know I’d basically burned them, to the point where I’m really not looking forward to eating even though I’m hungry, but Dan manages to give me a sort of smile and nod before swallowing.

“Yeah, they’re-” I twist my lips as he speaks, and he pauses. “Okay, they’re pretty shit, to be honest, but I’m hungry, so,” he lifts another forkful to his mouth and grimaces as he chews, and I try my best to look as offended as possible - a gasp and a hand over the heart and everything. Which makes Dan laugh, and I’m wishing I could be clever and funny all the time - I like his laugh.

“You’d better eat your shit eggs too,” he points his fork at me, mouth still full, then swallows before continuing. “Sun’s coming up, Mr. ‘we have to leave at dawn’.” Now he twirls the fork in the air, matching the movement of his eyes as he rolls them, so I shovel a few less-than-satisfying bites into my mouth. My stomach thanks me, even if my taste buds don’t.

We eat quickly and mostly in silence, until I notice Dan frowning at the sliding door behind me.

“Is he coming with?” Now he’s using his fork as a pointer, and I turn to find Mellix sat outside the
door with a wolfish grin on his face. Can you be polite to Dan? I project, and his ears perk up. Alright, fine, you can come. I grin when he does, and his tongue lolls out through his pointed teeth.

“You both do the thing,” Dan comments absently, and I turn back in time to find him scooping up the last of his eggs. My head tilts, brows scrunched together, and he holds up a finger.

“The tongue thing,” he says after he’s swallowed. I must still look confused - I am - because he sticks his tongue between his teeth and bites down while sporting a sort of silly grin, then shrugs at me. “Tongue thing.”

“I don’t- when do I do that?” I realize my voice has gone high-pitched, but surely I don’t do anything that embarrassing, right?

“Like, five seconds ago,” he chuckles as he stands, then turns to rinse his plate off in the sink. I just watch, frowning. I did not! Although I’m suddenly feeling self-conscious. Did I? I glance back at the door to find Mellix still sat right there, tongue poked out just like Dan said mine had been. His tail thumps as I twist my lips at him. Great, apparently we’re even more than just emotionally connected. It seems I’m just not around people enough to be told so.

I must still be frowning when I reach the sink, because Dan turns and takes one look at me before his eyes go a little wide and he chuckles.

“Don’t worry, it’s endearing,” he smiles at me, and I watch as his cheeks flush pink and he ducks his head. “Anyway, we should be on our way soon?”

“We should,” I agree, “if you’re ready?” Now he glances back up, mouth opening and closing for a second before he bites his lip.

“I mean, I don’t exactly have-”

“Right! Clothes, I packed enough for us both, don’t worry.” I grin at him, and he nods, an awkward half-smile on his face. “I’ll just grab the bag and we can head out?” Another nod, so I climb the stairs and head to my room.

By the time I’m back, Dan’s stood awkwardly at the sliding glass door, watching Mellix. Who seems to be watching him back. I hesitate a few steps before the bottom, waiting to see if I can figure it out. Then the wolf blinks, and Dan breaks out into a triumphant pose, punching in the air with far more energy than the bags under his eyes would hint that he’s capable of.

“Got you, you bloody wolf, can’t beat the master,” he pokes a finger at the glass as he says this, a snide grin on his face accenting a dimple in his cheek. Mellix just laps at the other side of the clear window, right over the spot Dan’s ponting.

“Were you having a staring contest with my familiar?” I chuckle as I descend the last few steps, adjusting the backpack on my shoulder. As I get near the door, it slides open, and Mellix’s ears perk up.

“Your- wait, he’s not just a pet?” Dan’s voice follows me as we head outside, and I can picture the exact way his brows are probably arching up his forehead. I have to stifle another giggle - he just doesn’t know, that’s all. It’s hard to remember that, though.

“No, he’s a lot more than that, sort of an extension of me, I guess?” I offer over a shoulder, heading past the shed and out to the familiar trail between two of the largest trees.

“Right- okay, is that really all we need, for two whole days?” There’s a tug on the backpack, and I
stumble backward, then spin to find Dan staring at me. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to, like, make you...anyway, uh, really?” He’s frowning at my bag, which I’m just realizing probably looks as ordinary as any other backpack. I end up chuckling again.

“Dan, you might want to start assuming that nothing is exactly what it looks like, yeah?” I adjust the bag so it’s comfortably sat on my shoulders, then turn back around to the forest. After a very obvious lack of noise behind me, I stop and peek over my shoulder to find Dan stood at the treeline, staring up into the branches above us.

“I promise, it’s totally safe, okay? I won’t let anything happen,” my voice goes a bit too soft at the end, probably, but it gets him to drop his gaze back to me, and I give him a small smile and he gives me an uneasy one, but then he’s stepping onto the path and it only takes him a moment to catch up.

Fortunately, the path is wide enough for us to stand side by side, although I can’t help but notice Dan’s walking quite a bit closer than the dirt below our feet would actually require. It makes my heart leap up and then drop low, because sure he’s stood beside me, but it’s because he’s terrified.

“But anyway!” My desperate outburst in an attempt to distract him from the forest must work; his head whips up, eyes just a little too wide, but his whole expression softens when he realizes I’m just making conversation. “Yeah, Mellix is a familiar, definitely not a regular pet.” The wolf lopes on ahead of us, barely pausing here and there to sniff at some discarded branches or pile of leaves.

“So, what makes him special, then? Like, why’s he different from a pet?” Dan’s face scrunches as he turns to watch Mellix, who peeks back to blink at us before continuing ahead. He knows where we’re headed, knows to be on guard for anything potentially dangerous. Not that we’ll run into anything dangerous, but I want Dan to be as safe as possible.

“He’s, uhm…” I twist my lips. How to describe a familiar? Not a pet, much more than that, but more in the kind of way that’s challenging to actually put into words. A word doesn’t exist, aside from ‘familiar’. Oh! “It’s like, okay, you know what soulmates are, right?” I turn to find Dan’s eyes go wide, but then he blinks, nods.

“What, love of your life in animal form? Are all witches furries, then?” He scoffs, but my eyebrows quirk up at the way his cheeks flush pink. Granted, mine have as well.

“No! Not like that, like…” I huff out a breath. “Like, they’re sort of connected to you? In a way, you’re always destined to find them?” I drop my head back and stare at the leafy branches above us as we walk. “I don’t know, it’s hard to explain!”

“No, actually, I sort of get it,” Dan’s voice is soft, contemplative, and I look over to find him nodding slowly. Finally, he turns and locks eyes with me. “Like an extension of you, in a way? But also their own pers- uh, their own animal?” I don’t miss the slip-up, but it’s interesting to hear his thoughts on something like soulmates. Or anything. Or everything.

“Yes, like that,” I agree. It’s fairly accurate, at least.

“No! Not like that, like…” I wait for him to finish, but the unspoken question hangs in the silence around us, so I turn to find his head ducked and his hands tucked in his pockets.

“Do you get a familiar as well?” I finish for him, and he glances over - his eyes are sparkling, that layer of excitement visible even though he’s clearly trying not to show it anywhere else. “Depends
on what you believe, I guess, but I’ve yet to meet a witch without a familiar.” This is true, every
witch I know has a familiar, but I’ve heard stories about witches who never found their familiars.

It’s not that they ended up unhappy, though, just...I couldn’t imagine living without Mellix, I’d
been lucky enough to find him - or, for him to find me - when I was still a kid and he was a puppy.
We grew up together, and I think that made a huge difference. I think it made me happier, having
someone to rely on and confide in and run to when things got too tough with bullies. Having Mellix
wasn’t necessary, but it was a comfort. It still is.

The wolf pauses his trek to pad back to us and nuzzle his way under my arm; now we’re truly
forced to the edges of the path, with Dan pressed nearly against me on one side and Mellix on the
other.

“Right, uh, how do you, uhm, find-” he breaks off again, but now it seems to be because he’s very
focused on the tree trunks bordering the path beside him. Mellix, I love you, but do you mind?

Fortunately, the wolf gets the message and laps at my cheek before trotting on ahead, back to
scouting. I shift over to give Dan more room, but he stays glued to my side, eyes still casting
nervous glances toward the trees.

“It’s different for everyone,” I say in the hopes of distracting Dan. It sort of works; he’s now at
least dividing his attention between the forest and me. “Mellix just sort of followed me home from
school one day and that was it, we clicked right away. Some people go out searching for their
familiars, and there are even some witches who are more in tune with animals and try to help
others find their familiars.” I rattle all this off from memory, but it seems interesting enough to Dan
that he’s barely looking at the forest any longer.

“So I could, like, have a familiar out there somewhere?” His gaze does drift to the trees this time,
but it’s more of an open-mouthed wondrous look than a tight-lipped fearful kind. I smile, even
though he’s not paying me any attention.

“Yeah, you could.” He looks so hopeful and positive, I just want him to keep feeling that way. I
don’t want to say that it might take awhile, or that he might never find his familiar, or that some of
the more cynical witches - those without any familiars, funny enough - suggest that not everyone
even has a familiar.

“What would it be, do you think?” He’s still staring up, light and hopeful and grinning a bit, and I
like him lost in thought like that - he’s usually been so full of fear or frustration or...whatever else,
and I can’t even imagine how he must’ve felt when he first arrived, so I’m glad to see him finding
some peace in something, even just for a minute.

And, unfortunately, it really is just a minute - his toe catches on something, probably a root or
branch, and he pitches forward, barely catching himself before he slams face-first into the ground.

“Are you-” I’m just leaning over with a hand out to help when a few leaves stir at his feet, making
a small whirlwind before settling back on the path. If my eyes are wide by the time he turns to look
at me, his are far wider.

“Did I just- I mean, you didn’t-” I shake my head, and he’s back to grinning again. Then frowning.

“I don’t know how- I mean, I didn’t mean to do that, is it always like this?” He’s frowning down at
his feet - or, probably, at the leaves he’d stirred before they returned to the ground - and it takes me
a moment to follow his train of thought.
“At first, while you’re still learning to control everything, yeah it is a bit...wayward,” I twist my lips, and he looks up at me. At least he doesn’t look shocked anymore. “But Peej’ll help with that, don’t worry!” I hope I sound more enthusiastic than I feel, because PJ will help, sure, but then it’ll be up to me. I’m not sure I’m cut out to teach a new witch.
‘Don’t worry!’ he says, and now I can’t do anything except worry...

Not that that’s anything new, though - I’ve been worrying since we stepped foot in the forest however long ago. Can’t be too long, the sun’s still high and bright, and I’m not really hungry yet. But I can’t shake the feeling that something is following us. It must be, because there are surely demonic beasts out here, and they’re definitely creeping behind us.

I glance at the trees, simultaneously hoping to find nothing there and hoping to see a shifting shadow so I can at least justify my nerves.

We’ve started walking again, since I tripped and ended up creating a tiny tornado of leaves at my feet. Wow, I actually did that? I still have no idea how, I hadn’t been trying, but I guess it’s also not the first time I’ve unintentionally done something with my magic. At least I didn’t start a forest fire.

And now I’m on edge twice as much as I’d been just a minute ago - I have no control, apparently, what if I do end up setting a fire on accident? Would Phil be able to put it out? I glance over to find him watching me, which is unsettling in itself; his eyes are narrowed just a bit, lips twisted in a sort of frown but not quite, and I suddenly wish I had the ability to read minds. Could I do that with magic?

I’m about to ask, mouth already open, when a barrel of fur pounces on Phil and tackles him to the ground.

“Mellix, Mellix, what-” he sputters out a few half-words before the wolf stops licking at his face, settling on his haunches on Phil’s stomach. I’m not sure what to do aside from stand there and stare - I’m sure as hell not getting involved in anything to do with a giant wolf, familiar or not. Oh god, what if my familiar is something frightening, or- shit, can a demonic animal be a familiar? Is that even-

“Dan? Are you alright?” I glance over at Phil’s voice to find him frowning at me - as is the wolf - and it’s not til I properly focus that I realize I’m surrounded by a curtain of leaves, all suspended in the air, shivering just slightly when a breeze passes.

And just as suddenly, they all drift back to the ground, and I frown at them before looking back up at Phil. Who just looks shocked, and I’m not sure how I’m meant to interpret that.

“I get easily distracted, I guess?” I offer by way of explanation. Which doesn’t feel much like an explanation, but there are two sets of eyes staring me down and I feel like I have to say something. It’s true, too - I tend to get lost in my head, which is apparently all it’s taking now to cause things to happen. Fucking emotions. Some days I wish I didn’t have any.

But then, I guess then I wouldn’t have any powers either, if PJ and Phil are right. Powers tied to my emotions, of course that has to be how my magic works.

“How about, uh,” Phil’s voice pulls me out of my head - yet again - and I find him stood up now, both he and Mellix crouched over at the edge of the path and digging around in the detritus. “Here!” He holds up a small rock, more a piece of gravel than anything, and glances pointedly between me and it.

“Uh, thanks?” I reach out tentatively, but he pulls his hand back before I can take the...
“No! No, make it, like, float or something,” he holds his hand out, the rock sat in the middle of his palm, and I frown at it. *What part of ‘I have basically no control’ aren’t you getting?* Before he can do anything other than grin at me, I’m shaking my head.

“I’m not risking setting the whole damn forest on fire,” I argue before he can ask. Because Mellix is trotting ahead already, I turn to follow, figuring Phil will just do the same.

“Well, that’s the point, you can’t get better if you don’t practice.” His voice hasn’t followed me, and I turn to find him still stood in exactly the same spot. “We’re not moving til you agree to try, at least,” he says, lifting the pebble again, and I roll my eyes. And walk back over to him anyway.

*He has no reason to be helping me, not even now. If he’s asking, I’ll do it. Or try, at least.*

“Fine, alright, what am I meant to do then?” I grumble, crossing my arms at him. For a moment, he just opens and closes his mouth like a fish out of water, and I quirk a brow at him.

“I’m not, uh, maybe just- okay, so when I was learning, I had to like, really focus on the thing, and think about what I wanted, and then just-…” he trails off and the rock floats up above his palm, just a bit. Then it settles back down and he stares at me like ‘okay, your turn!’ I quirk a brow.

“Right, just-” I break off and stare intently at the rock, which does absolutely nothing, before frowning and shrugging at him. “There, tried, let’s go,” I whirl around, then clench my teeth when I don’t hear any footsteps behind me.

“No, try for *real*, Dan!” He finally says.

“I did, obviously it didn’t work, or maybe just give me some better directions?” I call over my shoulder, not really bothering to look back. The silence behind me, though, is nearly as daunting as the large wolf stalking toward me, teeth bared. I take a hesitant step backward. All at once, realization smacks me in the face hard and fast.

*Oh, shit, he said he’d never taught anyone before...* guilt suddenly swirls in my stomach, and - against my better judgment - I spin on a heel and turn my back to Mellix; Phil’s stood in the same spot, looking like he’s trying very hard to be upbeat and positive. I hate that I can see right through it.

“I’m- I uh, just got frustrated,” it’s not entirely a lie, but it makes Phil’s face soften, turn into something more like pity. *I can deal with that, being pitied is far less awful than feeling guilty.*

“That’s okay!” He enthuses, and it’s *genuine* this time. I give him a sheepish smile that’s equally as genuine. “Just try to use that, and sort of channel it into whatever you’re trying to do.” He glances down at the rock again, and I take a deep breath. *For Phil, I’ll try this again for Phil.*

I stare hard at his palm, but most of my frustration has evaporated with my guilt weighing on me, so I blow out a breath. *What else can I try?* Unexpectedly, there’s a warm breath at the back of my neck, and I don’t even need to turn around to know who - or *what* - it is. *I bet fear will work just fine…*

For a moment, I close my eyes and let myself imagine Mellix’s sharp teeth baring down on me, snapping at my throat - it feels a little false, because I doubt that’d ever *actually* happen, no matter my fear for the wolf, but there’s a core of warmth in my stomach that starts heating up, and I fling my eyes open and think hard about making the rock float.
At first, nothing happens, but then it’s wobbling and shaking and I’m about to declare myself triumphant when it shoots up into the branches above us and all but disappears. I follow its progress, and I’m left staring at a horrible angle with my neck bent so I can see into the leaves. Everything’s silent for a long stretch of time where we’re all just waiting - breaths held, heads craned back - for any sign of the rock.

Finally, we must all decide to give up right around the same time, because we’re all suddenly watching each other - even Mellix has joined in, swinging his muzzle between Phil and I - if I could give his expression a name, it’d be confusion.

“Well, uh, that’s definitely a start,” Phil manages after a moment, but his lip curls up just a little and then we’re both racked by a fit of laughter.

“A start?” I manage once I’ve caught my breath - Phil’s still grinning, but he meets my gaze and I’m suddenly feeling light and giddy and full of something. “I’m a bloody master magician! I mean, did you see how high that thing went? It still hasn’t-”

I break off when there’s a crackling sound and then a thump over to our left, and we all turn before glancing back at each other. And devolving into another round of uncontrollable giggles that Mellix somehow copies with a snuffling sort of snorting.

“Witch,” Phil finally says, once we’ve calmed down enough to get anything out of our mouths aside from huffs of laughter. My eyes widen, then squint in confusion.

“Sorry, what?”

“Witch, not magician,” he sort of frowns at the word ‘magician’, like it tastes bad to say.

“Oh, is that, uh, like a derogatory term or something?” My cheeks flush with heat - I haven’t said it before, right? Out loud? I can’t think of any time that I had, but now I’m worried I’ve offended him unintentionally.

“Not, uh, not exactly, I just...I guess I’m just personally not a fan?” He tilts his head and shrugs, but I’m exhaling a breath. Okay, haven’t offended him unintentionally.

“Not, uh, not exactly, I just...I guess I’m just personally not a fan?” He tilts his head and shrugs, but I’m exhaling a breath. Okay, haven’t offended him, I don’t think.

“Sure, that makes sense,” I agree. “But I am definitely a master now,” I grin at him, hoping to bring the mood back up. I don’t think I’ve laughed that much in...maybe ever. Fortunately, Phil grins back at me.

“Powerful, maybe,” he just shakes his head. “But control is a whole other thing to work on.” Before I can properly frown at him for ruining my good mood - yes, I know I’ll need to get better control, but holy fucking shit I launched a pebble into the stratosphere like a fucking rocket! - he’s stooped down and rummaging around at the edge of the path.

“Here!” He produces another rock for me, and I’m about to reach out and take it when he reaches for my hand and flips it palm-up; I’m wondering if my magic is acting up yet, based on the way my heart’s suddenly racing as he cradles my hand in his. “For practicing while we walk.” He sets the pebble in my palm, and I tear my eyes away from it - and our hands - to find him staring at me.

“Th- uh, thanks,” I manage to stutter out, and then he’s stepped back and I nearly drop the damn practice rock because I’ve entirely forgotten I have muscles in my arm to hold my own hand up. Phil’s just bloody grinning.

Then he’s set off down the path - I don’t even know when Mellix left, but the wolf’s already a ways ahead of us, and it takes me a moment to find my feet and get them moving in the right
Okay, so maybe I’m not a master witch, but I think I’m doing pretty damn well for only knowing about my powers for like, twenty-four hours. By the time we stop for lunch - although it might even be more like dinner, with how low the sun’s getting - I’ve been able to keep the same pebble for at least ten minutes.

I may have gone through a lot of pebbles before that, but they keep fucking launching themselves to Mars, alright?

“It’s my lucky one, Phil,” I say for the eighteenth time. Phil just chuckles as he leads us off-path to a small clearing beside the trunk of a huge tree - I can still see the trail from here, which is literally the only reason I’ve agreed to this spot. He’s been trying to get us to stop for ages, since my stomach growled and I complained about being hungry, but every single place he wanted us to stop was a good hike into the forest. That’s where I drew the line.

I watch Phil sling the bag off his back and unzip it, then fish around inside - his arm disappears far deeper than it should be able to, and my eyes and mouth go wide the moment I realize.

“Oh my god, it’s like Hermione’s bag from-” I can’t even finish my own sentence, because he produces a large blanket from the depths of the bag - one that really shouldn’t even fit in the backpack to begin with - and spreads it out over the dirt.

“Oh god, it’s like Hermione’s bag from-” I can’t even finish my own sentence, because he produces a large blanket from the depths of the bag - one that really shouldn’t even fit in the backpack to begin with - and spreads it out over the dirt.

“Told you, not everything is what it seems,” Phil smirks at my still-awed face, and I can’t even be bothered to, well, be bothered. He pulls out a tiny campfire-looking thing, which earns a spot in the middle of the blanket, and a pan and a few water bottles. I barely manage to catch the one he tosses my way.

“What are you in the mood for?” He looks up from the bag at me, but all I can do is blink and shrug - I don’t even know what he brought. A whole five-course meal, perhaps? The thought is enough to make me snort out a huff of laughter, which makes Phil’s brows scrunch together, but then he’s digging around in the bag again and I’ve gotten myself under some semblance of control.

Oh sure, when I’m not trying to do magic, I have no problem with control, apparently.

Even as I think it, I realize how untrue it is, though - I’ve got the absolute worst control on the planet, especially when it comes to things I want. Evidently, that extends to my powers as well - I want to be able to do everything, even though it’s sort of terrifying. Apparently, that’s what I’m channeling into my practicing.

“Do you need, uh, any help?” I ask absently, though I’m staring at the pebble in my hand. I think Phil answers, but he definitely chuckles, so I assume I’m fine to go off and practice on my own. Or, rather, go off to one corner of the blanket and practice. No way in hell am I leaving the safety of this little area.

I’m sort of tempted to feel self-conscious - after all, Phil’s clearly an actual expert at this stuff, he’d had no issue getting the little rock to hover over his palm. But something about Phil, I suppose, makes me feel like I don’t have to be self-conscious. Or maybe it’s that he’s just as nervous about being a teacher as I am about being taught.

So I find I don’t have as much trouble as I’d expected sitting down at the edge of the blanket and staring resolutely at the rock in the palm of my hand; up til now, I’ve had pretty good success - if
you can call launching projectiles a success - by tapping into my fears, mostly of the hellbeasts in
the forest around me. Although we’ve yet to see them, and it’s getting harder and harder to access
that particular fear.

I try to go for the embarrassment I’d felt when I’d tripped and stirred up a tiny whirlwind of leaves
around me, but the intensity of the moment feels too distant, and I can’t even get the pebble to
shiver.

*What other…anger?* That seems like a powerful enough emotion, if I can work myself up to being
properly angry - but at what? I suppose I could think back to my past, to being exiled or being
bullied as a kid or really anything else from my life before I was kicked out, but...*then I wouldn’t be
here, probably. I wouldn’t have found Phil.*

But I did. It’s really really hard to be pissed off about things that happened and got me where I am
now, sitting on a blanket in the middle of the sort-of-creepy woods with Phil, on our way to a seer-
magician - *no, a seer-witch* - to help me work on controlling my powers. *My* powers, because I’m a
witch as well. And I fucking have *powers.*

Elation floods my chest and I’m a little wary about tapping into anything even remotely related to
the emotions I’d felt when I’d set those fires in the kitchen, but I try to tamp down on it as much as
I can and focus on the small pebble in my hand. *Please don’t explode into flames, or shoot off to
the bloody moon, please…*

At first, it’s a slow movement, just drifting up like someone blew on a feather and it happened to
float up in the air a bit, but then it pops up higher - likely due to the fact that I’m so fucking thrilled
I haven’t lost control yet - and I try to keep my emotions in check. *Breathe in, breathe out, okay…it
gets about level with my eyes before I fill my head with nothing and let it fall back to my palm.*

“That was so good, Dan!” I glance up from my hand to find Phil grinning at me, and I can’t help
but return the smile. *I actually did it!* “You should come eat, before it gets cold.” I realize there’s a
lot more sitting out now than just a little portable campfire stove: two plates heaped with some kind
of chili, if I had to guess, and a few rolls of bread as well. I shift so I can slide the pebble in my
pocket, then scoot back toward the center of the blanket and grab a roll and tear off a bite.

It’s not til the first bit hits my stomach that I properly realize just how hungry I am, then I’m using
the bread and a conveniently supplied fork to scoop up some chili and shove it in my mouth; for
several minutes, I’m pretty sure I entirely forget Phil’s even there.

Until I’m finally able to slow down a bit - *come on, you’re supposed to be working on your
control.* Phil must notice, or he must’ve been waiting for me to stop devouring the entire plate in
front of me, because he clears his throat.

“I know you sort of…didn’t want to say before, but- and you can tell me not to ask anymore, I
promise I’ll stop if you want - but what were you thinking about?” His voice comes out uncertain,
matching the way he twists his lips as soon as he’s asked, and I end up staring at him as I finish
crunching and swallowing.

*Shit, what do I tell him?*
Phil

He’s going to tell me not to ask again, I can see it - his eyes have gone wide and frightened, and he’s taking his time chewing his bite. *I shouldn’t have even asked to begin with, I knew he didn’t want to talk about it.*

But here I am, being nosy.

For a very long moment, I’m just holding my breath, fork poised over my own food and waiting for him to swallow - everything feels tense and staticky, and I’m one heartbeat away from taking it back, telling him it’s fine and to forget I asked.

“I, uh,” he ducks his head, and I wonder if he’s actually really going to tell me. *Oh my gosh, what if it’s something really bad, though? I can’t even imagine what would be that bad, though, that he’s so reluctant - or maybe embarrassed. Embarrassed...I hadn’t even considered it…*

“If you don’t-”

“No, no, it’ll probably make things easier for you to, uh, teach me, right?” He grimaces even as he says it, though. I feel a bit bad about nodding, but *yeah* it would probably help a lot if I could at least know what he’s thinking about. PJ probably *already* knows, not that he’d tell me though.

“Okay, uh, lately it’s been...fear, I guess?” He’s focused studiously on his food, poking at his plate but not actually picking anything up. “Like, of the demon beasts. And I *know,*” he lifts his head and a hand now, like he’s defending himself against a response I haven’t even given - I’m a bit too floored that he’s actually *answering.* “They aren’t really dangerous, but try telling that to my stupid brain.” He coughs out a sarcastic chuckle, then lifts a bite of chili.

“I hate the ocean,” I blurt out, which earns me scrunched brows and a slow chew from Dan, evidently trying to follow my random train of thought. “There’s no reason for me to be afraid of it,” I clarify, “but I won’t go out very deep if I can avoid it.” I’m not entirely sure myself why I’ve just gone and said it, maybe just trying to relate, but it must help some degree - he’s nodding a bit, and he sets his fork down on his plate.

“Right, well that’s one thing, but it wasn’t working earlier,” he goes on, and I find I’m sort of fascinated - I know how my witchcraft works, of course, and I’ve heard about other types, like PJ’s clairvoyance, but I’ve never really been close with many other witches, never heard details about their own unique types of witchcraft.

“So I started trying other things, other emotions, y’know, since that’s what you said,” he gestures at me, tipping his head for a moment. Then he’s focused again. “But not, uh, not all of them really worked, or I couldn’t like...*feel* them enough, if that makes sense?” I nod, hoping I’m coming across as encouraging. Already, I’ve abandoned my food in favor of curling my knees up and wrapping my arms around them, all my attention directed at Dan as he talks.

“Well, so then I was just excited about, like, being a witch I guess,” he shrugs, “and that was enough but not too much?” Another hanging question, so I nod again. His lips part like he’s about to say more, then clamp shut as though he’s decided it’d be best not to.

“It worked,” I note, and he nods. Then he’s grinning again, all visible anxiety replaced with a sort of childish joy. *Can I blame him, though? How cool would it be to discover out of nowhere that you’ve got some ability you thought only existed in fairytales? But...* “Is that really what you were
nervous about mentioning, though? The fear? I mean…” I glance around us at the slowly-
darkening forest. “It’s a fear, it’s just as irrational as lots of other fears. Like I said, I’m afraid of the
ocean.” I can’t figure out why that’d be so embarrassing he’d be afraid to mention it.

Now his cheeks flush dark red, and my eyebrows shoot up before I can stop them.

“It’s, uh, it’s not-” then he’s digging into his food again, and my mouth drops open as well, even
though I tell it not to. What’s he not saying? Clearly it’s something much bigger than his fear of
demonic animals. And as much as I shouldn’t pry…

“I won’t judge,” I promise. Which is to say I’ll try very hard not to visibly react or say anything
offensive, and I’ll probably think a lot about it in my head until I’ve come to a reasonable thing to
say. Assuming my reactions - or Mellix’s - don’t give anything away before I’ve fully processed
whatever he’s got to say. If he decides to say it. “No pressure though!”

Dan shifts, then curls himself up so he’s matching my position. He still hasn’t looked up, though.

“That bad, huh?” I should let him off easy, he’s already given me a lot to work with, I don’t have to
force anything out of him. That wouldn’t be fair. It doesn’t stop me from wanting to know, and I
end up trying to walk the line down the middle of ‘I won’t push too far, but I really want to know’. At
least, that’s what I’m hoping I’m showing right now. I offer a soft smile, even though he’s still
focused on his knees.

“I promise, you don’t want to know,” he mumbles - the only reason I even hear it is because the
forest has gone mostly silent around us, that space of time between dusk and evening proper when
all the day animals are burrowing into their nests for the night and none of the nocturnal animals
have woken up just yet.

“I promise I really do.” The words come out before I can stop them, though I do clamp a hand over
my mouth just in case I can catch the tail end and pull them all back. It doesn’t work. Dan peeks up
at me, eyes narrowed like he’s searching for something.

Wait...wait, is he-

“It’s getting late,” he says after a long, tense moment. “I’m a bit exhausted from all the walking, is
this where we’re camping for the night?” He looks around at the small clearing, the first one he’d
actually let us stop at, before turning back to me. I could swear there’s something of a challenge in
his eyes, like he’s waiting to see if I’ll actually push it.

But I won’t, at the end of the day, I know it’s not my place - if he’s really that uncomfortable, I
don’t want to force him to say something he isn’t ready to say.

Something he isn’t ready to say...even now, my head spins with the possibility that he’d been so
close to admitting - properly admitting - he likes me. But he hadn’t, and he’s tired, so I offer him a
smile I hope looks perfectly normal and bright before reaching over to my backpack.

“Yeah, I’ve got the tarp again, and some blankets and pillows.” I pull everything from the bag as I
talk while Dan just sort of gapes at me - I’m glad I can still impress him; he’s picked up everything
I’ve ‘taught’ him so quickly, by the time we get back, I doubt any of my uneventful bits of spells
and witchcraft will amaze him like they do now.

“Camping under the stars,” he says absently, and I tilt my head back - there’s nothing but darkening
leaves overhead, so it’s not til I glance over at Dan that I realize he isn’t even paying much
attention. In fact, he looks a bit lost in his own head, eyes glazed over and his thumbnail between
his teeth.
For a moment, I’m not sure what to do or say - or do I stay quiet, let him come out of his head on his own? - but then he seems to have snapped out of it, because he turns toward me and glances down at the pillow in my hand.

“For me?” I nod and hand it over, then pass him a blanket as well.

“Once we get to Peej’s, we’ll have proper beds,” I say, although he’s not complained even once - I just suddenly feel a bit bad making him sleep on the ground.

“Trust me, this isn’t the worst place I’ve ever slept,” he scoffs, setting the pillow out and turning to face the forest. By the time he’s tugged the blanket up to his shoulders, I realize I still haven’t moved, so I rush to lay the tarp out flat - at least I’ve got enough energy for a suspension spell this time.

A few moments later, we’ve got some protective covering from any falling leaves or rain - not that it’s all that likely to rain - and I’m sort of wishing Dan had been watching. But his breathing’s already evened out, and I really can’t blame him for his exhaustion - brief trips into town are about the only regular exercise I get, an entire day of walking is a bit more than I’m used to.

As I situate myself opposite Dan on the blanket, I let myself imagine just for a minute what might’ve happened if he’d actually told me - I’d tell him I feel the same, wouldn’t I? I’m suddenly warm, the kind of warm that makes my skin prickle and my cheeks flush with heat - I would, right? Or would I chicken out again?

No, I think if he said it first, I’d be able to say it.

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I must drift off at some point, in spite of the spike of anxiety at the thought of confessing my feelings, because the next time my eyes open, it’s to a shadowy expanse of dark blues and greys, and I have to assume night’s fallen.

I have about half a second to start to wonder what exactly woke me before there’s something sticking in my back and my heart leaps out of my chest.

"Phil!" Even as a whisper, I recognize Dan’s voice, but it doesn’t stop fear from climbing up and settling in my brain; before I’ve even properly woken up, I’m halfway to my feet and searching the surrounding area for signs of danger.

"Phil! Phil, no, it’s just-” Dan’s hands land on my shoulder, halting my frantic spinning. After a moment, my eyes finally focus and adjust to the lack of light enough to make out his face - which is scrunched up in concern.

"Is something wrong? Are you hurt?” I’m suddenly wishing for a night vision spell - one of the many spells I somehow didn’t think to pack - so I can properly check him out. Well, not like that, but- And suddenly, that’s exactly what I want to do - sleepy-Phil-brain is not to be trusted.

I take a step back from Dan, and the distance seems to help. A little.

“No, I just, I...uh, shit, this sounds so stupid now…” he trails off, ducking his head. “Sorry, forget it, I didn’t- I mean, I shouldn’t have woken you, I-”

“Dan, what’s wrong?” Now I step closer, against my own better judgment, because does he look scared?
All at once, everything hits me: we’re in the forest in the middle of the night, just like he’d been the
night he found my house - that he got exiled - and on top of that, he now knows demonic animals
exist. Even though he has no real reason to fear them. Now my heart rate’s gone up for a totally
different reason.

“Do you want to, uh, maybe sleep over here?” I ask, and Dan’s head whips up. Through the leaves
and branches overhead, tiny beams of moonlight make their way to his skin, and his whole face
looks like a constellation of shifting stars. For about three seconds, I forget that I actually said what
I said.

“Because, uh, my personal ward!” It’s such a horrible lie, and I almost regret it, until Dan’s wide,
shocked eyes relax into something calmer.

“Is that like, it protects you?” He glances at the line of trees surrounding us, chewing at his lip as
he waits for a response. Sleepy-Phil cannot be trusted…

“Yeah, sort of like...a, uh, personal bubble kind of thing?” I can’t believe I’m just making this all
up, and lying to Dan! But he clearly doesn’t feel safe, even though he definitely is - Mellix
wouldn’t let anything happen while we’re asleep - so maybe it’s not the worst thing in the world.
It’s to make him feel better, right?

“Oh, so I’d have to be...close…” he doesn’t sound offended by the idea, at least. Of course not, he
likes you! He said so. The other day. Before he found out he’s a witch...doubt bubbles up in my
stomach, but then Dan’s nodding and taking a step closer, and I suck in a breath.

I can’t believe I lied just to get him to lay near me...

It’s insanely thrilling, though, and I barely hesitate before dropping back down to the blanket - I
sort of mean to just curl back up and go right back to sleep, thinking Dan will situate himself
nearby and that’ll be that, but I end up watching him as he slowly lowers himself beside me. He’s
just sitting, though, staring right back at me like he’s waiting for something. My slow brain doesn’t
quite register that he’s not brought his pillow or blanket over.

And then it does, and I swallow thickly. I literally made this bed, and I have no problem lying in it.
Right? It feels a bit dishonest, but a white lie that makes him feel safer is probably a good thing,
after all. So I scoot myself back until I’m able to lay right at the edge of my pillow, then go still as
I watch Dan inhale, then exhale.

His next movements are slow, careful, but they still send sparks of lightning through my entire
body: he’s turned himself so his back’s to me, and his head lowers gently to the opposite end of the
pillow, and just being this close is enough to almost override every shred of common sense I have
in my head - I want so badly to just reach out and wrap my arm around him and pull him closer.

But I don’t - that would be pushing it too far. At least my brain has managed to draw a line
somewhere. Instead, I focus on calming my breathing - which doesn’t really work, because
everything suddenly smells like Dan, and it’s sort of making me want to bury my face in his curls
and that comes right back to the line I’m very much not allowing myself to cross over.

So I squeeze my eyes shut and try to think of anything but the not-really-a-stranger laying three
inches apart from me and will myself to fall asleep so I don’t have to keep resisting the urge to just
do something already.
I knew I shouldn’t have woken him. I just couldn’t help it.

I’d laid awake, staring into the slowly-darkening trees, until I was certain every shifting shadow was some new hellbeast come to drag me off into the night, until I could swear I saw a flash of red eyes or the glint of moonlight off a set of fangs.

Then I’d turned over, squeezed my eyes shut, and that turned out to be ten times worse: every sound became a shuffling of feet, a cracking branch under the massive paw of a creature, a snuffle of a thing honing in on my scent.

So I sort of caved and woke Phil.

And somehow, in the span of three minutes, I end up laying not two inches from him under the same blanket, on the same pillow, and fuck, how the hell did I get myself in this predicament? I’d almost prefer the demons…

Except Phil’s warmth is surprisingly comforting, even though I feel like someone’s set my skin on fire and simultaneously injected eight cups of coffee straight into my bloodstream - at least these issues are internal. And he’s got some extra level of protection from whatever’s lurking out there, and he’d offered so I shouldn’t be so overwhelmed by this.

He’d offered...I can’t believe I’d been ten seconds from telling him that a few of the times I’d been able to do something with my powers, I’d been thinking about him. And then I’d chickened out. Because how embarrassing would that be to admit? And if he didn’t feel the same…

But he’d offered to let me lay beside him - well, not right beside. A tiny piece of me is immensely tempted to scoot just a little farther back, to press myself up against him and see what he’ll do. But that piece is overshadowed by fear, the fear of rejection or mortification or a fear that he’ll send me back to my own pillow and blanket and I’ll be forced to face the rest of the evening alone, unprotected.

So I don’t.

Instead, I let myself imagine what it’d be like if: if I’d had the courage to admit my own feelings, if I knew for sure he liked me back, if he let me curl up in his arms, if this became a thing. It’s intoxicating and distracting enough to keep me from worrying too much about my present situation. I’m not sure whether I fall asleep thinking of Phil’s arms wrapped around me or thinking of his lips on my cheek, but at least I do sleep this time.

When I wake, it takes me a good thirty seconds to properly recognize that this isn’t some strange dream: I am, in fact, laying on the ground in the middle of a clearing in the woods with a very warm person clinging to me, and-

Shitshitshitshitshit, that’s Phil, he’s- I suck in a breath before I can think better of it, but Phil’s arm and leg have both draped across my own, and my back is pressed flush up against his chest. I’m about two seconds away from hyperventilating - how the hell did we end up here?

In a very misplaced effort to control my breathing, I squeeze my eyes shut and focus on what I can feel: the very hard and uncomfortable ground beneath my shoulder and hip, the cool air stinging
my nose as I inhale, the fuzz of the blanket tickling my chin, Phil’s breath tickling the back of my neck, the weight of his leg on my thigh, the warmth of his arm wrapped around me-

Bad idea, abort...for a moment, I debate extracting myself from him, but it’s not exactly my fault that we ended up like this. I didn’t do anything, clearly, so I don’t technically have any reason to be embarrassed. Maybe it would be better to just pretend to be asleep until he’s woken up...if I were in his shoes, I think I’d want that - if he’s up soon, he can just pull away, and then I’ll make some move like I’ve only just woken up, and we can avoid any and all awkward encounters about it entirely. Great plan.

Except that I sort of want to know what his reaction will be - embarrassed? Uncomfortable? Disgusted? I sigh, because surely he’d be disgusted to be caught cuddling with a random stranger, wouldn’t he be? Before I can let myself think too much about it, I wiggle a bit, hoping to jostle him awake.

And I’m disappointed, because it works; there’s a deep breath behind me, and I wait for the inevitable scrambling to get away, or the careful extraction of limbs if he’s cognizant enough to try not to ’wake’ me. And I wait.

And wait.

And my heart rate doubles for every single second he doesn’t move - I can’t tell if my breathing’s under control or not, but it surely won’t be in a minute. Why isn’t he moving? I’m afraid to answer that question, afraid to have to consider that my feelings might be reciprocated, because fuck then I’ll have to act on them. I don’t think I can do that.

“Dan?” Phil’s voice is soft, so soft right next to my ear, and I’m tempted to answer - my lips have already parted - but then that would be it, wouldn’t it? We’d both be aware that the other was aware of our situation, and we’d have to do something. We’d have to acknowledge it. I keep my eyes shut, try to steady my breaths. Desperately hope he can’t hear how loud and fast my heart’s beating.

There’s a long, near-deafening silence broken only by our breathing, then Phil’s pulling away from me slowly, carefully, like he’s definitely doing his best not to wake me. Well, that’s it, then. I stuff all my disappointment as far down in my stomach as it’ll go, then count to a hundred as I listen to Phil make his way around the clearing.

Once I decide it’s been long enough that he won’t be suspicious, I roll over and stretch, then blink my eyes open.

“Finally, sleepy-head!” Phil’s voice comes from somewhere behind me, or behind my head somewhere, and I tilt it back into the pillow so I can pinpoint him; he’s sat down by the little portable campfire, grinning at me like there’s absolutely nothing strange about the way we woke up. I can’t tell if it’s a ruse or if he’s genuinely unbothered. For all I know, maybe he isn’t at all bothered - maybe he’s just a cuddly guy.

Somehow, that’s almost worse - I could’ve just been any random person, it wouldn’t have mattered whether or not it was me. I tug the blanket up over my face, hoping to block out the sun and the way Phil’s watching me.

“I was about to start making some breakfast, do you want to light the fire?” I peek out from under my protection to find his smile’s softened, and nothing - aside from the upside-down angle - looks strange in his expression. Completely genuine. I tilt my head back a bit further until the campfire comes into view. Then I squint at it.
Fortunately, I have a whole cache of emotions bottled up in my chest, and I barely have to begin thinking about them before the flame springs to life with a pop and a whoosh of warm air. Phil looks so pleased that it’s hard not to smile back, even though producing that little bit of energy has gone and dragged all my stupid feelings out and into the light of day.

For a moment, my laziness and desire to hide until all my emotions disappear wars with my guilt for just making Phil do everything, and it’s not til I remind myself - for the thousandth time - that he’s got no reason to help me aside from being exceptionally kind that I push myself into a somewhat upright position and rub at my eyes.

“Need anything?” I grumble, voice unexpectedly thick from sleep even though I’ve sort of been awake for what feels like ages. Before he can answer, though, the branches I happen to be staring at sway, and there’s a crunch and crack of something moving closer; I scramble away, nearly throwing myself into the fire, but manage to dodge to the side at the last second.

Of course, I end up barreling backwards into Phil, knocking us both to the ground in a pile of gangly, awkwardly-placed limbs - I think there’s a shoulder in my back, and I know I’ve got an elbow somewhere soft and squidgy, and I do my best not to move too quickly.

And then the rustling intensifies, and I can’t move, suddenly paralyzed with fear - the fire beside us sparks, and I almost want to laugh, but I’m too focused on the space at the edge of the clearing. At least I’m inside Phil’s personal-bubble-ward-thing, surely that’ll help keep me safe. Right?

“Dan, are you-” I cut him off with a shush, heart hammering and eyes wide as I wait - whatever it is has paused, only a soft snuffling audible now. I hold my breath for as long as I can manage, desperately hoping the thing will just disappear. Move along! Nothing interesting here, no tasty humans to eat, just…

I realize belatedly that thinking at the thing probably won’t help much. There’s another crack, a snapping twig, and an enormous paw emerges from between the low branches; every muscle in my body tenses, and I’m suddenly uncomfortably aware of everywhere I’m pressed against Phil - this can’t be a pleasant position to be stuck in for him either.

“Dan, it’s-” I whip my head around and hiss a string of curses at him, hoping to stare hard enough that he understands the imminent danger we’re in. Jesus christ, Phil, can you not see the giant wolfish-

Oh. Just as I’ve had the thought, the rest of the ‘demon beast’ breaks through and into the clearing, and I literally flop back on Phil in relief - it’s just Mellix. Huh, what a strange day, when I’m actually glad to see a giant fucking wolf.

“Dan, do you-” Phil’s voice, a little winded, reminds me exactly the current position I’m in, and I rush to pull myself off him before he can finish his sentence; heat flushes my cheeks as I sort of roll sideways, keeping my gaze fixed intently on the blanket below us.

“Sorry,” I mumble, “didn’t, uh- look, it’s early, alright, I was still half-asleep…” I trail off, too embarrassed to bother continuing my litany of terrible excuses; I keep expecting a laugh, or a joke to be made at my unfounded fear, but neither comes. After a moment, I get over myself and peek up to find Phil just watching me.

“It’s okay,” he says after a long, tense moment - or maybe it was only tense for me, as he doesn’t seem to really care that I’d just been literally laying on top of him not a minute ago. Then he’s turned back to the fire - which, in spite of my rollercoaster of emotions, hadn’t gone haywire and burnt down the entire forest - and setting up a pan over it to heat. My eyes glaze over as I watch the
flickering flame, the way it licks up the edge of the metal and the slight distortion the hot air makes as it wafts around the base.

Then there’s a huff of warm breath on the back of my neck, and I wish I could say I had enough control not to yelp, but I don’t; my reaction must startle Mellix - the owner of said breath - because he sort of hops back as I turn; he just balances on his haunches for a moment, then his head cocks to the side, ears perked up at me.

“Sorry, boy, I didn’t realize it was you,” I shrug, then turn back to Phil. Who’s grinning at me like I’ve just said something fantastic, and it makes me squirm where I’m sat. Suddenly, the heat from the fire feels like a bit much.

“He wants to play,” he tilts his head at me - or, rather, behind me - and I look over my shoulder to find the wolf grinning in that tongue-lolling-out way that mirrors Phil’s when he’s giggling. I turn back to Phil with a quirked brow.

“What, he wants to drag me around like a giant squeaky toy, you mean?” I scoff - not sure I’m about to get a giant animal riled up, sounds like a pretty shit plan for me.

“Well,” he tips his head the same way Mellix had not a minute ago, and I have to suppress a smirk at how similarly they move. That must be so cool, though, to have a familiar… “You do squeak, so…” he trails off, then focuses on the pan, which I’m now realizing is the source of the amazing smell - bacon. Jesus, does Phil have a whole damn fridge in that bag? I mean it as a joke, but I’m suddenly wondering if it’s not completely plausible.

And then his comment hits me.

“I do not!” I whine back at him, which, of course, sounds a hell of a lot like a squeak. I clear my throat and lower my voice. “I do not,” I emphasize again, which only sends him chuckling, though his attention is far more focused on the pan than on me. I frown and cross my arms anyway.

Then there’s a nose poking into my back, nudging me til I’m nearly face-planting into the blanket, so I finally turn away from Phil - who’s still very much not paying my pouting any mind - and turn to the wolf.

“Alright, what, you want to play fetch?” The way his tail starts wagging, I get the idea that’s exactly what he wants. And I’ve actually got a fantastic idea.
It’s incredibly heartwarming to see Dan and Mellix getting along, for once. Something about him getting on with the animal extension of myself makes me sort of giddy.

I focus my attention on breakfast, though. We’ll need a lot of energy, especially with the way Dan’s decided to play with the wolf - there’s a creaking and crunching sound just as I’m cracking an egg, so I fumble and drop a bit of shell, but nobody was watching, so I don’t have to waste time feeling embarrassed. By the time I glance back up, Dan’s just stood and staring off into the forest.

A few moments later, Mellix comes crashing through the trees and slides to a stop in front of him, dropping a huge stick at his feet, and Dan just breaks out into a huge grin; I sort of love how excited he is about using his witchcraft - he stares for a long second at the branch, then it shoots up into the air and flings itself somewhere far away, and Mellix takes off in the direction of the subsequent crash as it lands.

“Looks like you’re getting the hang of things,” I use the wolf’s departure as a way to open up the conversation - he’d been so close to saying whatever he was thinking about last night, maybe to saying he likes me, I’m sure of it. What if he just needs a little encouragement?

“Yeah, I think so,” he whirls around with a smug grin, and I’m torn between wanting to laugh and wanting to smack his arm. But he’s not close, just sort of wandering over to where I’m sat, so I opt for the laughing. Fortunately, that seems like a good enough choice, because he joins in a moment later.

“Actually, though, it’s getting a lot easier, so thank you,” he says once we’ve both calmed down a bit and he’s sat opposite me, across the fire. My brows quirk up - why’s he thanking me? I’ve barely done anything. I mean, up til last night, I hadn’t even really known what he was thinking about, how he was trying to use his emotions to access his energy.

“Don’t give me that look, I wouldn’t even know I had powers- er, witchcraft?” He corrects himself, and I realize I must’ve frowned. My face is still in a frowning position, so I try to smooth it out and smile at him instead. “Right, well I wouldn’t have even known I was a witch if I hadn’t met you, so…” he shrugs, and I take it to be another expression of gratitude.

“You’re doing a great job figuring it out on your own, I don’t think I’m doing much to help,” I admit, mirroring his shrug. Then there’s a rustling sound that gives us about five seconds’ warning before Mellix comes crashing through the trees again; at the change in our positions, he tilts his head, and the branch - really, it is more a branch than a stick - tips until one end’s touching the ground. Then he’s bounding over to Dan and dropping the thing right in his lap.

“Thanks, Mellix,” he grits out, turning for a moment to give me a tight smile that says he’s not a fan of the slobbery piece of wood. But the wolf in front of him is as happy as I’ve ever seen - or felt, with our connection - and Dan barely hesitates before sending the branch back into the air and off in some other direction.

“Thanks, Mellix,” he grits out, turning for a moment to give me a tight smile that says he’s not a fan of the slobbery piece of wood. But the wolf in front of him is as happy as I’ve ever seen - or felt, with our connection - and Dan barely hesitates before sending the branch back into the air and off in some other direction.

“He really likes you, you know,” I comment in what I hope to be the most casual way ever; in an attempt to keep my implications from being too obvious, I poke around at the eggs - I’ve tried to fry them and failed miserably, so they’re something between fried and scrambled. And they’ll be done soon.

“Does he?” Dan asks, though it sounds rhetorical. When I look back, I expect him to be staring off
in the direction the wolf had taken, like he had been before I turned away. He’s not. He’s very much not, and dark brown eyes flicker with the movement of the fire as they watch me.

“Yup,” I squeak out. “Eggs are done, mind getting some plates?” I point toward the bag, and that must be enough of a distraction; a moment later, he’s focused on the task and I take a shaky breath. Because I had not just implied that my familiar likes him - and by extension, I might like him - and he definitely had not picked up on it. Definitely not.

“Jesus christ, you weren’t joking about this thing,” Dan’s clearly moved on, which is a relief, because I don’t think I can have that conversation just yet. I’m surprised I actually said what I said, although I hadn’t technically even said anything. I cough out a laugh that I hope is convincing.

“Yeah, pretty cool, right?” I accept the plates when he hands them over, glad to have several things to do now that the food’s finished. Eating and packing up and walking again. Not that he seems to need much practice anymore.

“It’s not the simplest spell, but yeah, you could do it.” The way his eyes light up, the way he bites his lip against a too-enthusiastic smile, it makes my chest feel light and fuzzy - that’s because of me, sort of. Really, it’s because of him and his witchcraft, but it’s exciting to play a part in it, to be the one who gets to introduce him to all the amazing things about being a witch.

They aren’t all amazing, though...there’ll always be the drawbacks: the people who are so ready to judge and hate us just for existing, the people who are exactly the opposite - obsessed with us. And not every witch is like me and PJ, or even like Beatrice, some are just...awful. Horrible and malicious and out to do more harm than good.

“So you’ll teach me, then? When we get back?” Dan’s bright, enthusiastic tone brings me out of my head, and I find my smile ends up being pretty genuine in spite of the dark direction my thoughts decided to go.

“Yeah, of course, just-” I exhale a bit more sharply than I intend to, and Dan frowns. “No, it’s not anything bad, we’ll just have to head into town for a few things.” Beatrice’s shop, fantastic. Even though she isn’t the worst kind of witch out there, she’s still frustrating to deal with. And I’ve no doubt Dan will insist on tagging along - which he should, if he’s going to learn everything about being a witch, but I don’t have to be happy about forcing him into meeting her.

“Oh, right,” Dan says around a bite - his frown gives me pause until I realize he’s probably remembering our last trip to town and how poorly that had gone. For a moment, I debate explaining, but he’s shoving more food in his mouth, and that looks like a much better idea; I nod and shrug and do the same.

We both end up finishing quickly, which is probably for the best so we can get on our way - it feels like it’s been a long morning, though that may have more to do with all the events. I still can’t believe Dan didn’t wake me when he noticed I’d somehow wrapped myself around him in the middle of the night.

Really, it was completely unintentional, but my subconscious must’ve decided I wanted to and I’d just woken up that way. And Dan hadn’t tried to pull away - he was definitely awake, with how fast he’d been breathing, but if he’d been okay with it…
Suffice to say I’ve been in an excellent mood all morning, and a part of me wants to stay in this little clearing and exist in this in-between time for a while longer, but we should probably head out sooner rather than later or it’ll be dark by the time we make it to PJ’s. And I’d rather avoid putting Dan in any more situations where his emotions get too intense.

“Do you want me to carry the backpack today?” Dan asks just as I’m shoving the last blanket in and zipping it shut. When I glance up, he’s got a hand stuck out like he’s ready to take it, so I decide to just go with it - it seems he likes having something to do, anyway. And I can always take it back later, if he’s tired. *If he’s not too stubborn to let me.* Something tells me he’d be too proud to admit exhaustion.

“Sure,” I hand it over, and he shoulders it. “Just let me know if you need a break.” As soon as the words have left my mouth, I know it’s pointless - he scoffs and rolls his eyes, then sets off toward the trail. Mellix seems to have already disappeared, likely off to scout ahead, so I just shake my head and follow.

Dan’s focused on floating his ‘lucky’ pebble over his hand, so we walk in relative silence, the only real sounds the crunch of dirt and leaves under our feet and the rustling of branches with each light breeze; the whole atmosphere gives off a vibe like it’s meant to be calming, but I can already feel the undercurrent of energy as we get closer to PJ’s first ward - *he really doesn’t like to be bothered.*

“So there are some...*things* you should probably know, before we get to Peej’s,” I announce, and my voice sounds a bit too loud in the wake of the quiet. Dan lets his rock fall back to his palm, then waits for a moment as I catch up.

“‘Some things’...” he repeats, brows furrowed as he turns toward me. The pebble gets shoved into his pocket, and he leaves his hand there as we continue on. “What am I about to walk into?” I can hear the exasperation, the heavy breath he’s waiting to sigh.

“It’s not- no, nothing *bad* or anything, just...draining?” I offer, the closest word I can think of to the energy void PJ uses to help protect himself. To be fair, as a seer, he’s often bombarded by people hoping for a glimpse of their future, or hoping to use his witchcraft for their own gains - he has to be cautious.

“Am I going to like...pass out or something?” Now his steps slow, and I tip my head back. *I’m doing a horrible job explaining...*

“No, it’s not like that, it’s...well, if you weren’t a witch, you might?” I don’t know if he’d understand the intricacies of how this particular ward works - I’m not sure I fully understand it myself - but I need to at least show he has nothing to really worry about. “And it’ll be fine once we’re inside his house,” I tack on as an afterthought - because it wouldn’t make much sense to have an energy void in your own home.

“Okay?” He says it like a question, voice going higher at the end, and his hand fidgets in his pocket as we walk. Already, I’m starting to feel a bit on edge, but I know it’s not anything to do with *me.* Probably.

“It’ll be fine, don’t worry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” I shake my head, hoping to get back to the calm light feeling we’d had when we set off, but I’m starting to feel like we left that back in the clearing.

“I’m *not* scared,” he grumbles, which I’ve noticed is his go-to reaction when he’s nervous, so I try not to push it. *We don’t need him lighting the forest on fire.* Although his control since we set off has improved remarkably, so maybe it’s not anything to be concerned about. *Probably not, right?*
“Right, didn’t mean you were,” I decide agreeing is probably the best option, just in case, and we fall into a much less comfortable silence than we’d been in before. And just in time, as I can feel the tension in the air - well, the tension related to PJ’s ward, although the tension between Dan and I is also pretty noticeable.

“Okay, this’ll probably make your head hurt for a bit, sort of like a headache?” I push right through the invisible barrier, wincing as the dull throb settles in the back of my head, and glance over to make sure Dan’s alright.

He squeezes his eyes shut, face scrunching up against what I’m aware is a very uncomfortable sensation to sort of hit you suddenly like it does. His feet pause mid-step, then he’s stumbling forward, and I’m about to reach out to catch him when he catches himself, hands resting heavily on his knees.

“Well shit, that fucking sucked,” he grimaces, blowing out a deep breath, and I offer a sort of smile. “Is that it, then?” He asks as he straightens up; the slight frown doesn’t leave his face, though.

“Mostly, yeah, although there’s a second ward farther in that Mellix can’t pass. That one won’t really feel like much to us, though, it’s mostly to prevent animals from getting in.” He nods at this, then glances ahead of us on the path - the wolf in question is nowhere to be found, probably already waiting up near the second barrier.

“We should head off, though,” I suggest, and he nods. As we walk, I notice him dig back into his pocket and pull out the pebble. “Probably not the best idea to practice, actually,” I realize a moment too late that my hand has a mind of its own, and my fingers land gently on his wrist as he turns his palm up to set the rock to floating again.

If he’s affected by my hand on him, he doesn’t show it - or maybe it’s just hidden under the layer of discomfort sitting on the surface of his expression, but it’s hard to say for sure.

“Why- oh, the ward?” I nod, about to attempt to offer some kind of explanation, but he just shrugs and shoves his hand back in his pocket. It’s not til it’s disappeared that I realize my own hand is still stretched out toward him. I pull it back quickly, and bury it in my own pocket for good measure.

We’re both silent until we reach the second ward, and the giant wolf thumping his tail on the hard-packed dirt as he waits for us.
It’s an odd feeling, not being able to do no, not magic, witchcraft. But either way, now that I’m being told not to, I’m strangely conscious of my desire to practice. And also of the dull ache at the back of my neck, which is a continuous reminder that I shouldn’t practice.

“Thanks, Mellix, we should be back soon. I’ll let you know,” Phil grins at the wolf as we approach; I find I’m not so bothered by him anymore, seeing as he’s clearly just a giant, overgrown puppy. And I can easily distract him from any possible intent to eat me by flinging a branch in some direction or other.

“Thanks,” I offer him a quick scratch on his head as we pass; whatever we walk through next - the ward that’s keeping Mellix out - doesn’t set my head to spinning the way the first one had, for which I’m very fucking grateful. Leave it to Phil to say I won’t pass out and I go and nearly do anyway…

“I still can’t practice?” I ask aloud, even though I can feel that the pressure in my head hasn’t lifted. And there’s no house in sight. Phil actually smirks at me, which feels a bit unfair.

“You could, but…” he trails off with a shrug. I’m not exactly sure what to make of it, so I just frown and watch the dirt path disappear under my feet as we walk. The headache isn’t even that bad, I’ve had far worse…I’m tempted to pull my pebble out and practice just to spite him, just because he thinks I shouldn’t, but I’m also not stupid enough to think I know more about witchcraft or PJ’s wards than Phil does.

I’m still really damn tempted, though.

“We should be passing the inner ward right about-” Phil starts, and that’s when I see it: a towering structure that looks a hell of a lot more like a Picasso than a house, and it just fucking blinks into view out of nowhere. I freeze in my tracks, trying to digest the sudden appearance of a whole damn building - let alone the colors, the shapes of the building - so it takes a moment to register the fact that the ache in my skull has entirely disappeared.

It’s almost completely replaced by an ache in my eyes, which are trying very hard to absorb whatever nonsense is going on in front of me - for lack of a better word, the thing is a complete clusterfuck.

“Come on, he’s expecting us now that we’re in,” Phil’s about the only semi-normal thing I can focus on, so I focus hard, staring at the back of his head as he sets off toward the house. Toward the front door, I assume, though I’m not sure which bright patch of wall is meant to be a door. Maybe we just phase through the damn side or something…

I finally convince my feet to follow after a few deep, calming breaths, then I’m right behind Phil as he knocks on a rather uneventful-looking trapezoid of brown wood on the exterior wall - remarkable only because it’s so unremarkable.

Before I have time to even begin processing the bits of the house I can see, a giant hole just opens up in the wall like a camera aperture and Phil walks on in like it’s the most regular thing in the whole damn world. Maybe to him, it is…I, on the other hand, have to gape at it for a few more seconds before stumbling forward and through - because it’d just be my luck to have the thing close on me and pop my damn head off while I’m in the middle.
The exterior should’ve been a fair warning for what I might expect inside, but I don’t think my
brain has quite caught up yet. It might as well still be stuck at the second ward with Mellix, for all
it’s helping me now.

“Phil!” An enthusiastic voice shouts from across the space - something like a lounge, if I had to
guess, with seating around the edges and a table in the middle, along with all manner of strange
objects I’m simultaneously terrified of and compelled to touch.

“Peej, it’s been ages,” once again, I focus on Phil - the least strange object in the room - as he
embraces a guy who honestly looks about our age. There’s a stupid twinge of jealousy that refuses
to go away, even after they’ve let go.

It disappears real fucking quick when they both turn to me, though.

“And you must be Dan,” PJ says - because who else would it be? - and I manage a nod. He doesn’t
look any more like a witch than Phil had, though I’m not sure why I expected he would - maybe the eclectic taste in architecture and home decorating? “Pleasure,” he sticks his hand out as he
approaches, and I offer a tight smile as I take it.

Fortunately, he doesn’t hold my grip long; even though nothing’s really happened since we arrived
ten seconds ago, there’s a tug in my chest begging me to run and hide behind Phil. Something
about that sense of normalcy I feel around him, that I’ve come to feel over the past few days - well,
as normal as my situation could possibly be - is calming.

“Right, well, let’s just get down to it then, shall we?” PJ claps his hands together, a bright grin on
his face that almost makes him look manic, like there’s a spark of something not quite right in his
eyes. But a quick glance at Phil tells me he’s entirely unbothered - grinning near as bright as PJ is -
so I figure it’s best to just go along with it. Phil wouldn’t put me in danger or anything, right?

“Get down to…” I trail off, now fully staring over at Phil with the hopes of getting some kind of
clarification. But he’s focused on PJ, who’s focused on several tea cups that have definitely just
appeared on the table. And the large teapot, which releases billows of steam as he pours. I’m not
even sure what to begin to think at this point - are we drinking spelled tea or something? Am I
about to have some Luke Skywalker/Yoda Jedi training moment? With tea, somehow? I have no
bloody clue.

“Dan,” PJ holds out a cup, which I take purely on instinct. I don’t sip first - even though Phil didn’t
drug me when I first showed up at his house, something about being in this place sets me on edge.
“And Phil,” he hands the next cup to Phil, and he takes it with a smile. I decide whatever he does,
I’ll just follow his lead - and I notice he doesn’t take a drink yet. Could just be out of politeness,
though.

It’s not til PJ’s lifting his own cup that Phil does the same, so I move to follow. Apparently, he’s
decided on green tea, which tastes...okay, I guess. I’m still on edge, though, glancing back and
forth between Phil and PJ; the latter has shut his eyes, slurping the tea in the worst possible way,
while Phil’s taking quieter, more polite sips.

After what feels like a literal solid minute of drinking tea, PJ pulls his cup away from his lips and
lets out a very satisfied breath, then looks between Phil and I with an expectant smile. My own eyes
go wide, hoping Phil will offer some insight as to what exactly we’re meant to be doing now.

“Well!” PJ practically shouts, and I whip my head back to find his cup’s disappeared and he’s
clapping his hands together again. “Shall we? Phil, a word?” I just blink at him, then at Phil, and
not for the first time since we’ve arrived I wonder if there’s something going on that I’m being
“Peej, you’re scaring him, can we skip the-” he cuts his sentence short, wiggling his fingers at PJ, who just breaks into a bout of laughter. I frown at Phil’s implication, because I am not scared, just...uncomfortable. And a little lost.

“Right, right, fine,” he turns to me. “Dan, you’re a witch, big surprise as I’m sure Phil’s done an excellent job of teaching you so far. In fact-” he grins at me, taps his temple with a finger, “I know he’s done a great job.” I shrug, then nod. He has, and he’s been particularly useful in the, uh, discovery of my witchcraft as well...I try not to think on that too much. Now is not the time.

“Ideally, you keep working with Phil, you’ll be in good hands,” there’s an exceptionally audible pause here, and I don’t miss the way PJ glances at Phil. I do, however, miss the meaning behind that glance. If Phil understands, he doesn’t acknowledge it, though, and I’m dragged off into the next sentence before I can properly dissect the look.

“Or you don’t,” PJ shrugs, then wanders over to a cabinet and pulls open a drawer. With a flourish, he tugs out a necklace - just a chain with a pendant hanging from it, really - and holds it out in my direction. “In which case, we’d prefer you wear this.” I stare at the thing: it’s not ugly, just a bit obnoxious, as the huge oval-shaped stone hanging from it is sort of imposing and looks rather heavy.

“Because…” Clearly there’s a reason, but it seems I have to actually ask for things to be explained to me. I much prefer Phil’s method of teaching, where the explaining comes first.

“Because we can’t have an untrained witch wandering out there, causing trouble.” He doesn’t look mad, his face the picture of calm collectedness, but I can feel some kind of tension in the air that doesn’t settle well in my stomach. “You’ve seen how people can be about witches, and that’s after centuries of exercising careful control and caution.” His brows quirk up and his lip curls in a smirk, one directed at Phil, who just grins back and huffs out a breath of laughter.

“Alliteration,” Phil clarifies, and I realize my brows have scrunched down. I nod and smooth them out.

“Makes sense,” I shrug, “but the pendant?” I point at the offending item, which he’d not actually explained the purpose of. Again.

“Ah, tamps down your witchcraft. Entirely voluntary, you have choices,” he dangles the necklace a bit closer, but his brows lift, and it takes a moment to realize why. He’s a bloody seer, he doesn’t even need to ask.

Instead of a response, I roll my eyes; PJ grins and the pendant disappears in a small puff of smoke, which draws my attention in spite of my attempted nonchalance. Phil, on the other hand, seems out of the loop for once.

“Well I’m not about to give up the best fucking thing that ever happened to me, am I?” I point out, and his grin puts the sun to shame. It’s not til I’ve had a few seconds to consider my words that I notice just how meaningful they might sound, and my cheeks flush with heat.

“Now that we’ve got that sorted, though I could’ve told you how it’d play out,” he smirks at Phil, green eyes sparkling behind his glasses.

“You wouldn’t, though,” Phil quips back instantly, and there’s a squirming in my stomach at being left out of this banter - they’ve clearly been friends for awhile, and I’m the outsider here.
“Precisely! But I do need to have a chat, if you’re satisfied now we’ve done all this?” He waves a hand around the lounge, and I’m still trying to figure out what exactly the tea was for when Phil gestures at a doorway and the two head through. So was it spelled tea, then?

I don’t feel any different, aside from a bit more uncomfortable and a lot warmer, but surely we wouldn’t have hiked an entire day and a half out here just for some tea, right?

“He doesn’t- I mean, well, he-”

I can just barely make out Phil’s voice - though I swear I’m not listening for it - as it gets a bit louder, a bit higher pitched. And against all my better judgment, or what little there is, I shuffle a bit closer to the doorway.

From what I can see, it leads to a kitchen, which looks significantly less unusual than the lounge - I wonder, briefly, if the whole ‘quirky guy’ facade is exactly that: a facade, meant to unsettle visitors.

“Yeah, yeah, I know;” PJ’s voice sounds louder, now that I’m a bit closer. I don’t dare go fully in view of the doorway, though. “He already told you, I know,” he chuckles. “And what have you done?”

“Well, that’s- I mean, I haven’t-” Phil’s quieter now, clearly more aware of his volume than he’d been a minute ago. “I don’t want to- I mean-”

“And what happens if you wait, what if he never brings it up again, hm?”

“I don’t want to put Dan in an awkward position, what if he changed his mind, or-” I suck in a breath at my name, although I’m not sure why I’m all that shocked they’re talking about me. Why else would they make a point of leaving to talk?

“Did he change his mind, though?” PJ sounds on the edge of laughter, the ‘are you that blind’ kind, and my curiosity doubles. Is he teasing Phil over something? Given all the compromising positions Phil’s found me in, I could use some ammo. I lean against the wall, as if that extra two centimeters will somehow improve my hearing so much more.

“I-” a sigh, “no, I’m pretty sure he still likes me,” and now my eyes go wide, and it’s all I can do to stay on my feet. Unaware of my sudden internal implosion, the conversation actually continues, though I’m shocked it’s able to filter in through my ears and past the hammering of my heartbeat. Oh my god, how did he-

“I mean, I know he said it, but I thought maybe just because he got drunk-” I have to clamp a hand over my mouth to stop the gasp threatening to give away my position. Shit shit shit, of course it’s the one damn night I can’t remember, and I had to go and tell him my stupid fucking feelings…

“And you feel the same, right?” PJ’s talking again, though I feel like I can’t even hear him. I do, however, hear Phil’s answer quite clearly.

“Well, yeah…” PJ barks out a laugh at the words, then there’s a shuffling of feet and I pull myself together long enough to scramble back to the center of the room; at the last moment, I do my best to rearrange my bewildered expression into something I hope looks natural and disinterested.

I cannot believe Phil knew and didn’t say anything.

I can’t believe Phil likes me back.
Phil

I can’t believe PJ’s trying to talk me into acting on my feelings. Honestly, it’s like he doesn’t know me at all.

It’s one thing to maybe do something if Dan actually admits he likes me - while sober - but another completely not to have the reassurance that he’s in the same boat I am. I’m still glaring at PJ’s back as we head out of the kitchen and into the lounge. Dan’s just stood in the same spot, sort of frowning at the carpet, but his head whips up when we enter. His cheeks look like they could be a bit flushed, but it’s hard to tell with the neon red glow from the various light fixtures around the room. PJ has interesting taste.

“Well, Phil, thank you for that enlightening chat,” he enthuses over his shoulder at me, and I offer a tight grin back at him. I might have a few choice words for PJ if Dan weren’t standing right here - but then, if he weren’t, this visit would be completely different. “Now, Dan, we were just discussing dinner options, do you fancy seafood?” He tilts his head, and Dan’s lips twist into something unreadable before smoothing out.

“I’m not a huge fan, but I’m not picky,” he shrugs, and PJ just grins at him.

“I know,” he barks out a laugh, but Dan doesn’t seem all that caught off guard by the joke - PJ’s just like that, sometimes. “Sushi, though?” He asks as if he needs an answer. Dan’s brows lift, then he nods, and PJ whirs around and waves a hand over his shoulder, indicating we should join him. “Sushi it is!” He announces as we follow him back into the kitchen.

I shoot Dan a quick glance as we walk, but he’s staring at his feet like they’re the most interesting things on the planet, which is absurd since we’re stood in PJ’s house: the place is a literal museum of intriguing and fascinating objects, and he’s always collected a few more each time I visit.

“You alright?” I ask, voice barely above a whisper - PJ will know we’re talking, but I’m doing it more for Dan’s comfort anyway. We follow PJ over to the table and I pull out a chair for Dan, though I’m still concerned by his lack of acknowledgment... is he mad I left him alone? I suppose I’d be bothered if it were me...

I’m about to apologize when he turns and gives me a small, soft smile - I’d expected a tight one, one that screamed to get him out as soon as possible, so this is a welcome surprise. I return it, as he sits, and I have no time to think about the interaction because PJ’s demanding our attention again.

“Alright, for Dan, some California rolls and sake nigiri, Phil, your usual tempura vegetarian rolls and spicy tuna rolls.” Because he’s dramatic like that, the food materializes in a puff of smoke on plates before us, along with a set of chopsticks. In the middle of the table, small dishes of soy sauce, wasabi, and ginger appear. I roll my eyes at PJ, who’s just grinning - though he’s focused on Dan.

Who’s jaw has pretty much come unhinged, until he notices us both staring and must have the common sense to pick it up off the table and pop it back into place; the pink blush that creeps up his cheeks matches the salmon on his plate.

“He just transported them from the fridge,” I shake my head, hoping my words will help eliminate all the mystery behind the witchcraft. “It’s an easy spell,” I glance over to find PJ stifling a giggle by way of shoving a bite in his mouth. Dan clears his throat, and I turn back to find him doing the same.
We eat mostly in silence, aside from Dan politely thanking PJ for the meal and telling him it’s delicious.

“Thanks, got it direct from Japan this morning,” he laughs at the way Dan’s eyes go wide, though Dan’s at least got enough control not to do much more than that. Because I’m already looking at him, I watch him stick another piece of sushi in his mouth - it shouldn’t be anything, but I’m suddenly fascinated with the way his fingers handle the chopsticks, surprisingly masterful, and the way his full lips stretch wide to accommodate the bite.

And, because this is absolutely the worst possible time for it, heat pools in my stomach and my cock twitches in my pants - I can’t help but imagine his lips somewhere else, somewhere much more delicious.

“So, Phil, I should’ve mentioned earlier,” PJ waves his chopsticks at me, “Sophie’s got the entire second guest room under construction, you’ll both be fine in your usual guest room, right? With the one bed?” I manage to tear my gaze away from Dan at the word ‘bed’, but only because the context of PJ’s question has finally hits me. At which point, my reaction is to stall by shoving a veggie tempura roll in my mouth. PJ’s just smirking at me, and I don’t even dare to glance over at Dan - surely, he’s bright red and-

“That should be fine, thanks PJ. And thank you for letting us stay, it’ll be nice to sleep on an actual bed,” Dan’s voice comes across so clearly that I have to immediately dismiss the idea that I’ve just imagined it, and I end up nearly choking on my sushi. By the time I’ve finished swallowing - and coughing a bit - PJ seems to be holding back a laugh, and I tell my muscles that they absolutely need to turn my head toward Dan. I have to know what he looks like right now…

Which is...utterly unphased. Maybe his cheeks are a little pink, if I’m looking for it. But otherwise, he’s just giving PJ a small smile that matches his words perfectly: appreciative, maybe a little sarcastic. Finally, after what feels like years, he turns to me. I’m not really aware enough of my own expressions to know what I look like, but he must see something there, because his lips tug down just slightly and his brows scrunch in a way I really don’t like.

“Right! Uh, that’ll be, yeah,” I can’t even look away from Dan to stutter out my answer - not even when PJ snorts out a laugh that it sounds like he’s tried to cover - because those lips that had me so distracted have parted just slightly. I wonder if Dan’s about to speak, but then his mouth curls up in a smirk that accentuates the dimple in his cheek for a second; just as quickly as it’d appeared, it’s gone, and he’s turned back to his plate to stick his last piece of sushi in his mouth.

“Well, great, then!” PJ’s voice startles me from whatever fantasy I’d definitely been about to fall into, and I clear my throat as I look back over. “In that case, I’ll let you get settled, I’m meant to be out meeting with the woman in a bit anyway.” His plate disappears before him - no smoke, this time - and he does the same. This, it seems, is enough to impress Dan. Frankly, even though I have no real reason, I’ve always been a bit jealous of PJ’s transportation skills.

“Did he just-” Dan breaks off mid-sentence as PJ pops back into existence.

“I did, and you could, but not just yet.” He stays just long enough to smirk at us both and offer Dan a wink, then he’s gone again.

“He’s had a lot of practice,” I supply, assuming that Dan’s about to ask when exactly he can learn to do something like that. He turns toward me just as I turn to him, so we end up locking eyes for a second that feels like an hour before I dip my head to find anything else to stare at. I’m torn between wanting to ask if it’s really alright to sleep in the same room - the same bed - and wanting to explain about the transport spells. Or literally anything but our sleeping arrangements for the
evening.

*Although we did technically sleep together last night...* in spite of myself, my thoughts drift off, and I decide that it might not be so bad if that’s what Dan actually wants. *Maybe he’s coming around to admitting he likes me again...*

“Like...a year’s worth of practice, or...?” Dan’s voice pulls me back, and I’m almost disappointed we haven’t gone down the single-bed-two-of-us route. But I have no trouble pushing a smile to my face. Especially because I’m pretty sure I can guess his reaction to my answer.

“More like a thousand years’ worth,” I chuckle, because his brows have lifted high on his forehead and there’s a wooden clanking sound that says I’d see his chopsticks have dropped onto his plate if I could be bothered to look away from his open mouth. His pink lips. His wide brown eyes. After a long moment, he manages to smooth everything out. For about a second.

“Okay, what the hell do I have to do to look like that in a thousand years?” He’s shaking his head, a small smirk showing he’s clearly proud of his joke, but the words send a spike of jealousy through my chest. *Don’t be silly, he doesn’t suddenly like PJ, he’s just barely met him.* Sure, PJ’s objectively attractive in a sort of wild, messy way, but- *I mean, he hasn’t changed his mind about me, right?*

There’s a too-long pause in the air, and I realize we’ve gone well past the point where I could respond with something funny.

“That...was that a joke? You weren’t serious, were you?” Dan’s gaze flicks to PJ’s empty chair, then back to me, and my lack of response is enough to send him into a panic.

“Jesus fucking christ, he’s a thousand? What the- how’d, I mean, do all-” his mouth opens and closes like he’s trying to figure out what to say, but I’m more focused on the way he’s started breathing fast, how he’s leaned back in the chair to let his eyes drift up to the ceiling.

“Dan, Dan, hold on, it’s-” I start, but I can already tell that won’t help. Not on its own. I reach for one of his hands, the one gripping the side of his chair until his knuckles have turned white, and pull it gently. My touch must be enough to surprise him, because his hand comes away easily, and I try not to think too hard before wrapping mine entirely around it and squeezing.

By the time I look up, he’s gone completely still, though I can still hear his shallow breaths in the sudden silence.

“It’s okay, you’re not going to just live to be a thousand, there’s...” I sigh, closing my eyes for a moment. “It’s complicated,” I hope that’s enough explanation for now, because a proper one would take a while, and it’s not exactly my story to tell. “But no, you might live longer than most people, but you’re still basically...uh, human?” It’s not entirely true, but for the purposes of living to be thousands of years old, it’s close enough.

Fortunately, something I’ve said or done must be helping, because his eyes have relaxed a bit and he no longer looks like someone’s just pointed a gun at him. *Or would that be the inverse of a gun, something that makes you live forever instead of taking your life?*

“Uhm, I uh, o-okay?” He finally stutters out. I only realize I’ve not let go of his hand when it squeezes mine once, and I expect that to be the end of it. I expect him to drop it and drop the subject and maybe just ask about one of PJ’s eclectic collectibles or ‘what’s next’ or anything else.

Except the moment doesn’t end, he doesn’t let go, and I don’t either - *because what if he still needs...*
the comfort? I tell myself, but I’m not really convinced. Heat crawls up from my stomach up through my chest and to my cheeks, but I’m more focused on the source of warmth in my hand, the one growing warmer by the second - it’s not til I feel like I’ve picked up a too-hot cup of coffee that I pull away, and even then, I’d almost wanted to keep holding on.

“Sorry,” Dan mumbles an apology, but his gaze is nearly as hot as his hand had been and I can’t look away from it any more than I’d been able to take my hand from his - his look burns in an entirely different way.

“I’m uh, our, uh, the room?” I stutter out, shoving back in my chair and rushing to stand - I’m a coward, so much for trying to get Dan to admit his feelings...I can’t even face the idea that he might actually like me - assuming he hasn’t gone and decided to fall for PJ instead; that silly jealousy squirms in my stomach alongside the nerves about my own feelings. 

Oh my god, what am I supposed to do if he actually does say he’s into me again? Because I’d been so articulate the last time, hadn’t I? I really haven’t put any thought into this, not at all, and who knows what PJ has in mind to set us up. Although, we’ll be leaving in the morning, so he hasn’t got much time...

“Sure, the bedroom,” Dan nods, far too calmly, and stands. Right, the bedroom. I’m willing to bet good money he just spelled the second guest room so we can’t get in, I’ve never known Sophie to be big on home improvement projects. I don’t move for a long moment, silently cursing PJ for his desire to play matchmaker, when Dan interrupts my internal ranting with a hand on my arm.

Okay, fine, I can hardly be mad if this actually works out...

“So, the bedroom?” Dan’s voice has gone as soft as his touch, and I can’t decide if his hooded gaze is wishful thinking or if it’s actually happening. I’m not sure that any of this is actually happening, or if it’s all a hallucination. Wouldn’t be the first time PJ slipped something into the tea. But I’d checked before taking a sip - no spells.

Which means the fingers trailing lightly down my arm are very much connected to Dan, who’s still staring at me, still waiting, and then he goes and licks his lips, and I think my knees go weak. I’d probably fall right then if I hadn’t clearly fallen for him the first moment I laid eyes on him.

Which sounds sort of cliche, but he had been standing naked right in front of me. And doesn’t that start to conjure up all kinds of images. Seriously, did PJ add something to the sushi, then? I hadn’t thought to check, what with his usual method of spell-delivery being his green tea, but now I’m starting to worry.

Surely Dan’s just affected in some way, right? I stumble backward, away from his touch - his frown, brief but definitely there, seems pretty real.

“This, uh, this way,” I wave an arm toward the back staircase - far less imposing than the one in the lounge, which juts outside the building and requires more witchcraft to climb than most regular stairs require physical effort, so I tend to avoid them. Before I can spend too long worrying about Dan’s reaction, I spin on a heel and head toward the plain wooden stairs. The soft sound of footsteps on the floor behind me is enough confirmation that Dan’s following, and we wind our way up the spiral stairs to the next floor.

It’s a bit odd - I’ve been in this house a hundred times, but everything feels off and echoey and different with someone trailing right behind me. ‘Someone’, as if that’s all Dan really is: just an ordinary person, nobody special. Like he’s not become the center of my entire world in a matter of days.
“Anyway, here,” I say, even though we haven’t been talking and there’s nowhere for me to redirect the conversation from. I push open a rather unassuming door - unassuming by PJ’s standards, which means a deep purple with gold accents around the edges - into a similarly themed room. I step inside to hold the door for Dan and to observe him for a moment: he’s clearly engrossed in taking in the new surroundings, which is ultimately fair, as they’re a far cry from the bright eccentricity of the lounge downstairs.

I follow his gaze from the plush off-black carpets around to the footboard of the mahogany bed, across the purple-and-gold duvet, then up to the headboard and the tall posts carved to look like miniature replicas of the trees the wood came from. The highest branches reach up to the ceiling, which has been painted to mimic a sky perpetually caught at dusk: hues of deep blueish purple fade across the room to end on the other side in orange-gold, like the sun’s just past the wall in the other room. Actually, if I remember the other guest room correctly, I think it actually is.

When Dan’s eyes drop, they land on me, and I’m suddenly no longer thinking much about the design choices in the other guest room; all concepts of purple and gold and bright suns and blue skies fall from my head, replaced with warm browns like hot chocolate and soft reds and pinks that have no right looking so damn pretty. He has no right looking so damn pretty, not after walking through the forest for two days, not after spending hours on end practicing witchcraft and draining his energy, not after sleeping on the rough ground and waking up with the dawn.

“The bed is really comfortable,” is all I manage to say, somehow - a part of me begs my brain to say any of the things I just thought, to just say fuck it all and tell him what I really think, tell him how I actually feel, but there’s a pang in my chest and I’m far too terrified for that. After he says it, he has to say it first. While sober.

“Is it?” Dan still hasn’t looked away from me, and he holds my gaze for a long moment, but he finally breaks eye contact long enough to turn toward the bed. With the tension in the air, whatever tension it is, I sort of expect him to lay down on it, to fix me with a look that sets me on fire, but that might just be wishful thinking.

And he doesn’t, either. His steps toward it are slow and careful, then - without warning - he flops down face-first into the duvet and doesn’t move. And doesn’t move.

And still doesn’t move.

“Dan, are you-” I’m cut off by a long groan, one that my body wants to interpret one way and my brain insists should be interpreted in another. I try to ignore both in favor of listening to Dan.

“It’s so fucking comfortable, jesus.” The fabric muffles his speech, but I can hear clearly enough, and I cough out a laugh at the unexpected turn in conversation. Admittedly, it’s also a bit due to relief as well - I had absolutely no idea where things were going before.

“Well, coming?” Dan’s voice sounds louder now - strange, because his words set my heart to racing and I’m surprised I can hear anything with the blood rushing in my ears - and I stumble forward a step completely on instinct. Or something else.

This is going to be quite a night.
Dan

Does it really count as teasing if I know he wants it?

Or, I guess, I know he likes me, but that doesn’t mean he necessarily wants anything. Which is sort of why I’d just gone and flopped on the bed - although, I’m entirely serious, it’s really fucking comfortable. I have no intention of moving anytime soon.

I’d maybe laid it on a bit thick with the flirting, but he probably deserves it if he knew how I felt and didn’t say anything. Even though he felt the same. Feels the same. I think. I assume. Oh god, what if he’d just meant he liked me as a friend?

I’m very suddenly regretting asking him if he’d planned on joining me. Although, I guess it’d have to happen eventually, unless one of us was keen on sleeping on the floor. After last night, I’m doubting it. I’m sure as hell not giving up the first chance for a proper bed since I got kicked out of town.

I really hope Phil doesn’t want to give it up either. Except now I’m certain I’ve misread something. He isn’t exactly acting like he likes me. Like he wants anything. Jesus, I’ve just gone and made a complete ass of myself, haven’t I?

Except there are footsteps, and then there’s a dip beside me on the bed, and I suck in a lungful of duvet before turning my head just a bit - Phil’s sat down, and I’m met with an eyeful of his arm and his side. Without properly thinking, I reach out, intent on touching him - really, I just mean to trail my fingers across his skin like I had earlier, like I’ve sort of wanted to for a while now.

A hand catches mine mid-air, stops me entirely, and I turn my head just a bit farther, just until I can see Phil’s face.

He’s staring down at me, and I can’t interpret his expression: wide eyes that could mean anything from excitement to anger to confusion or something in between, lips pressed into a line that might spell out impatience for my constant come-ons or...well, another kind of impatience.

I really hope I’m not wrong. I really hope this is something, because if it isn’t, I might actually die of embarrassment. No need to worry about living for a thousand years when I’ll just internally combust out of mortification right here on this bed...

I can feel heat pricking my skin already, crawling up my neck to my cheeks and surely leaving pink in its wake. The warmth makes it all the way out to my fingertips, to the spot they’re resting in Phil’s grasp, before I realize I’m doing it again.

“Sorry,” I mumble, burying my face back in the duvet - apparently, I’m absolutely shit at this control thing. And to think, I’d been so sure I was getting the hang of it with all the levitation stuff earlier. I’m just tugging my hand from Phil’s - no need to drag him into this little personal bonfire with me - when his grip tightens.

“Don’t apologize,” his voice sounds low and husky and fuck that’s not helping in the slightest. I glare into the purply blackness of the bed with the hopes of getting myself under control before I end up burning Phil’s hand off - although, there’s not any actual fire, so I wonder if I shouldn’t just...see what happens.

“Seriously, Dan, don’t apologize. You’re just learning, control doesn’t happen overnight.” His tone hasn’t changed, and I’m objectively aware that he’s trying to turn this into a teaching moment, but I
really can’t concentrate; my brain keeps jumping to him saying other things, loads of other things, with that voice - things I shouldn’t be thinking about because he clearly doesn’t want me thinking about them right now. I don’t know if he ever wants that. I don’t know what he wants.

“What do you want?” I ask, because how else am I meant to get an answer? I suddenly feel dumb for not having asked sooner. Why hadn’t I? Then I’d know, at least.

“I’m- I mean, I want you to learn, I guess? I just don’t want you to be ashamed.”

“No, no,” I shift so I’m laid entirely sideways and prop my head up on my hand. My free hand, as the other’s still being held captive by Phil. Who’s frowning down at me, and I blink.

“No, that’s not what I meant. I meant what do you want,” I tilt my head and lift my eyebrows, hoping to convey what I want. Implication is a lot less embarrassing than outright admission. I’m not sure I blink in the entire time it takes him to respond, as I’m focusing on every single shift of his expression, every slight widening of his eyes, every twitch of his lips, hoping for some kind of sign. For a moment, he just opens his mouth, and fuck if I don’t get shivers just thinking about everything I want that mouth to do to me. Everything I want to do to it.

Heat crackles like electricity up my arms, though it doesn’t seem to affect Phil or his grip on my hand. Or the words that finally leave his lips.

“I’m not sure what you mean, Dan.” His voice has taken an edge that makes me want to curl in on myself, and internal combustion suddenly has a very nice ring to it. That might be a lot less painful than whatever’s happening right now. I squeeze my eyes shut and shove my face back into the duvet.

“You know what I mean,” I argue, because the actual words are right there on the tip of my tongue but have absolutely zero interest in being said. A bit like party guests who can’t take a hint and just leave already.

“Not sure I do, actually.” And now my brows quirk up, which is a bit awkward with the fabric squishing them into my face, but they do. Is he...I turn my head until I can see just the edge of his face, and I swear he’s smirking. That fucker.

“Oh, is that so?” I roll until I’m entirely on my back and use his grip on my hand to pull him forward. I don’t expect much, but he must have absolutely no balance, as he nearly falls flat onto me from just that tug. Our faces end up intoxicatingly close.

For a long, very still, very silent moment, we just breathe. I assume we breathe, or at least Phil does, because warm breaths hit my face, but I’m pretty sure my own lungs have stopped working. And my brain. And my tongue. And all the rest of my muscles, aside from my heart; that’s started racing, maybe to make up for the other nonfunctioning body parts. My eyes have gone wide, frozen as blueish-green ones stare back at me, probably just as wide and definitely just as nonblinking. I notice little streaks of gold - gold, properly, not the pale yellow people usually mean when they say there’s ‘gold’ in someone’s eyes.

Shit, gold is definitely my favorite color. This particular shade of gold, surrounded by oceanic greens and blues and two centimeters from my face and accompanied by pale skin and black hair and pink lips and-

“Yeah,” Phil exhales the word against my skin and his gaze drops to my lips. It definitely, absolutely does, and warmth blossoms in my stomach and sends a wave of heat out from every inch of my skin. I’ve entirely forgotten what we’re talking about, or why the hell we’re even
talking because fuck is he getting closer?

I’m just letting my eyes drift shut, almost more in disbelief than in acceptance that this is actually happening, when he pulls away with a hiss. I try not to let the drop in my stomach bother me too much. Of course that’s not what he wanted, he would’ve said something if he knew how I felt. It takes far too long for me to pry my own eyes open; I’m not sure I want to face the aftermath of an almost-kiss.

Admittedly, I probably should’ve opened them sooner: when I manage it, a billow of white-grey smoke stings my eyes, and I wave a hand in front of my face to clear it. At which point I realize my hand is the source of the smoke, as it’s coated entirely in flame; to say the flailing that takes place for the next few seconds is mortifying would be an understatement.

It’s not til a hand grabs my wrist - just below the line of flickering red and orange - and holds it still that I realize my hand isn’t properly on fire. Well, it is, but it’s not a regular fire. My skin isn’t blistering, it’s just warm. It’s an oddly comforting warmth, too, which is a bit frightening - fire shouldn’t feel comforting, and I’ve never thought myself to be a pyromaniac.

“Dan! Dan, it’s-”

“Right, I know,” I respond before Phil’s even finished, and the flame settles and dissolves a moment later. Those blue-green eyes I’d been admiring earlier now stare at me from behind my own hand, still held aloft by Phil’s firm grip, and shame replaces my momentary rush of adrenaline.

“Oh my god, did I burn you? Are you-” I’m already shifting, grabbing for his free hand with mine. Wouldn’t that just be great, causing him bodily harm and we’ve not even had a proper first date…

The idea of a proper date distracts me for a moment, and a thrill shoots through me; the moment I feel the glow of warmth building up in my stomach, I tamp down on it, pleased to find it stays under control like I asked. Okay, just need to be more wary of it, I can handle that. Hopefully.

“I’m fine, it just surprised me,” Phil’s voice is exceptionally calm given my hand was just on fire, although he’s probably dealt with far worse than a shitty witch who can’t control himself. Well, can’t control himself with his witchcraft. Can’t control himself with his emotions, either, and they’re unfortunately very linked…

Maybe control won’t be as easy as I thought.

“Are you okay?” Phil’s voice breaks through my concern at the same time his grip on my wrist loosens. For a moment, I just watch the way his brows scrunch together, the way his lips - fuck, they’d been so damn close a minute ago, we’d been about to-

“I’m fine,” I lie. Well, physically I’m uninjured. But that moment, whatever it had or hadn’t been, has passed. And I’m not too proud to admit that rejection hurts like a fucking bitch. Well, not to myself at least. Aloud. “I promise,” I wave my hand at him, and he smiles just slightly before releasing me. I have no idea how to say ‘please don’t let go, please come back, please let’s continue that moment and pretend the whole fire thing never happened’ without coming across desperate, so I don’t.

The silence that falls around us crackles with tension, and it isn’t even the good kind.

“Any spells for rewinding time?” I huff out a sardonic laugh and squeeze my eyes shut, then flop backward onto the bed. I don’t actually expect an answer, although I really have no idea what is or
isn’t possible.

“How long?” Phil’s voice sounds close, then the bed shakes as he falls beside me - not touching, but definitely right there. Right fucking there. I hope his attention is elsewhere, that he doesn’t notice me suck in a breath or my muscles go rigid or warmth - the ordinary kind - flush my cheeks.

“Two minutes ago?” I figure that’s safe enough, and I’m feeling a little brave. Just a little, probably due to the adrenaline that’s yet to leave my bloodstream. Two minutes gives me a some wiggle room, if I chicken out. But then, maybe I can be honest, too. Maybe. I try to steady my breathing.

“So, what, before…” he trails off, and I wait in case he’s going to say something first. The beat of silence turns into the drawn-out kind, where we’re clearly both just hesitant and hoping the other will speak.

“Before my hand caught fire,” I deadpan, partly because I’m serious and partly because I don’t want to let on that I’m serious. Phil just hums beside me. Neither of us says anything for awhile.

It’s not the kind of silence that needs breaking, that feels wrong and uncomfortable and enjoys the unease it causes; it’s more the silence that promises that, should you break it, something wonderful might come of it. And fuck if I couldn’t use something wonderful.

“Like, right before,” I finally amend. I still refuse to open my eyes, because the breaking of this silence doesn’t require me to acknowledge my surroundings just yet. Only once Phil’s spoken, I think. Or maybe I’m just being a coward again.

There’s a shifting on the mattress beside me, slow and deliberate, and all I can think is so it was the other kind of silence, then. I resolve to block out any visuals of Phil getting up and leaving - I don’t think my already-bruised ego can handle that blow right now. The expanse of black behind my eyelids seems a lot nicer to stare at.

I wait for the pressure to lift, to tell me Phil’s gone, but it never comes. Just changes, until there’s a warmth hovering over me that I know I’m not causing, and my eyes fly open.

“So, right about like this?” I’m met with a near exact replica of the scene from earlier, a masterpiece of shades of black, of green, blue, and gold, of pink blended to red and back to a pale cream, and I suck in a breath that has my chest expanding to touch Phil’s. Because he didn’t leave, he’s right fucking there.
Phil

I really really hope this is what he meant. Otherwise I’m setting myself up to be absolutely mortified.

Somehow, I’ve not yet completely messed it all up, although I can feel my balance failing when Dan’s chest touches mine. He looks breathtaking below me, cheeks flushed red with warmth that might be his witchcraft but might just be his natural reaction, lips a color to match, and wide brown eyes staring up like I’ve just appeared out of thin air. I could do that, too, just like PJ can, I’m tempted to tell him, even though my method isn’t nearly as effortless. I might have a bit of a jealous streak.

But right now, I definitely have Dan below me, and I’m about a second away from falling on him - not intentionally, but I could probably make it seem suave. Maybe. Or maybe I’ll look like a complete idiot, especially if this isn’t at all what he meant. He still hasn’t said anything.

“Yeah,” the word leaves his lips at just the right time, as I’ve fully lost my balance, so I let myself roll on top of him and lean down to press my lips to his. It’s quick, not quite how I’d been meaning to do it earlier, but my horrible coordination is working against me, so we end up pressed together in a rush.

Although, it’s almost better that way - I can’t back out when gravity takes over. Dan hums against me, a soft sound that vibrates through my lips and into my chest as well, and heat floods through me in a way that makes me wonder if his witchcraft isn’t involved somehow.

For a moment, neither of us moves, my chest pushing him into the mattress and our lips pressed together; then the spell holding us in place breaks, and Dan’s hands find the hem of my shirt and fingers trace along the skin there. His lips move, biting at mine, and it takes a serious amount of control not to let a low whine escape the back of my throat.

I’m quick to return the favor, though, and Dan’s much more vocal: the soft moans and hums he makes against my mouth when my hands drag down his sides leave me embarrassingly desperate, and I shift until I’m fully on top of him, my hips grinding down into his.

And the noises he makes then…

“Phil, Phil, Phil, wait,” Dan’s voice comes out breathy and light as he pushes me back by the shoulders, and I try not to let my disappointment show - whatever it is, I’m okay waiting. I take a few deep breaths in an attempt to clear my muddled brain, then settle my elbows beside his head.

“Are you- I mean, you want, uh, this?” Now he’s quiet, unsure, and his gaze drops from where it’d held mine to a spot on my arm. His fingers tap out a nervous pattern on my hips.

“Do I-” a giggle escapes my throat before I can stop it, which is probably not the best thing that could’ve happened, so I bite down on my tongue in the hopes it’ll subside quickly - the flash of uncertainty in Dan’s eyes, though, that stops me cold.

“Dan,” I scoot down until I’m staring him right in the eyes, “I really really want this, I promise.” His eyes flick between mine and my lips for a few moments, then he’s got a hand around the back of my neck and he’s pulling me down and the kiss feels a bit silly because we’re both grinning but it’s perfect; after a few moments, it turns lazy and slow and comfortable, and we sort of just lose ourselves for a while.
It’s not til the warmth between us turns to proper heat, til Dan’s skin feels like I’ve stepped too close to a fire, that I pull away. When Dan actually whines at me, a breathy sound that I think contains my name, I end up giggling and rolling off him - I think I’m actually sweating, and the air outside our little bubble makes me shiver.

“Phil,” he groans again, louder and more insistent this time. When his hand trails along my chest, heat follows it even through my shirt, and I have to push him away. Which earns me a frown, and I frown right back.

“I don’t want to stop,” I clarify, “but you’re too hot.” Dan’s brow quirks up, as does one side of his mouth, and I shake my head and chuckle. “Not like that. I mean, you are,” I turn my head so I can watch his reaction, which is to look up at the ceiling. “But your skin is literally too hot to touch.” I watch as he lifts a hand in front of his face and flips it around like he’s examining it for physical evidence of the heat.

After a moment, he reaches over and brushes his fingers down my cheek - I expect it to be hot, like he’s trying to prove it to himself, but it’s back to a normal human temperature. Maybe a bit warm, but that’d be expected after...well, after everything that’s just happened. Had that all really just happened?

“Better?” Dan’s voice has gone low and soft, but his eyes spark like there’s still fire behind them.

“Yes, but that- we’re not, no-” I break off when his hand moves farther down, brushing lightly across my chest and stomach and lower and- “No! No, not-” I suck in a breath when his hand traces along the edge of my waistband. “Not until you’re more, uh, under control.” I hope my voice sounds firm, even though my current position is ‘if he wants to, I’ll definitely end up giving in’. Fortunately - well, fortunately for all the flammable items in the room, and for my skin - Dan just sighs and removes his hand. Crosses his arms over his chest. Stares up at the ceiling.

“Back?” I chuckle, and his lips turn down even further. An idea pops into my head, one fueled more by lust than common sense, but I shut it down. Not yet, too soon. We’re one night into whatever this is, I don’t want to rush anything. I don’t want him to regret anything. And I don’t want him losing control - although I’m honestly more concerned for him than for my own safety. Screwing up anything with witchcraft involved has the potential to be really harrowing for the witch.

“Am not,” Dan argues, and all the lightness I’d felt two minutes ago rushes back. Now that he’s quite literally cooled down, I roll over so I’m straddling his lap again; before he can react, I lean down to press a quick kiss to his lips - which are, in fact, pouting - then push myself back and up off the bed.

“Alright, I want to shower and get some rest. We’ve got a long day back tomorrow, if Peej isn’t feeling generous.” I’m halfway to the door by the time I hear the bed creak behind me.

“Back? We just got here, why-” he breaks off when I turn, and I watch the gears whirring behind his eyes. “Can I join you?” This question is quieter, less annoyed, although he’d probably prefer my answer to his first one.

“Peej is...well, he has a lot of influence. And he does things his way. But he needed to see you in person, and he approved, so we’re headed back tomorrow. To your second question…” I trail off, and I’ll admit, I’m absolutely picturing everything I’d do to him if I got him in the shower. My eyes rake his body, because I think they can do that now without being worried I’m stepping over some boundary.
“No,” I shake my head, more to clear it than to emphasize my answer, and he frowns.

“Right, okay, I just—”

“It’s not that,” I interrupt before he can go anywhere. “I want to, I really really do,” I watch the way his eyes go wide and decide that I quite like it. “God, the things I would do to you,” I let my eyes travel the length of his body again, slower and more deliberately. I watch his chest expand as he sucks in a breath, watch his throat as he swallows. “You have no idea,” my lip curls up in what I hope is a seductive smirk, but I’m going entirely on instinct right now.

My instincts must be working, or I must be better at this seductive thing than I thought, because Dan’s frozen in place but I can feel the waves of warmth from halfway across the room. If it didn’t have painful consequences, I think I’d be really into the fact that I can tell exactly how much I’m affecting him.

“But that,” I nod at him, and he must realize he’s let himself slip - a moment later, the heat subsides. “Not until that’s under better control.” His frown is the picture of adorable frustration, accent by that dimple in his cheek, and I decide it’s probably best to leave before he tries to convince me to change my mind. I’d give in.

“Soon,” Dan promises just as I reach the door, and it sends a shiver up my spine in spite of the residual warmth. I don’t trust myself to respond.

Instead, I’m out the hall and up the stairs as quickly as I can manage, hoping that a little exercise will get my blood flowing somewhere other than the cock now half-hard in my pants. Unfortunately, by the time I reach the bathroom, it hasn’t helped in the slightest.

Half my brain says I should try to run a cold shower, freeze everything out of my system, but the other half - and the rest of my body - wants a hot, steamy continuation of the last ten minutes downstairs.

Dan’s promise of ‘soon’ echoes in my head, and my decision’s made for me.

Objectively, the hot water running down my back should feel refreshing, cleansing as it rinses off the sweat and dirt and grime of the last two days. I should be elated that I can do what I’m about to do without any guilt, because Dan wants this too. The feeling of my hand stroking over my length should feel amazing, should be exactly what I want.

Except it isn’t. Because Dan’s downstairs and making promises and wanting me, though I still can’t imagine why, and I’m stood in a hot shower stuck pleasing myself because I care far too much about making sure he’s in control, making sure he understands his limits and his witchcraft before he does something he’ll regret. And this isn’t good enough.

I want him, breathless beneath me like he’d been not ten minutes ago, fingers trailing along my skin and pulling me closer, hips rocking against mine - fuck, it’s my fantasy, right? I want him naked under me, legs wrapped around my waist and loud moans falling from his lips while I fuck into him. That’s what finally drags me over the edge, and it’s good but it’s still not enough. Not when Dan’s there, laying on the bed, waiting for me even though we can’t. Not yet. Not until he’s got more control.

I lean against the cool shower tiles and frown. Well that was less than satisfying...I can’t get the picture of Dan out of my head either, lips parted while absolutely sinful noises come from his throat. And that had happened, he’d made sounds like that, and fuck, it hardly seems fair that I’ve seen him naked - how am I meant to cope with that image, now that I know what it feels like to kiss
him, to touch him and have him touching me?

The rest of my shower passes quickly, uneventfully. It has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Dan’s waiting for me in the bedroom. Even though we won’t do anything, because he won’t be able to control himself. Somehow, I’ll have to have control enough for us both.

I step out of the shower carefully, as I’m literally the most clumsy person on the planet and PJ’s got slick tiles lining the floor, and it’d be just my luck to fall and smack my head on something. It’s only once I’ve dragged a few fluffy towels from the linen closet and draped them around me that I realize something’s missing.

Or, rather, I notice something isn’t missing, exactly: my face. Which sounds like a strange thing to notice, but I’ve never come out of a shower and had my reflection in the mirror not blurred and blocked by condensation, and that’s only made me realize that the entire bathroom is virtually steam-free.

But still warm. I startle when a voice sounds from outside the door.

“I’d apologize, but I’m not exactly sorry…”
It had taken literal ages to find the damn bathroom. I mean, who puts bedrooms on one floor and bathrooms on the next? Isn’t that asking for a middle-of-the-night injury to occur?

I suppose I could’ve just followed after Phil, but I hadn’t exactly been focused on him. Well, I sort of had been, but more on keeping my emotions in check. Which is really fucking hard to do when the person igniting those feelings goes and implies all the things he’d like to do to me in the shower, and I just have to watch him leave and pretend I’m not all worked up.

Because I had been, and he can tell now. So I’d sat around on the bed until I felt calm and cool - literally - enough to go after him, to convince him I could handle it, that I wouldn’t hurt him. That I had control. Then I’d wandered around this hellhole until I realized there was another floor up, where I’d been poised with a hand over the doorknob, intent on proving my control, when PJ had appeared behind me.

“You won’t,” he’d said. Which was exactly the kind of thing to say to make me turn the handle and swing the door in an inch.

But he’d just quirked a brow at me, and the door drifted shut with a click. Then a louder click, which I took to mean some sort of lock had slid into place. I’d frowned at him.

“It is my business, actually,” PJ’d said before I could even complain. “But trust me, now’s not the time. Wait til he comes out.” And then he’d gone, just winked out of existence, so I’d immediately spun around and turned the doorknob again.

Except of course it wouldn’t turn, not even enough to jiggle, so I’d stared hard at it and tried to move the locking mechanism with my witchcraft - I mean, hell, why not give it a shot at least? Which, unbeknownst to me at the time, had been a horrible decision: a splitting spear of pain had shot through my head, sending me stumbling backward and breaking my focus. And the ache had disappeared as soon as I’d stopped, until I went back to my pathetic attempts at unlocking the door.

I’d given up after the third attempt, when the throbbing behind my eyes had finally convinced me I’d be better off waiting. Thanks, PJ, appreciate that…

So I’d sat right outside the door until the shower turned off. And I may have occupied my time imagining Phil in under the hot water, what he’d look like fully naked. Probably still hard, if his words earlier were anything to go by. If his actions were anything to go by. I may have imagined what it’d be like to drop to my knees in front of him, to take him in my mouth and make him moan the way he’d made me.

It hadn’t been til I’d caught a whiff of smoke that I blinked back to reality, to the scorched handprint I’d left on the wood floor beside me. To the sound of the water turning off finally.

For a moment, I debated staying quiet. Letting him open the door to find me out here. But I’d been tempted, and temptation and I have a very toxic relationship.

“I’d apologize, but I’m not exactly sorry…” I lean my head back against the wall, sighing as I stare at my hand. It doesn’t look hot anymore, and I can feel the ball of warmth in my stomach that’s slowly cooling. I drag a finger along a spot beside the handprint just to be sure. No mark. As I stand, the door beside me clicks open, and Phil’s face appears through the crack.

“Dan, what are you- wait, did you-” he breaks off, swinging the door a bit wider and scanning the
space around me for some sign of...well, I assume some sign of damage.

“The floor,” I supply, because he’s going to find it anyway and I may as well at least admit my failure. Even if it means he’s even less likely to believe I’ve got some control. *Hell, I wouldn’t believe it.* “Just got a bit distracted,” I say, as if that’ll help.

He frowns down at the mark, then back up at me; for the first time, I realize I’ve gone and actually *caused damage* to PJ’s house, and I should probably feel pretty shit about it.

“Sorry, I didn’t- I mean, I can clean it? Or fix it or something?” I offer, even though it’s not Phil I should be apologizing too. I’m not entirely sure how I feel about talking to PJ right now, given his earlier parenting - and it had felt like parenting, telling me what to do and when.

“Oh, no, I’m sure he won’t mind. Not the first time the place has been the victim of a bit of fire,” Phil chuckles, leaning against the doorframe; I don’t get nearly enough time to process what exactly that means, either, because the towel slung around his shoulders has hitched up to reveal his chest, pale and still a bit damp, and I can’t drag my eyes away from it any more than I can force my tongue to form words.

For a moment, we just stand there, but then Phil’s tilting his head and adjusting his towel and I try not to frown at the sudden loss of a beautiful view.

“*Dan,*” Phil groans, and I find myself desperately wishing it were in any other context. “You might actually kill me, you know,” he crosses his arms, fully blocking anything I might’ve gotten to enjoy, so his words hit me hard and fast. *Oh my god, could I actually? Without meaning to?* I suck in a breath and stumble back a step. Any warmth - surely his reason for calling out my staring - gets sucked deep into my stomach, and I suddenly feel cold and clammy. *Oh my god, I could kill a person, I could kill Phil, if I don’t get myself under control.*

“No, Dan, no-” Phil steps forward, and I can’t pull out of his grip quickly enough; before I can blink, arms have wrapped me in a tight hug, and lips find the side of my head. “That’s not what I meant,” warm breath tickles my scalp between soft pecks, and I do my best to breathe. “You’re not going to kill anyone, especially not me, I promise,” he mumbles, and the way he surrounds me entirely leaves me a little calmer, a little less panicked, in spite of the fear running through my blood.

“But you-”

“No, Dan, no, it was just a joke, you’re not-” he breaks off, then, abruptly pulling me away. The firm grip on my shoulders steadies me, though, and I find myself staring into bright blue eyes. “It was a joke, I just meant you’re…” he exhales in a way that doesn’t sound frustrated or pitying, more like-

I suck in a breath when his eyes leave mine, dropping down to my lips and lower, and I swear I can feel the way his gaze drags across my skin, as if he’s doing it with a hand instead of a look.

“Not being able to just...do anything we want, that’s what might kill me,” he breathes, and *fuck it*, I surge forward and crush my lips to his. *Fuck not being able to do what we want, fuck my lack of control, fuck witchcraft,* I’m decidedly sick of it.

My attack must surprise Phil, because he stumbles backward and it’s all I can do to follow him, to keep us pressed together. I can feel heat collecting in my chest, in my stomach, but I shut it down before it can go anywhere. *Let me prove I can do this.* If Phil’s intent on arguing, he doesn’t show it.
His hands - the ones still attached to my shoulders - slide down my arms until I remember to do something other than just stand there with my lips on his; I move, using our momentum to push him back and into the wall behind him, though I have no idea which one and it hardly matters. My fingers find the edges of his towel, the one wrapped around his waist, and it takes an immense amount of control - see, I’ve got control, thank you very much - not to rip it off him.

But we’re in the middle of the hall in a house that isn’t Phil’s with one very frustrating witch who can see the future, so it’s probably for the best that I don’t.

Phil’s hands travel back up to my shoulders and across my chest, but only for a moment. Then they’re pushing me away, breaking the kiss, and I have to fight back a whine. I have control. When I finally open my eyes, I’m met with a slightly-breathless and flushed Phil, and that heat in my chest threatens to jump out again. No, I need to prove this.

“Dan, you- we can’t-” Phil stutters for a moment, but I’m mesmerized more by his lips than the words they’re saying. I lean forward, against his hands, in an attempt to get closer.

“You could.” I jump at the interruption, then whirl around to find PJ stood there, leaning casually against the balustrade. “He’ll figure it out,” he points at me but tilts his head at Phil, and I turn back to find Phil’s pressed further back against the wall, cheeks flushed dark red now. Oh, right, I should probably be a little more embarrassed at being caught like this…

“Any advice, then?” Phil asks, and I try not to frown - hi, hello, I’m right here, care to explain what I’m missing? PJ grins, then winks out of existence again. It was cool at first, but it’s starting to grate on my nerves.

“Phil,” I turn around, hoping for an explanation. “What-”

“Here you go, everything I’ve collected on protection against flames.” PJ pops back into existence beside us, far too close for comfort, and I shrink back. He’s got a small notebook extended toward Phil, whose lips twist into a sheepish grin.

“Mind just-” he starts, but the book disappears a second later and I watch at least three different expressions flick across Phil’s face. I have no idea why, but I absolutely pick out a frown.

“It’s waiting for you.” PJ leans back, putting a more appropriate space between us, and Phil’s hand leaves my waist. I try not to be bothered by the loss, though I do glance back to find his face has softened into a grateful smile, one that I think tells me more about their relationship than anything else has to this point.

And I’m absolutely not at all jealous. Because it’s clearly platonic, they’re clearly just friends. Besides, PJ has this Sophie person. Unless that’s like Susan, and it’s just PJ’s house…

“At home.” PJ’s brows quirk up as he tilts his head, gaze flicking back and forth between us. “I don’t want any of that,” now his finger follows his eyes, “going on anywhere near me.” His words come out more teasing than anything, though, and he smirks before disappearing once again. I’m getting really fucking sick of that… I’m suddenly glad Phil doesn’t - or can’t? - do it.

When I turn back to Phil, he’s got his lips pressed into a hard line, and he’s still staring at the spot
PJ had stood. After a long moment, he glances at me. My brows lift, a silent what just happened?

But he doesn’t seem to get it, because we’re both silent for another long moment. Then another, and I’m about to open my mouth - actually, I do get round to it - when Phil’s resolve breaks and he doubles over in laughter that seems to have come from nowhere. My brows scrunch.

“What?” I finally ask, and he lifts his head; he does stifle his giggles, enough to do that cute little biting-his-tongue thing, before sucking in a breath and replacing his hand on my waist. I don’t miss the way his eyes flick around the space, I assume to check if PJ’s decided to make another untimely appearance.

“What?” I ask again when he still doesn’t respond, but he just drags me in against his bare chest - his bare chest - and I end up melting into him. My hands definitely waste no time tracing lines down his side, even though I’m still supposed to be frustrated at all the nonsense that’s gone over my head.

“For someone with very little emotional control, you don’t seem all that embarrassed at PJ implying we’d be- uh, well, you know,” Phil’s teasing tone cuts off halfway through, dropping into something low but clearly mortified. And, thanks to his reminder, I’m now blushing furiously and ducking my head into his chest a bit further.

“I mean, we, uh…” I start, as if my brain will manage to come up with anything articulate to say. Or even anything inarticulate, with the way it’s gone straight to imagining exactly what Phil and PJ had been implying. Oh… “That fucker,” I finally decide on, which earns me a startled laugh and a tighter hug, and I’m not really complaining, but I certainly would’ve liked to test out some of those fire protection spells…

Assuming that’s what Phil would want - he really hasn’t said. Just a lot of implying, a lot of hinting... what if he’s just too polite to admit he doesn’t really want this? My fingers freeze where they’d been trailing up Phil’s chest, and I squeeze my eyes shut. Some days, I just fucking hate my brain - did it have to jump to the worst possible conclusion for Phil’s hesitancy?

I push back and out of his arms, and I’m not met with much resistance. Of course I’m not, he’s probably glad for the chance to get away. Not only am I literal ticking bomb, but I’m some annoyingly infatuated guy who he feels bad rejecting.

“I’m, uh, I could use a shower,” I mumble, keeping my gaze on my feet. I don’t need to see the pitying look Phil’s surely giving me right now. “I’ll see you later.” I brush past him, trying my best to stay calm. Now would be the worst possible time to lose my cool, literally.

A hand grabs mine as I pass, though, and fuck but I’m so damn gone for him that I stop.

“Dan,” Phil’s voice makes me blow out a long, slow breath; he sounds one word away from a litany of pitying, apologizing, telling me he’s going to sleep on the floor or ‘maybe this shouldn’t be happening, we shouldn’t be happening’.

“I look forward to it,” is what comes out of his mouth, followed by a gentle squeeze of my hand before he’s gone, before the creaking of the staircase tells me he’d be out of sight if I could manage to turn around.

I don’t, though; instead, I’m rushing into the bathroom and slamming the door shut behind me. And grinning like a fucking idiot.

I look forward to it.
Phil

I’m not sure what that was, what had Dan stiffening in my arms and pulling away, but I didn’t like it. I didn’t like him trying to leave with tight words and cold actions. I’d prefer the burn of his hot skin touching mine any day.

And I had hoped that I’d say the right thing, because at least six different things got stuck in my throat before one finally made its way out, and I thought it was maybe a good one.

Judging by the curl of Dan’s lip when I squeezed his hand, I think it was.

But now I’m stuck waiting in the bedroom by myself, sort of wishing PJ’d transported the notebook to our room and sort of thanking him in my head for sending it home instead; I want Dan, something I realize I’ve made a bit too obvious, but I also want him to get some control on his own first. Reliance on spells can be as bad as reliance on a drug, sometimes worse.

“He will figure it out, you know,” PJ’s voice from the opposite end of the room startles me, though I know it probably shouldn’t at this point. I know my best friend.

“You think?” I watch PJ cross the space, cup of tea in hand. He takes a long slurp before fixing me with a bright but stern gaze. Then he tilts his head, and I can see the joke before he even says it.

“I know,” he chuckles, and I end up joining in until we’re both doubled over, green tea sloshing precariously at the edge of PJ’s mug.

“Alright, if you say so,” I quip back once I’ve regained the ability to talk. “How’s Soph, by the way?” I feel bad - we’ve only talked about me, and about Dan, since we arrived. PJ plops down on the bed beside me and takes another sip.

“She’s good,” he shrugs, “you know how it is.” I nod as if I do, but I can’t really say anything because I don’t know how it is. “Thought I’d got the house fireproofed,” he goes on, and I let him, because I’m usually the talkative one, but it must be hard to be so isolated. Even though he does have Sophie. “But evidently not,” now he quirks a brow at me, and there’s a spike of secondhand embarrassment - it seems Dan’s scorch mark hadn’t gone unnoticed.

“Sorry about that, I’ll fix it before we go,” I offer, even though PJ’s witchcraft is far more advanced than mine. I haven’t ever had much I could offer to PJ, aside from friendship - he’s always been one step ahead, or a thousand. I’d been jealous at first, of course, and in awe. But that’s all faded away.

Well, until Dan. I’m suddenly wishing for even a fraction of PJ’s energy, a fraction of his years and years of knowledge and experience with his witchcraft.

“Don’t,” PJ waves a hand, and the motion pulls me out of my head. “He’s very impressed by you, if you couldn’t tell,” another slurp. I look over to find him watching me over the rim of his mug.

“He is?” I’ll admit, the few times PJ does talk about the future, about what he knows, it’s always exactly what I need to hear.

“He is. And that’s my cue to go, Sophie’s waiting. She’ll be sad she missed you, so I expect you both back…” he trails off, tapping a finger on the side of his cup. “Next month, I think. Hard to keep everything straight up there,” he grins, tapping his temple now.
“Tell her I say hello, and we’re sorry we missed her,” I offer a small smile - Sophie’s fantastic, a fiery complement to PJ’s cool calmness, and I’m a little disappointed I hadn’t been able to introduce her to Dan. She’s just as much family as PJ is. But I suppose we’ll be back next month, PJ’s never been wrong yet.

“Will do. And I’m very serious about not setting my guest bed on fire, thanks,” PJ quirks a brow at me before disappearing, and a fresh wave of warmth crawls up my cheeks. Now I’m back to wishing he’d left that notebook here for us.

“Oh!” I near have a heart attack when PJ pops back in beside me, and I definitely yelp, but only a little. “The portal on the roof, it’s all set up, should take you back outside the first ward. Mellix knows to wait there.” PJ grins and waves a dismissive hand at me, interrupting before I can speak. “No thanks necessary, I like Dan. You picked a good one.” I frown when he grins, then he’s gone again.

_Pick him? I didn’t really have a choice, did I?_ But even as I think it, I know I’m wrong. I didn’t have to let him stay, I didn’t even have to help him heal, I could’ve let him go. He’d been willing to. He would’ve survived on his own, I’m sure of it. Maybe a bit more broken, hardened, but he’d have survived.

I’m startled from my thoughts by a knock at the door, though it’s partly open already. Dan’s head peeks through the crack.

“Mind if I-”

“Dan, you don’t have to knock, you’re staying here as well,” I can’t help the grin that spreads across my face. He’s still damp, if the glistening on his bare chest is anything to go by, and I let my gaze travel down it to the towel wrapped around his waist. I’m extremely glad my witchcraft isn’t directly tied to my emotions the way his is.

“Right, I just thought- uh, right,” he steps inside, then inches the door shut behind him, pointedly avoiding my gaze. I have to stifle a giggle when his skin starts _steaming_, little beads of water evaporating into the air. I’m extremely tempted to mention it, or to make a joke, but I’m not sure if that’d be in poor taste or not.

“What?” His head whips up, because I apparently didn’t do a great job of keeping my laugh quiet, and he fixes me with a frown and scrunched eyebrows. Which only serves to make me giggle more, because he looks like he’s been pulled right out of a cartoon where the angry person’s got steam coming out their ears and it’s sort of the funniest thing I’ve seen since Mellix woke him up with the chickens.

_Wow, had that only been a few days ago?_ It feels like ages, like _years_, like we’ve known each other that long.

“You’re, uh,” I point, and he glances down at his nearly-dry chest. All at once, his cheeks flush pink and the steam subsides everywhere except his head - tendrils continue to drift up over his curls, still a bit damp but going fluffier by the second.

“It’s actually quite useful,” he mumbles, though he refuses to lift his gaze - a thrill runs through me when I realize that _I_ was the reason behind that warmth, that he was thinking about me. _And_ because he’s using his witchcraft - or, I suppose, the side effects of his witchcraft - for something aside from setting things on fire.

As I watch him cross the room, heading to our backpack to pick out some clothes, something else
hits me; I slap a hand over my mouth to stop the gasp that escapes anyway.

“Dan,” I hope his digging around in the bag has distracted him from my reaction. “When you set the fire that exploded the stove—” because it’d been him, even though he didn’t realize it at the time. He freezes, and I have to bite my lip against the laughter bubbling up in my chest. I was right!

“Hm?” He finally stands and turns, clearly doing his best to feign interested confusion. I don’t miss the way he presses his lips in a line, or the way he’s sort of bouncing on his feet, like he’s impatient to get this over with.

“You were thinking about me?” I hadn’t meant it as a question, actually, I’d been going for full teasing with an outright statement - an accusation, but a playful one. Doubt had slipped in at the last second, though, and nerves squirm in my stomach as I wait for a response. It could’ve been anyone, or anything, or maybe he really was just mad or upset, I shouldn’t have said anything, I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions...And now we’ll both have to face embarrassment when he admits he wasn’t-

“Yeah,” he drops his gaze to the floor, cheeks going a shade of pink that really shouldn’t look so pretty, and shouldn’t be a perfect match to his lips, the way he’s now biting them. For a solid ten seconds, I’m not really sure what to do, or how to react, and that’s all the time it takes for him to spin on his heel and rush out the door.

The creak of the hinges sets me to moving, and I spring up from the bed and follow after him. By the time I’m out in the hall, he’s partway up the stairs.

“Dan! Wait,” I say as if that’ll magically make him stop climbing. I’ll admit, I’m a little surprised when it does; one hand grips the railing as the other hugs some clothes tight to his chest, but I can still see the flush from here.

“I was just, uh, going to change,” he supplies, even though I didn’t ask. Heat pools in my stomach before I’ve even said words.

“You could do that in the bedroom,” I suggest, and the way he sucks in a breath, the way he licks his lips and takes a single step back down makes me want to melt. Hell, I’m surprised I don’t, because he’s walking closer and there’s not the slightest change in temperature as he passes me. I have to remember to breathe, to blink, to turn around and follow him back into the room.

I’m met with the sight of Dan’s back, the full expanse of it; then it’s gone, disappearing under a bright red shirt I’ve seen and worn a thousand times but never hated until right this second. Against my better judgment - and pretty much all my judgment - I take a few long steps forward and stop the shirt’s progress just before it gets to his waist.

He doesn’t make any move to fight me when I lift it back up, and I let my fingers trail along the skin I uncover. He shivers, and I smirk at the back of his neck.

“Let’s play a game,” I suggest, because he’s right here and half naked and maybe I’m the one who needs to work on on my control. But his fluffed hair bobs in front of me, an immediate agreement. “We keep doing this,” I tug the shirt higher, until it’s right under his arms. He lifts them without my having to ask.

I’m dead silent until the shirt’s discarded on the ground beside us, but Dan’s breaths come fast enough that I can hear them in the wake of my words. Slowly, deliberately, I spin him back around to face me. Wide brown eyes meet mine, expectant, and I lean as close as I dare.
“Until the first signs you’ve lost control,” I swerve away from his lips at the last second, even though they’re parted and tempting and I really want to kiss him. But I also want to test him - I want to do more than just kiss him, I figure he’s got enough control that I don’t need to test that. That’d be like quizzing a college student on the proper spelling of ‘dog’.

So my lips find his neck, sucking and biting at a spot just below his jaw, and he gasps and slides his arm around my back to pull me closer. I stay there for a moment, just enough to get him leaning into me before I move lower, to his collarbone. The muscles of his neck move under my tongue with each time he swallows, each time his breath comes out closer to a whine, but he hasn’t burned me yet. In fact, his skin’s barely warmer than normal.

With a smirk, I drop down, placing kisses along his chest until I’ve reached his nipple; when I swirl my tongue around it, he lets out a soft whimper, and I grin as I suck at it. His hand drifts up from my back to the base of my neck, and then I’m the one holding back a noise as he winds his fingers into my hair and tugs gently. I have to pause for a second, but my hot breath on his chest makes him shiver and grip me tighter.

But still no heat. Well, no more than the usual kind.

And it’s exciting, knowing that he’s got enough control that I can do this. Oh, and also that he’s sort of gaining some mastery of his witchcraft, but that’s starting to feel more like just an added bonus when I have his bare skin under my lips and I’m lowering myself slowly down to my knees in front of him.

I really hope he can handle this.
Dan

This is fucking impossible.

How the hell am I supposed to stay in control when he’s got his lips doing that to me? When he’s-fuck, is he...

I almost lose it right then, when he drops to his knees. Every ounce of control I’ve had up til now, ever since he suggested I ought to get dressed here in front of him, it all threatens to disappear; there’s been a hot coil in my stomach burning my insides, begging me to just let go, but I don’t want to. I want this. I want Phil, I want his fingers trailing at the edge of the towel now barely clinging to my waist. I want whatever he’s silently promising will come next.

I bite my lip, letting my nails graze his scalp - I think his wide eyes are asking permission, or waiting for something, so I nod. As if I’d ever say no to this, to him. My breath hitches when he tugs at the fabric, and it falls away. For a moment, embarrassment creeps up to replace the arousal racing through my blood, but I have to remind myself that he’s seen me naked, this isn’t anything new.

Hell of a first meeting, though.

I’m just preparing to stifle the giggle that crawls up from my chest when a wet warmth envelops my cock, and the noise that comes from my mouth ends up a low moan instead.

He wastes no time taking my length until I’m nudging the back of his throat, and my grip tightens in his hair as I try desperately to retain some control over my witchcraft - already, I can feel heat leaking from my chest, following my veins out to dance on the edge of my skin. I have to squeeze my eyes shut and take a stuttered breath just to prevent an actual explosion.

But Phil’s giving me no break, his tongue working around the tip and sending sparks that absolutely do not help my current lack of control in the slightest. I still can’t bring myself to open my eyes, too afraid that the sight of Phil’s lips stretched around me will break whatever tentative grip I have on my witchcraft.

Even now, I make some kind of effort to focus on anything but his mouth - instead, I think about his hands digging into my hips, holding me still and probably holding me up given how weak my knees have gone. I think about the feeling of my hand in his hair, that I’m gripping far too tightly but I can’t be bothered to stop, not with the way his head’s moving and the way his lips pull whimpers from my throat and fuck I can feel my control slipping despite my best attempts.

If Phil notices, if he feels my skin heating the way the burn in my chest says it should be, he doesn’t say. Doesn’t stop. Doesn’t even pause, and every inch of my core is begging for me to just enjoy this properly. To forget about whatever consequences might come if my control slips, because surely it wouldn’t be that bad, right?

My conscience, or lack thereof, is a dirty fucking liar.

I don’t even realize anything’s changed until uncomfortably cold air replaces Phil’s mouth, and I end up bucking forward into nothing, whining when the warm, wet friction disappears. His hands haven’t left my hips, though, gently pushing me away. Finally, finally I open my eyes, because I have to frown and I want to be sure Phil’s watching and understanding my frustration.

He’s definitely watching, staring up at me through heavily lidded eyes, but his lips have curled up
in a smirk that definitely does not mean he’s acknowledged my annoyance.

“Phil,” I whine, which sounds desperate and needy but...well, I am. Fuck the pretense of being anything else. His smirk only grows, turning to a full grin, which seems immensely rude, given the circumstances.

“I told you, as long as you kept control,” he shrugs, then releases my hips and stands. He gets all the way to the bed before I manage to move. Then my brain decides to start functioning, which is really fucking convenient, and tells me I’m probably still too hot, too worked up. I pause and take a breath, glaring internally at the ball of fire in my stomach that decided to make an appearance at the worst fucking time.

Couldn’t have given me, what, like five minutes? I scold at the intangible source of my witchcraft, which at least has the common decency to cool to a manageable temperature. Phil’s just stood by the bed when I finally return to reality, brows raised at me.

“Sorry, what?” I assume he’s asked a question, given the way he’s staring, and I’d just been too distracted to realize. He doesn’t say anything for a long moment, just holds my gaze, then looks down.

“If you get in bed like that, I won’t be able to keep my promise about not burning PJ’s house to the ground,” his voice comes out thick and low, and does not help my barely-there grip on my energy. I know I’ve only just showered, but I’m suddenly thinking I could really use a nice ice bath right about now.

“Please,” Phil swallows, and I’m living for the way it seems I’m affecting him. Now if only I could control myself enough to take advantage of that...I’m not sure how, but I’m determined to get myself there. Soon. I’d promised. And I absolutely will, I have to. I want this more than I’ve ever wanted anything, and I’m not about to let some stupid witchcraft get in the way.

“Please put some pants on,” Phil’s still talking, and I nod absently before realizing he’s asked something of me, that I should actually do what he wants, because otherwise...would he do that? Make me sleep elsewhere if I couldn’t keep myself under control? Shame floods in to replace any lingering desperation - well, desperation for Phil’s mouth - and I turn to the discarded sweatpants and tug them on. My erection aches against my stomach, and I sort of want to complain about it, but it’s my own fault.

Next time, I’ll be better, I vow to myself before heading over to the bed. My steps slow as I approach, though, because this is still new and uncharted and I’m stupidly nervous. Why? Hadn’t he just been on his knees and- no, stop, not right now. I hate that core of heat still simmering under the surface, reminding me of what I could have if I could just get my shit together for one fucking second.

“Are you, uh, alright?” I look up to find Phil frowning at me, brows scrunched together. His hand lingers on the edge of the duvet, like he’d been about to crawl under but now he’s not so sure. I huff out a breath.

“No? I mean, I am, but...” I shrug, then climb into the bed without preamble and bury my face in the pillow. “I don’t know,” I grumble, letting the fabric muffle my response. There’s a creaking as a weight settles on the mattress beside me and a rush of air as the duvet’s lifted and Phil slides under. Then a hand finds my back, rubbing slow circles across it.

“I mean,” I start again, though I don’t want to move - I’m comfy in spite of my cock still pressed up against me, and it’s much easier to talk to a pillow than to Phil. “What if I don’t get control?
What if that never happens?” Fear oozes out, stinging my chest at the almost-admission: I’m afraid I won’t, I’m afraid of what happens if I can’t. I’m afraid to lose you, and I barely even have you.

“It will,” Phil says in the least helpful way. “We’ll figure it out.”

Oh. I think I say that aloud, but it gets lost in the fluff surrounding me before it ever makes it to my ears. ‘We’, like we’re something, like we’re in this together, like he’s here for me, like he wants to be here for me. Like he wants me. I know he said it, but words are just words when you say them and ‘saying what you mean’ rarely actually means anything anyway.

But saying...well, saying something else, something unrelated, and using words like ‘we’?

I fall asleep with a stupid grin plastered to my face that Phil can’t see and a hand resting on my back that stopped moving ages ago but still brings more comfort than Phil probably realizes.

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I’m warm when I wake, but not the kind of warm that demands concern. It’s more the sweaty warmth of being far too close to a person under a heavy duvet when it’s really not cold enough to warrant the cuddling or the blanket.

And I literally don’t give a fuck.

I don’t think I’ve ever woken up happy before, or content at least. I would be a hell of a lot happier if last night had gone in the direction I’d hoped it would, and my lack of control still grates on my nerves, but it’s hard to wake up anything but content when my arms are wrapped around Phil and I’ve got him pulled close to my chest.

I’ve no idea how we got to this point, since the last thing I properly remember was shoving my face into a pillow, but I’m not complaining. Not in the slightest.

I must make a noise or shift or something, because a moment later, Phil’s squirming in my grip; then we’re face to face - nose to nose, really - and I almost forget to breathe. This, this is what I want.

“Good morning,” Phil’s voice comes out croaky from sleep, but it’s low and soft and fuck I think I’m grinning like an idiot again. It really is a good morning, isn’t it? A damn spectacular one, honestly.

“Good morning,” I parrot back instead, because that’s an easy thing to say. Phil’s lips curl up in a smile, and his hand worms its way between us. I’ll admit, I’m a bit startled when he pokes my cheek.

“I like this,” his finger hasn’t moved, and it takes me a moment to work out what he means.

“It’s a muscle deficiency,” I roll my eyes at him, though I can’t stop grinning. “Just another fault on the endless list that is my life,” I know my tone has turned bitter, but it’s true. And clearly I can add ‘lack of control over witchcraft/emotions’ to that list as well. Now my smile falters, but I huff out a semi-convincing laugh to show I’m not serious. Well, not fully serious. I mean, I’m joking a little bit. Sort of.

“Well I like it,” Phil says, resolute in his decision. His lips press into a firm line that dares me to argue, but I’m feeling stupidly fond and I don’t really have it in me to go into full self-deprecation mode right now. With another eye roll, I bury my face in the crook of his neck.
“Fine,” I figure I can argue later, when I’m feeling properly awful, but I’m too content for that right now. Phil’s arm slides out from between us to wrap around my back, and I decide that maybe I should just never move again. We should never move again.

It’s literally two letters, a single syllable in my head, but my grin returns full force and I nuzzle against Phil’s neck. He really said that, he said ‘we’ would figure it out…

Apparently, Phil’s witchcraft does not include the ability to read minds, because he’s jostling me a moment later and pulling the duvet off us.

“Come on, sleepyhead, we have a long day ahead of us if we want to get back to the house before evening.” I groan at the fondness in his voice, because that really isn’t fair at all, but he’s disappeared from under me and I just want to squeeze my eyes shut and rewind time.

“What happened to that time-reversal spell you were going to tell me about?” I grumble, rolling into the pillow to block out the light; I’m not entirely serious. Unless he’s got one, in which case, I vote we take full advantage.

“Not even Peej has figured that out yet,” Phil laughs, and I hear the sound of the door creaking open and shut.

I don’t remember falling back asleep, but I must, because there’s a dip in the bed that wakes me again, and I mutter a groggy string of curses before I realize it’s Phil. Then it’s a slightly clearer string of curses, though a lot less exasperated.

“Come on, do you want to be stuck out in the forest at night?” Phil pokes my side, but it’s more his words that get me standing. Sure, I’ve got some fiery witchcraft to defend myself now, but I’d really rather not chance an encounter with a horde of demon beasts if we can avoid it.

“Fine, fine,” I grumble, not entirely willing to concede that he’d gotten to me. I’m not scared, just...cautious. And intelligent. No person in their right mind would purposely risk their life out of pure laziness. Although, I’ll admit, I’m probably the best bet for someone who would.

I avoid looking at Phil as I crouch by the bag, trying to give myself some time to regain my composure. I opt for a muted blue shirt in place of the one I’d picked out yesterday - a bright red, still discarded on the floor from where Phil’d pulled it off me. A shiver creeps up my spine as flashes of last night spark in my head, just long enough to remember but not so long I’m entirely lost in them.

I tug on the less-attention-attracting shirt and a pair of jeans, which I’m surprised fit as well as they do. A bit tight, but not at all uncomfortable, not even if we’re walking all-

“Wait,” I turn as I button the jeans, frowning over at Phil. “Sorry but am I missing something?” He quirks a brow. “It took us nearly two days to get here, but going back is somehow only a day?” I wait, then, for the inevitably magical- not ‘magical’, uh, witchy? Is that offensive, then? Well, for whatever response involving witchcraft Phil’s sure to give me.

“A portal.” Phil grins. Of course it’s a bloody portal, why not? I blow a puff of air out my nose in a horrible approximation of a laugh.

“Right, off we go, then?” I suggest, waving toward the door. I assume Phil’s about to pull up some magic- nope. It’s challenging to train my brain away from that, but Phil clearly doesn’t like the word. I wait for him to pull up some kind of swirling vortex that’ll transport us halfway home, but he just shakes his head and stands.
“Breakfast first.”
Phil

I had really wanted Dan to last longer than he had last night, I’d hoped he could. But I guess we’ll just have to keep working at it, testing his boundaries and pushing them as far as they can go.

The thought excites me, just a bit.

“You need to practice using and controlling your energy anyway,” I remind him, and his frown at the extra delay turns into a tight-lipped nod. I shoulder the bag and head downstairs, smirking at his footsteps close behind me; I’m glad he’s excited to learn, but I’m still not sure how to go about teaching him anything.

As we walk, all I can think about is last night - it was simultaneously incredible and very unsatisfying, like being brought to the edge and told you can’t jump. I guess for Dan, that’s exactly what it was...I’d been a little surprised he’d just flopped down onto the bed without complaint, I was sure - or maybe just hoping - I’d get a show.

But yesterday had been...a lot, to say the least. I can hardly blame him for being exhausted, not even considering all the energy he’d used to practice his witchcraft. Even now, I’m amazed he has it in him to light the stove in front of us. I’d definitely be tapped out.

It’s probably just that he’s coming into his witchcraft, getting used to the energy. I don’t remember much from when I’d first learned I was a witch, but I’m sure I’d been overflowing with the stuff, anxious to use it any chance I got; that had faded over time to a more consistent, moderate level.

“Does PJ have any eggs, or what are we making?” Dan’s voice pulls me out of my head - I think I’ve been stood staring at the flame on the hob for the past however long it’s taken him to light it, though I really can’t be sure.

“Uh, right, eggs-” I break off, dropping the bag I hadn’t bothered to put down yet and pulling the fridge door open. I jump back when a tentacle coils out toward me, nearly slamming it shut on the thing.

“Jesus fuck, what-” Dan’s outburst ends up scaring me more than the creature.

“I swear, Peej gets bored and just comes up with the most fantastical things,” I grumble, interrupting Dan and doing my best to settle my heart. Peej had mentioned this ‘addition’, I just hadn’t been round to see it til now. I turn to find Dan stood farther away, nearly across the kitchen, and I exhale a small sigh before turning back to the fridge and its new inhabitant.

“If you don’t mind,” I start, hoping my tone comes out calmer and more collected than it’d been a minute ago - I need to show Dan that there’s no reason to be freaked out. “We’d be grateful for some eggs, we’re about to make some breakfast.” I hold my breath as the tentacle curls and twists. I jump back when a tentacle coils out toward me, nearly slamming it shut on the thing.

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I have to teach Dan somehow, which means I need to keep some level of respect. Admittedly, dropping to my knees in front of him last night probably hadn’t been the best way to go about getting that, but at least I’d had the common sense not to literally burn my tongue off once his skin heated up. I’d been pretty damn close.

Finally, the tentacle disappears into the depths of the fridge - I don’t even dare try to investigate that any further - and reappears with a few eggs. It drops them in my hand, slimy and larger than
they ought to be for regular chicken eggs, but I thank the creature and it curls around the door and slams it shut.

“I feel like there’s a hentai joke in there somewhere,” Dan coughs out a laugh that doesn’t sound very genuine. “Do I even want to know?” His tone, a little smaller now, makes me turn, and I find him fighting back fear - and it is fear, those wide eyes and lips pressed into a line; I’ve seen enough of Scared Dan to know what it looks like.

“Just a beast PJ’s hired to work for him,” I shrug like it’s no big deal, because Dan shouldn’t have to see that it surprised me. The pan’s already hot by the time I reach it, though my hands are full of egg and slime that I’d rather not think about the origin of. “Mind helping?” I ask over my shoulder.

Dan walks over, though I notice he gives the fridge a wide berth, and grimaces down at the eggs.

“How about we stick with ‘they’re safe to eat’ and get on with it?” I offer, but he shakes his head. Then frowns at me.

“I’m not a princess,” he argues, and I briefly wonder if he’s offended by the gender implications - I hadn’t much thought about it, but I’ve never been one to care. “I’m a witch, thank you very much.” My eyes go wide, but a sliver of pride sticks in my chest as the eggs float from my hand and land gently in the sink. The tap turns on of its own accord - or, rather, of Dan’s witchcraft - and a stream of water rinses the slime off. I’m about to suggest he conserve some of his energy, as I’d hate to see him burn out like I had a few days ago, but he’s already onto lifting an egg and splitting it right down the middle.

The shells drop, I assume because Dan’s focus has turned to the yolk as it lands perfectly in the center of the pan, a bright green color against a blueish-grey white. It’s a fair reaction, better than the first time I’d seen a dragon egg.

“How about we stick with ‘they’re safe to eat’ and get on with it?” I suggest as I twist my lips, but that seems to be enough for Dan, as he carefully extracts the shell and cracks the other eggs without a word.

I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop, waiting to see when he’ll reach his limits, but he seems to have no trouble at all in commanding his energy. His skills are actually absurdly masterful for having only a couple days of practice - if I had the capacity for anything but pride and fondness, I might be a little jealous of how quickly he’s picking this up.

“That’s really impressive,” I decide to say, because he deserves the praise. His gaze flicks up from where it’d been focused on the eggs, shifting them in the pan every so often.

“What, that I can cook?” He laughs, but his cheeks turn pink in a way that says he knows exactly what I meant. Then his attention’s back on the food, and mine’s caught on the dimple in his cheek. I poke it, just to remind him I like it.

“Hey, back off, unless you want me to burn them,” he swats my hand away, but I catch it and - in a move that I should not be capable of, because I am the least smooth person on the planet - I pull him over and against my chest. If it bothers him, he doesn’t say, but his lips stay parted like he’s about to start talking.

“Wouldn’t be the first thing you’ve burned,” I laugh, and he sputters for a moment before
apparently deciding to join me. His head falls against my chest as his chuckle dies down.

“Probably won’t be the last,” he tacks on, but his voice has turned sour and sad in a way I absolutely hate. I’m tempted to joke, to say something to lighten the mood, but I don’t know if that’s what he needs. I don’t know, and it’s moments like this that I feel like I barely know him - and I don’t, not really. There’s so much I don’t know. But we have time. We have time.

“We have time,” I say it aloud, because it made my heart stop hurting and maybe it’ll make his a little lighter as well. He’s silent, completely, but I can feel his breaths against the fabric of my shirt, slow and steady and warm.

“Dan,” I shrug after a minute has passed and he’s still just breathing. “Don’t fall asleep on me, the eggs will burn!” I try to make it a joke, and he huffs out a breath before pulling away, so I deem it a successful one.

“It’d be hard to make them worse than yours from the other day,” he throws the words over his shoulder as he attends to the eggs, fully with his witchcraft. Another little ball of pride bounces around in my chest in spite of his teasing.

“Hey,” I manage, after a solid few seconds of watching him, “they weren’t that bad.” But even I’m not convinced, because they were pretty crispy, and eggs should not be crispy like that.

Dan doesn’t respond, but I do get a raised brow over his shoulder. It’s not til I’m about to tell him the eggs are nearly done that I realize I’ve gone and forgotten plates, so I end up rushing around him and to the cupboard. And definitely hoping there’s not another animal inside set on scaring me half to death.

Fortunately, we don’t have a repeat of the fridge incident, and I whirl around with plates in hand just in time for Dan to switch off the hob and levitate the eggs onto them. I end up watching him for probably a few seconds too long, but I want to be sure he’s not pushing himself too hard, using up too much of his energy.

“What?” He asks as he grabs a plate away from me, then sits himself at the table - he definitely doesn’t sound tired, so I shake my head and join him.

“Nothing,” I say as if that’ll make him forget my staring. He squints at me in return, but I do my best to focus on my plate - it's a mess of green and pale blue, but I dig in, hoping to fill my mouth enough that he won't ask me again. I don't really need him worrying just yet, not if he's not fatigued.

He must decide after a moment that it's not worth it, because he drops his gaze and pokes tentatively at the eggs.

"They're safe?" He asks in spite of the fact that I'm literally chewing them right in front of him.

"I hope so," I joke once I've swallowed, and he twists his lips before lifting a small bite to his lips. His initial reaction is a frown, then scrunched brows, then he's looking up at me again. I don't really need him worrying just yet, not if he's not fatigued.

"They just taste like eggs?" He mumbles around the food before chewing and swallowing. I huff out a laugh and nod.

"Yeah, most eggs just taste like eggs," I agree. "Except fish eggs," now I'm the one grimacing - they aren't necessarily bad, just salty and remind me of the ocean. I've never been a big fan of the ocean.
Dan just nods and scoops up another bite, and we eat for a while in silence. It's not til I look up to find him watching me, fork sat to the side of his mostly-empty plate, that he breaks it.

"You don't use your witchcraft like PJ does." It's a statement, not a question, but that's fair because it's true. My cheeks flush at my words before I manage to say them.

"He's got a lot more energy to spare than I do." I shouldn't be embarrassed, because he's got thousands of years on me, but I feel inadequacy like a knife in my stomach, and I duck my head back to my plate.

"Oh, that makes sense," I glance up to find Dan nodding sagely, lips pursed. "That teleporting thing, it's a bit annoying, to be honest," he tacks on, then there's a scrape as he pushes his chair back and heads for the sink. I try not to grin into my eggs too much.

"Almost done?" He calls over his shoulder, and I shovel the last bite into my mouth before moving to join him and rinse my own plate.

"We should be off soon, or we'll be-

"Yeah, stuck in the forest at night, I'm well aware," he grumbles; I set my plate aside and grab his shoulders, turning him to face me. His lips have parted like he's got more to say, so I make a point of speaking first.

"You're safe, okay? I promise," I lean forward, close, in the hopes of emphasizing that. "Between my witchcraft and yours and Mellix as well, nothing's going to attack you, okay?" I watch his eyes, the way they widen and flick back and forth between mine for what feels like far too long.

"Okay," he says finally, a soft agreement accompanied by a nod that sends a wave of desire through my chest - and not the kind I'd felt last night, more the desire to protect him, to keep him safe like I'd just promised. Again, I'm left wishing for all of PJ's skills, all his witchcraft and energy and knowledge of the future.

"So we should...?" Dan trails off, hiking a thumb over his shoulder. I take a deep breath, then pull him into a hug. He lets out a little surprised 'oh!' before letting his arms fall in a loose loop at my waist, and I hope it's the comfort he needs, I hope I'm the comfort he needs.

After a long moment, he pulls away first, and I don't stop him. He's got a slight blush on his cheeks and a soft smile, one that makes my heart light and full at the same time.

"Come on." He grumbles it, but it comes out more fond than exasperated. "If we get ambushed by demons, I'm fully blaming you!" He shouts on his way to the lounge, which is the exact opposite direction we need to go, and I end up giggling as I watch him walk out.

“Dan?” I say after a few seconds. “Wrong way.” He comes back into the kitchen with scrunched eyebrows, and my chuckle turns into a full-on laugh.
Surely I’m not so turned around that I’ve entirely forgotten where the front door is, right?

Granted, PJ could have it shift locations every hour for all I know, the guy seems strange enough to do something like that. *I mean, keeping a fucking squid thing in the fridge?* I stay well clear of it as I make my way back through the kitchen to where Phil’s started to climb the staircase.

“What, he’s got a secret exit on the roof?” As we ascend, I get an excellent view of Phil’s ass, though it does distract me from my sarcastic question enough that my tone doesn’t quite hit the ‘sarcastic’ mark.

“Well, he does, but it’s- that’s where he keeps the portal,” Phil says as we circle up the staircase - we’re above the bedrooms now, and I notice the scorched handprint I’d left beside the bathroom door as we pass this floor and continue on to the next. I push past my lingering guilt and on up the stairs, which leave me disturbingly winded by the time we reach the top: a single plain door that Phil pushes open to reveal a flat rooftop and a bright blue sky behind it.

And an enormous stone arch like something straight out of a medieval fantasy novel, complete with a purplish black swirling vortex in the center. It’s actually quite aesthetic, in a goth-mage-meets-King-Arthur sort of way. When Phil’s hand lands on my arm, I realize I’ve just been stood over the threshold, staring.

“You alright?” His tone stays low, casual, but he squeezes just a bit and it sends a wave of relief through my body - funny, as I hadn’t even noticed I was tense. I offer a nod, then a smile when his eyes narrow just slightly.

“Really, I’m fine, just got distracted,” I promise, locking eyes with him until he’s the first to turn away. Honestly, though, I’m not nearly as worried about this as I’ve been about...well, about the vast majority of the strange things I’ve encountered since I met Phil. He’s approaching the portal like it’s just a regular door, and he’s not given me any reason to doubt his judgment on what’s safe; I take a few steps forward, until I’m stood beside him in front of the archway.

The portal has an energy, I don’t think I need to be a witch to recognize that; it’s the same weighty sucking-away-the-air kind that I’d felt when Phil had placed a spell on the branch to make it fly, or on the sprinklers to keep them aloft. It’s something silent but most definitely present, and this time, it feels far more intense than the other spells had, almost a vibration that resonates in my core.

I don’t realize I’ve drifted closer to the gaping not-quite-void until Phil’s hand in mine makes me turn.

“Mind if I join you?” He’s got a smirk on his lips that demands to be kissed off - and fuck, I can actually do that now - but I spend far too long staring and not long enough telling my muscles to move; he’s passed me and stepping through the portal, layers of inky black wrapping around him like silk. Before I’m aware it’s happening, my hand disappears as well, and I end up following.

I think I’m most surprised by the fact that it doesn’t feel like anything - with my eyes squeezed shut, I could be standing out on Phil’s porch, or taking a walk through his garden; I let myself imagine that, just for a moment: Phil stood by my side, his hand in mine as he tells me about each of the various plants, the silly names he’s given them and their purposes in spells. It’s pleasant, peaceful. Something I wouldn’t have ever dared imagine, but now I am and it’s the only thing I want.
“Dan?” Phil’s voice, high and tight with concern, makes me fling my eyes open and turn until I find him - then I’m scanning his body, searching for any sign of injury. “Dan, are you alright?” And for some reason, he’s staring at me like I’m the one who said his name that way, and I end up scrunching my brows at him.

“Am I- yeah, of course I am?” I can’t keep the confusion from my tone, especially when Phil’s eyes go wide. His hand tugs me just a bit closer, which doesn’t help in the slightest, except there’s less distance between us and that’s certainly not a bad thing.

“You’re sure?” Now both hands cup my cheeks, tilting my head to the side; his eyes search mine, boring in deep in a way that makes me want to squirm, if only because I can’t figure out what he’s searching for. I don’t, though, I stay in his warm grasp until he’s deemed me fit to release.

“Of course I’m fine, Phil, why wouldn’t I-” I break off mid-sentence when my gaze finally pulls itself away from him to take in our surroundings. At which point I notice we’re not exactly stuck in the middle of the forest the way I’d expected, the way Phil had clearly expected.

We’re stood in the gardens at his house, between two patches of brightly colored flowers that mock us with their normalcy.

“Phil, how did you-”

“I didn’t,” Phil interrupts, but his voice comes out soft and awed and heat creeps up my cheeks - I’m not sure if it’s embarrassment or pride or what, but it’s there and I feel the need to duck my head, to stare at the grass beneath us.

“How?” I finally manage to ask, because I hadn’t even done anything. I’d just imagined- “Oh.” I blurt out before he can answer, and look up with wide eyes to find him frowning. “I didn’t mean to, I was just thinking about the garden, and-”

“And you brought us here,” his tone hasn’t lost that reverence, and he’s the one with wide eyes now. “Dan, that’s- I mean, it’s incredible, to only know about your witchcraft a few days and have that much control…” he trails off, drifting closer until we’re chest to chest and I’m suddenly not feeling as well in control as he seems to believe.

I can feel myself heating up under his gaze, the intensity sending flames from my core all the way out to my fingertips, but it’s muted and soft, not the blazing, raging fire I’d struggled to control last night, these past few days; that’s still there, but buried deeper, simmering under layers of comfortable warmth. Carefully, I lift a hand to Phil’s cheek.

“Is it too hot?” I ask, trailing my finger down his jaw as lightly as I can - I don’t think I’d ever forgive myself if I hurt him. He just hums and closes his eyes, though, and leans into my touch. I can’t help the smile that creeps up my cheeks, the warmth that blooms in my chest that has nothing to do with my witchcraft.

“It’s warm, but fine,” he says finally, so I open my palm to properly cup his face. Because I want to, because I can, I lean in and capture his lips with mine. It’s a soft, slow, comfortable moment, matching the warmth under my skin, and the way Phil melts into me - not literally, thank fuck - makes everything feel light and fuzzy and right.

It’s a very sharp contrast, then, when Phil pulls away with a gasp and cool air replaces his body.

“Phil?” I call after his retreating frame, already halfway to the nearest tree line. Because it’s still midday and bright and sunny and I have witchcraft to defend myself, I’m not too terrified of the
looming forest to race after him.

I should’ve been, if only because I am not fit enough for that kind of exercise.

I end up winded and out of breath by the time I catch up; he’s stopped just at the end of the path we’d taken the other day on the way to PJ’s, and he’s staring hard at the spot in the distance where the forest swallows up the trail.

“Phil?” I try again more quietly, now that I’m closer and I’ve sort of managed to catch my breath. He holds up a finger, so I clamp my mouth shut and try to control my lungs, in case whatever he’s doing requires absolute silence. We’ve been standing still for what feels like ages when he finally whirls around with a bright grin.

“Oh, Mellix is on his way,” he announces, at which point I realize that, yes, of course I’d entirely forgotten about the giant wolf-dog in my accidental-transport fantasy. I feel a little bad, as I’ve actually come to like Mellix more than I expected, but the beast doesn’t exactly set me at ease when he’s around. That daydream had been a peaceful one.

“Okay,” I manage to stutter out quite eloquently, but Phil passes me looking not at all bothered, so I try not to think too hard about it. I don’t hate him, I promise! I feel the need to say it, but maybe Phil didn’t even think I’d left Mellix behind on purpose, and I’m not sure I want to put that idea in his head. So I turn and follow without another word.

The moment we’re inside, though, I’m tempted to collapse onto the sofa and never move again - exhaustion hits like a wave, and I’m not sure if it’s to do with my witchcraft or just being worn out by travel and new people and new abilities over the past few days. I don’t think I’ve ever been so relieved to see a plaid armchair or a black sofa in my entire life; frankly, some familiarity is really fucking appreciated.

I’m about to follow my temptations, halfway from the sliding glass door to the alluring cushions, when a small black book catches my eye - it’s sat on the coffee table, along with a little note folded up and sat on top of it, like one of those fancy placards to tell you which seat is yours at a wedding reception.

Phil gets to it before I do, and I don’t see anything other than a blur of black script before Phil’s squinting at the words and frowning. What I do see, however, is the way his cheeks flush a deep red.

“What does it say?” I reach for the note, a smirk already playing on my lips at Phil’s reaction. Given the purpose of the contents of the notebook, I’m only mildly surprised he’s so flustered. Surely it can’t be that bad, though…

Phil pulls it away before I can get to it, then it just fucking disappears from his hand. I gape at him.

“Did you just...make it...” I wave my hands in place of actual words, a little in awe at the spell but mostly at the fact that he just erased it without letting me read it. And it had clearly been something juicy.

“What does it say?” I reach for the note, a smirk already playing on my lips at Phil’s reaction. Given the purpose of the contents of the notebook, I’m only mildly surprised he’s so flustered. Surely it can’t be that bad, though…

Phil pulls it away before I can get to it, then it just fucking disappears from his hand. I gape at him.

“It’s gone,” Phil grumbles, but the blush hasn’t left his cheeks and he refuses to meet my gaze. So I stomp over and snatch the notebook from his grasp, just because. “Dan,” he tilts his head at me as I retreat toward the staircase, the only safe escape I can think of at the moment, but I refuse to take my eyes off him; he’s staring, but his look has turned from something embarrassed to something...playful? Is that what that smirk is?
I find myself rushing up the steps a moment later, after he’s lunged toward me and nearly gotten the book. He’s only a few feet behind me, but I use my slight advantage of distance to slip into the first room - Phil’s, I realize - and slam the door shut behind me.

I expect...well, I expect something, something to indicate Phil’s trying to get through the door, or maybe I expect him to start talking, or asking me to open up, or something. But it’s dead silent.

My heart’s racing in my chest in the most exhilarating way, and *fuck* I didn’t ever think I could enjoy feeling out of breath and nervous, but here I am. I’m leaned up against the door, so I turn to press an ear to the wood, in case I can make out any sounds that way.

Two light knocks send me scrambling back, scaring the ever-loving *shit* out of me, and I clamp a hand over my mouth to stop from yelping. I didn’t really think I’d been keeping the door shut or anything, but it drifts open of its own accord - or maybe of Phil’s - and my breath catches; Phil takes slow steps toward me, and I can’t even move. *Fuck,* I don’t *want* to move.

He’s smirking in a way that doesn’t look angry or upset or even frustrated, but there’s a tension in the air that sets me on fire - almost literally, I can feel the heat in my core verging on molten. I end up biting my lip, and I move the hand holding the notebook behind my back and let my other fall to my side, hoping to look casual. I’m not sure what’s happening, exactly, but *fuck* if I’m not already loving it.

“Dan,” he says it again, low and thick in a way that has me blowing out a breath as he takes a few steps closer, until his chest is pressed against mine and I’m stumbling back toward the bed. Which is just as well, because my knees are weak under me, and Phil’s lips are one inch away and I’m falling but *shit* I’ve already fallen, so it doesn’t even matter.

At the last second, I reach out and fist my hand in Phil’s shirt, dragging him down on top of me, and we both collapse onto the mattress in huffs of warm breath that turn into giggles that turn into full-on laughter when we realize how strange it feels to have someone’s chest shaking against your own. Phil breaks first, though, his smirk turning into a full grin that clears every moment of tension that had weighed on me not thirty seconds ago.

As much as I adore the lightness of this, I’m almost *missing* the edge-of-a-knife, keyed-up *whatever* we were doing a minute ago. But this is nice as well, and I’m not at all complaining about the shift in figurative weight to literal weight, even though I’m still trying to catch my breath and Phil crushing my lungs isn’t exactly helping.

But then he’s gone serious, or at least he’s stopped laughing, and I watch as his eyes get closer, his *lips* get closer, and I lift my head just slightly as my eyes drift shut.
Phil

It’s a little bit mean, but he had stolen the notebook to begin with.

I wait until his eyes are closed to snatch the book from his hand, then roll off him with a smirk and rush toward the door. Where I pause, because he hasn’t followed like I expected.

“Phil,” he whines, and I let myself stare for just a minute, appreciate the view: Dan, propped up on his elbows and pouting at me, cheeks flushed pink and chest still moving in a way that says he hasn’t quite caught his breath yet. Before he can complain any further, I transport the book into the storage room where he can’t get to it - it’s worth the drain on my energy, not using a proper spell - and move back over to the bed.

He sucks in a breath when I straddle his hips, and his head falls back to the duvet as I lean forward, chasing his lips. It’s a slow kiss, like before, but hotter, deeper than it’d been outside. That had been...light, warm, soft. Gentle. This- Dan’s hips rock up into mine, a friction I didn’t realize I needed until he’d done that, and I let my hands slide down his sides, searching for the edge of his-

No, no, we’ll literally burn- I have to pull away and squeeze my eyes shut, since Dan seems intent on taking this wherever it’ll go - and if PJ’s right, it’ll go...places. A shiver runs up my spine just thinking about it, but that’s the exact wrong direction for my brain to be going right now. After a slow, steadying breath, I open my eyes to find Dan frowning at me.

“Something wrong?” His voice comes out hesitant, unsure, and I can tell the line he’s pressed his lips into hides a frown. Instead of answering, I dip my head back to press a light kiss to his nose, which makes him giggle - a short, flustered sound that says he hadn’t expected it.

“I’d rather not burn my house down,” I answer, once I’m sure his smile isn’t going anywhere. He blows out a breath, tilts his head back to stare up at the ceiling. Closes his eyes. I’m almost expecting an argument, the way his brows scrunch together and his lips twist into a frown. But everything smooths out a moment later, and he opens his eyes again and gives me a smirk that reminds me of where we’d been five minutes ago.

“I know, but you took the book that told us how to prevent that,” he quirks a brow at me, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“You took it first!” I argue, poking his arm. His lips curl into a full grin and he pokes me back, until we’re both rolling across the bed, simultaneously trying to get at each other and get away. We end up sat up on our knees, face to face and out of breath, hands clasped together to prevent the other from attacking.

“Truce?” I ask, because he’s smirking and gripping my hands in a way that says he’s not about to give in, and they’re turning warm under my palms. A witchcraft kind of warm. “Dan?” I give him a soft smile and squeeze his hands a little tighter, and his eyes go wide. Then he’s sat back on his heels, glaring at his own hands as if that’ll make them cool down faster. Maybe it would? I’m still trying to understand better how his specific witchcraft works, it’s truly something else.

Holy crap, is it something else. I still can’t believe he’d managed to redirect the portal and override PJ’s security measures to get it to take us all the way home. It’s not that it’d be impossible, but the amount of energy that should’ve taken...and he’s not even tired. He’s still overheating, even if it’s much less than before.
I think I seriously have my work cut out for me.

“Okay, I think it’s better now,” Dan leans forward and pokes my arm, and I nod and giggle. Okay, maybe not that much work. He really does have far more control than I’d ever expect after only a few days of working with his witchcraft. He just clearly has a lot of energy. “What’d you do with the book?” He pokes me again, and I shift away and stand, still grinning at him.

“Anxious to put those spells to use, are you?” I tease, and he locks eyes with me in spite of the fresh wave of pink crawling up his cheeks.

“Yeah, I’m not the only one,” he responds after a moment, quirking a brow, and now I’m the one blushing. Tension crackles between us as he stands, and I have to remind myself again that we need those spells first. We need—

Then Dan’s chest is pressed against mine, backing me into the wall beside the door, and I can’t quite remember what it was I needed - aside from Dan, him I definitely need. I let his lips draw me in, lure me into running my hands up his sides, rucking his shirt up until I can get to his smooth skin, warm under my palms. His lips tighten against mine in a way that says he’s smiling, like he’s won, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have to use my grip to push him back.

“We can’t,” I give him a sad half-smile before he can say anything, and his open mouth drops into a proper pout. He even goes as far as to cross his arms at me, but it only leaves me chuckling. “Not until we have the spells!” I tilt my head, then slide out from between him and the wall and out the door, heading for the storage room. Maybe if I walk fast enough, I can slip in without—

“Well where are you going, then?” Dan’s voice is close behind me, too close to think I can get away with sneaking into the room. So I let him catch up, turning to face him as he comes to a stop. “The locked room?” He removes one hand from his steadfast crossed-arm stance just long enough to point at the door behind me before returning it and pouting once again. “Without me, of course.” He grumbles. I drop my head back to stare at the ceiling. Surely he won’t try to tempt me while we’re in the storage room, there aren’t even any comfortable surfaces...

“Alright, alright, fine,” I groan, and Susan does us the courtesy of swinging the door open. I glance briefly at Dan, who’s got a smirk on like he’s just gotten exactly what he wanted, although it’s accompanied by a slight scrunch of his eyebrows that says he’s not entirely sure what he wanted. But whatever it was, he got it.

I go immediately for the black notebook, sat exactly where it should be on the desk by the back window, and flip it open. There’s an endless list of hand-written spells, some with notes in the margins, some scratched out entirely, and some that just look outright dangerous, if the list of ingredients is anything to go by. But my eyes track a few that look effective and safe - the ones PJ had so kindly marked with stars and a little comment reading ‘effective and safe!’ - so I spin around, intent on checking my stock for the various ingredients.

Which is how I run right into Dan, who’s apparently decided to hover over my shoulder and read along.

“So it looks like a lot of the spells use jade, I know what that is, just a pastel greenish rock, right?” Dan steps back, apparently unperturbed by my sudden turn, and spins on a heel to investigate the shelves where I keep all my various crystals - there’s a cleansing spell around them so I don’t have to constantly remember, although I’m just realizing I may want to re-up that soon.

“Well, yes, but—” I break off when Dan spins around, grinning and wielding a large chunk of aventurine. I can’t hid the chuckle at his misidentification, which he evidently takes very
personally, if the subsequent frown and scrunch of his brows is anything to go by.

“What, it’s not?” He groans and replaces the stone, glaring at the remaining options now - I take a few soft steps until I’m stood behind him, watching his process of elimination as best I can. *I should probably just tell him...*

“Can jade be a different color, or-” Dan turns quickly, nearly smacking our noses together, and breaks off mid-sentence with a soft ‘oh’. Then he stares hard at me for a moment, and I try to keep my face completely neutral, but-

“You don’t even have any, do you.” He deadpans, then shoves me back a step. But his eyes sparkle and I don’t think he’s actually mad, more just frustrated he didn’t get it right. “Fine, mistletoe then, I saw that as well,” he grumbles, pushing past me and over to the set of drawers - those, at least, are well labeled. I try not to smirk anyway.

“Are you kidding me, you don’t have any mistletoe either?” He straightens up and resumes his earlier arm-crossing-and-pouting, properly glaring at me now. He even *taps his foot*, like that’ll make the ingredients appear. Or like I can do that, somehow, if he gets impatient enough with me. *He might be able to do it, though...* I let myself think about the logistics for a moment, but he’d have to know where everything was, visualize it perfectly in order to transport it here. I twist my lips, dismissing the possibility.

“It’s not like I expected you,” I tilt my head at him, and he seems to deflate at my words. “We can just order some, though,” I shake my head, hoping to show there’s absolutely *nothing* bothersome about his unanticipated showing up, “or see if Beatrice has some in stock, those aren’t too uncommon.” I shrug and offer a small smile, but I’m already dreading another visit to Beatrice’s shop; for Dan, though, I’ll endure the suffering.

“Beatrice?” Dan asks, quirking a brow - there’s an edge to his tone, though, and I try not to smirk. *Is he really jealous?* “Another of your sentient buildings, Susan in the next town over?” He sweeps his arm around, I assume to indicate Susan, but I huff out a breath of laughter. *I wish...*

“No, she owns uh...I guess you could call it a witch shop. Occult shop? It’s mostly occult,” I decide, then shake my head to clear it of the semantics. “But she’s a supplier when I need ingredients that would otherwise take ages to get, or might be fake if I had to buy them off Amazon.” I try to keep my voice even as I explain, but I’m pretty sure I take on a less than pleasant tone; Dan’s brows scrunch together.

“But I thought the town hated witches?” He’s still got his arms crossed, but it’s more casual now, and he leans against the table and tilts his head. I exhale in a way I hope isn’t too annoyed.

“They do,” I wave a hand in the air, “they just...they also like their revenge spells and curses, and transport spells when they’re feeling lazy, and Beatrice makes it pretty clear she’s a witch, so...” I trail off, unsure what else there is to say, or if that even made any sense at all. It’s not the first time I’ve gotten myself confused trying to understand the decisions the town’s made, to let Beatrice stay but force me out.

“I guess she just follows their expectations,” I finally decide, and glance up to find Dan’s lips twisted in a way I can’t decipher; not until he pushes off the table and speed walks at me, then wraps me in a tight hug.

“It’s fine,” I laugh at his sudden show of support, but I absolutely still hug him back. I can feel a layer of warmth around him, and it’s not hard to guess he’s bothered by what I’ve just said, but there’s no reason for him to get upset. I’ve come to terms with it. “Really, it doesn’t matter,” I rub
a hand across his back, but I think it does more to comfort me than it does him - it's soothing and it feels moderately productive and-

“Oh! But back to the point,” I pull away just slightly, because I don’t really want to keep this part of the conversation going. “We can head into town and see what’s in stock?” Dan drops his head to my shoulder, though, and I frown down at the back of his head for a moment before he responds.

“Do we have to go right now? I’m tired,” he grumbles into my shirt; I stifle a chuckle enough that it only comes out as a breath because I don’t want to shake him if I laugh properly.

“We don’t. Think you can handle the rest of the day without bursting into flames?” Now I do nudge him, just a little, which earns me a poke in the side that I decide not to return because then he might pull away and I’m quite liking him right here.

“I can handle myself just fine, thanks,” he mumbles, and it’s so full of embarrassed indignation that I can’t help but giggle and squeeze him tighter.
My annoyance at Phil for calling out my lack of control - *which is getting better, thank you very much* - doesn’t quite translate to my tone. Frankly, it’s his fault, holding me and breathing soft breaths into my hair and pulling me closer.

“Tomorrow then?” He suggests, and it takes me a moment to remember what we’d been talking about before he poked fun at me. *Right, the other witch, the store, the ingredients for the spells so we can-* suddenly, I’m feeling far more energetic.

“Actually…” I lean back and smirk at him, seriously contemplating if it’s worth going to get those ingredients *right this fucking second*; I’m not entirely sure I can control myself around Phil, not if we’re alone in a house with nothing to distract us but each other.

Phil’s brows shoot up his forehead, and his mouth opens like he’s about to ask what I’m on about, so I shut him up with a kiss - I figure that’ll get my point across quite nicely. He hums in surprise the moment my lips meet his, but his hand quickly finds its way to the back of my neck to hold me there, close and pressed against him.

Except for once, that’s not exactly the reaction I’m hoping for. I’d really expected him to break us apart and drag me at a sprint down to the shop in town, but he’s just kissing me, unhurried and unbothered by the fact that we can’t go much further than this - no matter how much we both want to. *At least, how much I thought he wanted to…*

I end up pulling away first.

“Maybe we should…” I jerk my head toward the door, expecting him to understand my meaning, but he just frowns.

“You don’t want to try to- in here?” Now his scrunched brows shoot up his forehead, and I let out an exasperated breath, then lay my head on his shoulder.

“No, what? No, I don’t- no,” I emphasize, and it comes out on a laugh - maybe if we both just stop assuming and use our words, we’d have a much better time of this. “Go to the store, jesus.” Although I realize after I’ve said the words that it’s just the step required in order to actually have what I want, which is exactly what Phil suggested. Maybe on a bed, though.

“Oh,” Phil chuckles, and it makes my head bounce against his shoulder. It’s actually a sort of comforting feeling, in a chaotic way. *Much,* I think, *like everything with Phil has been since I arrived.* Comfortingly chaotic. Or chaotically comforting. Both seem accurate.

“How about,” Phil starts, and I can already sense the denial in his tone. *Does he not want- I mean, does he not want the same things I do? Did I jump to conclusions?* I lift my head to find Phil giving me a tight grin. “We wait til tomorrow, so we can both rest a bit?” He still ends it as a question, but I’m suddenly lacking any fight. I don’t want him to *not* want me, but I don’t want him to feel *forced* to want me. Or forced into anything with me *at all.*

“Sure,” I try to mirror his smile, but I probably end up with more of the tightness than the smile itself. He pulls away from me first, then gestures at the door. I walk through, and I see myself walking down the stairs and sitting down on the sofa, but I feel *separate,* more like I’m watching my life than actively participating.

I’m aware, of course, that I’m probably just being dramatic - I mean, dissociating just because Phil
maybe doesn’t want to hook up with me after a whole twelve hours of us sort of getting together? Truly unreasonable of him, obviously. I follow his progress as he sits beside me on the sofa, then leans against me. Then his arms wrap around me, and it’s warm and solid and a weight and it does pull me back in just a little bit.

Enough that I lean into him in return, but I don’t expect him to give - he does, though, falling completely to the side and dragging me with him, and we end up curled against each other in the most awkward way. I’m sort of on top of him, he’s sort of squished into the spot where the cushions meet in the back, we’re both a tangle of limbs in all different places, but it doesn’t feel wrong. It feels comfortable and strange but not wrong, not bad. And I decide, as I lay there with my hip digging into his side and his knee digging into my shin and his hands on my back rubbing slow, soothing circles that maybe I am more tired than I thought.

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Of course, as is always the case, I don’t quite remember drifting off.

I do, however, remember waking up, as it involves a lot of tongue and not from the person I’d prefer to be making out with.

No, it’s all Mellix, if the giant wolf’s maw hovering over my face is anything to go by.

“We have to stop meeting like this,” I tease, rubbing a hand across my face to remove as much of the slobber as I’m able to. Unfortunately, my other arm is pinned, or it’d be assisting the first hand’s efforts. Once I decide I’m as clean as I’ll get, I reach up slowly, intent on scratching Mellix’s jaw.

I don’t dare move too quickly - those teeth could take my hand clean off without a second thought, I have no doubt - but the wolf only tilts his head slightly, so I let my fingers run through his fur a few times.

“He does like you, you know,” Phil’s voice beside my ear startles me, and I turn to find him blinking sleep from his eyes and giving me a soft smile. Apparently, Mellix agrees with this statement, which he kindly informs me of via another lick to the face. I make a point of groaning and rubbing at my chin, but I’m sort of pleased at the confirmation.

“As long as his way of showing it only involves tongue and no teeth,” I joke, but Mellix seems to get the gist of my comment and grins at me with those very sharp, very large teeth, and I shrink back into the sofa cushion. Phil just laughs - a sleepy, rumbly sound - until I manage to wiggle my trapped arm free enough to elbow him in the ribs.

“Ow, hey!” He pokes me back, but there’s no force behind it, then he’s burying his head in the crook of my neck. “So, is that a rule then?” He mumbles against the skin there, and I’ve suddenly forgotten what it is we’re talking about. I have about half a second to offer a confused hum before his teeth graze my neck and he bites down; it’s nowhere near hard enough to hurt, but it sends my head spinning.

“No teeth?” He says after he releases me, then his tongue swipes over the spot he’d just bitten. “Just tongue?” I swear my heart’s either stopped working entirely or it’s going so fast I can’t distinguish the beats; I inhale sharply at the tickle of his breath over the wet patch of skin, and I don’t realize I’ve craned my neck to grant him better access until he lets out a soft chuckle and finds a new spot to pay attention to. My eyes drift shut again, but sleep is about as far from my mind as it could possibly be. A bed, however…”
One I’ll probably set on fire if we don’t have spells in place, though. I can already feel the heat in my core, itching to burn out through my fingertips even though Phil’s barely touched me. It hardly seems fair, knowing we both - or at least, I think both of us - want this, but we can’t go there, not yet. Not yet, but soon.

“Is it tomorrow yet?” I ask, and my words come out breathy and absolutely wrecked - but honestly, all Phil’s done is wind me up, and it’d be really nice to just enjoy him properly. But I can’t, because I have to be worried about losing control and burning the whole damn house down. Or even just burning Phil - I have to be exceptionally careful. Now that I’m paying attention, I can feel a layer of warmth under my skin that’s definitely coming from my witchcraft. If Phil’s noticed, he hasn’t said, except to pull back and offer me a smirk.

“It isn’t,” he answers my previous question, but the way he ducks back down answers my other unasked one - apparently, I’m not out of control yet. I haven’t hurt him, he’s not worried. Or he’s too busy doing - ah, doing that; a soft sound escapes my throat when he dips lower, nibbling at the spot between my neck and my shoulder, just above my collarbone.

But now that I’ve thought about it, I can’t stop - the growing heat in my chest, leaking out through my veins and under the surface of my skin, and I have to push Phil back, take a breath, fill my lungs with fresh air in some misguided attempt to cool myself from the inside out. Phil just frowns like I’ve gone and taken away his favorite toy.

“I needed a second,” I explain, the hammering in my chest finally slowing its pace to something vaguely in the realm of normal. And Phil just grins at me, fucking grins, and I’m half a second from letting all that heat explode out of me in a rush because really? He thinks that’s funny? That I enjoyed pushing him away and dealing with my wayward witchcraft? I shove his chest, though I make sure my fingers don’t feel too hot before I do.

I’m annoyed but I’m not sadistic.

Phil just takes the shove, leaning further back into the sofa and continuing to beam at me.

“What?” I poke him, as if more physical attacks will somehow help me get a verbal answer. He just breaks into a fit of giggles, though - from my poke or my situation, I’m not sure - and I reluctantly allow my brain to appreciate the cuteness of his tongue poking through his teeth. But only for like, ten seconds.

“Phil!” I groan, then flop back so we’re about as separated as we can be, given the fact we’re both still laying on a sofa. Mellix - who, apparently, hadn’t actually left during that whole thing - drops his head to the armrest between us, and I can’t help imagine what an odd trio we must look like right now.

Then there’s a growling sound, and it takes me a full minute to realize it isn’t the wolf, but rather my own stomach. I glance over to find Phil’s brows raised.

“Hungry?” He asks, as if the answer isn’t obvious. It might actually be an innocent question, except he’s still smirking; I don’t even get the chance to properly answer, because a moment later my stomach growls again, and Phil ends up properly giggling at me.

“Shut up!” I shove at him for emphasis, but he doesn’t seem to mind. With more grace than I would expect of him - or anyone - after just waking up, he crawls over me and off the sofa, then makes his way to the kitchen. Because I can, I watch his ass until he stops in front of the fridge - I suppose staring isn’t revenge, exactly, but it’ll have to do.
“Remind me when we go into town tomorrow, flour,” Phil says to the fridge, which makes very little sense but I make a mental note anyway. “For now, though, is a stir fry okay? I think I’ve got enough of everything…” Phil trails off, a hand already pulling ingredients out and setting them on the counter.

I hum an agreement, but I’m already distracted, waiting for the moment he sets the pan on the hob. A fire sparks to life underneath it, and I grin - it hadn’t exploded, and I’d been able to do it with almost no effort at all. Phil peeks over his shoulder, eyes bright and smile even brighter.

“Do you maybe want to practice more?” Phil suggests, looking toward the backyard. Mellix’s ears perk up from where he’s still resting by my head, and he rushes at the door that barely slides open in time for the barreling tank of fur. Phil just laughs as I turn to watch the wolf, then turn back to Phil, my eyes wide; I’ll admit to myself at least, the sheer power Mellix has is a little frightening. Honestly, it’d be stupid of me not to have a healthy respect for him.

“I think he wants to play,” Phil prompts - apparently I’ve just been staring. I suppose the wolf and I had been on amicable terms when we’d been playing a magnified game of fetch, so perhaps that’s the way to keep on his good side. I nod absently at Phil as I stand, then make my way to the door. Susan slides it aside with far less urgency than she had for Mellix, but I’m moving quite a bit slower.

“No fire!” Phil shouts just as the door’s sliding shut, and I wave a hand over my shoulder to let him know I heard.

Mellix stares me down, wide yellow eyes narrowing as I take a tentative step forward.

“Do you want to, uh,” I point in the direction of the forest, hoping he’ll catch my meaning and go off in search of a large branch I can throw for him. My stupid hand is shaking, and I nearly run right back inside when the wolf licks his lips. No no no, I’m not tasty, I’m a human, I’m Phil’s friend, I’m-

I stop mid-thought - are we friends? Or something more? Surely more, if the past day is anything to go by. I break my apprehensive stare at the wolf to peek over my shoulder at Phil: his back is bowed as he chops something - some vegetables most likely - and throws the pieces into the pan. It’s one of those domestic, calming sights I rarely ever imagined I’d see in my life, and I exhale a slow breath - whatever we are, whatever this is, it’s happening, it’s a real, actual part of my life right now. Maybe not forever, although I’d certainly hope for a while at least, but definitely for now. I find my lips have curled into a soft smile, and I hope Phil doesn’t turn around so I can continue to absorb this for a bit longer.

Of course, the whole soft, thoughtful moment is interrupted by the thwack of a tail on my back, and I turn in a huff to see Mellix’s dark grey fur disappear into the treeline. Stupid wolf.

My eyes widen when a howl echoes back to where I’m stood in the garden, so I offer a quick mental apology just in case.
I hope Mellix doesn’t give him too hard a time. Dan seems…well, more comfortable with the wolf than he’d been before, at least, but definitely still on the nervous side.

A hissing, spitting sound reminds me to stir the vegetables and prevent them from burning, but then I’m thinking about burning, and heat and fire and those spells and I am really not looking forward to introducing Beatrice to Dan - I can already see it, Beatrice’s condescending demeanor setting Dan on edge, and he’s not one to hold back a snarky response. I’ll have to play peacekeeper, I guess. I can’t imagine the ramifications of Dan losing his cool - quite literally - in the middle of Beatrice’s shop. In the middle of town, for that matter.

It’s probably for the best if nobody knows there’s another witch living just outside town limits, especially one with the amount of energy Dan’s harboring and only the most basic knowledge of his own witchcraft.

No, Dan’s been chased out of one town already… I resolve to do most of the talking once we get to the shop, just to be on the safe side. Then there’s a slightly smoky smell that’s definitely coming from the pan I’ve totally forgotten to keep stirring, so I turn the heat down and try my best to salvage the mess - it’s only a few bits that sat right over the fire for too long, but maybe I can pass them off as caramelized or something.

With a sigh, I scrape the pan’s contents onto two plates, then make sure the hob is switched off. I already have one fire hazard to manage, I definitely don’t need a second. No, that’s not fair, I chide my own thoughts as I pull two forks from the drawer. Dan’s not a child that needs to be ‘managed’, and it isn’t his fault his particular brand of witchcraft manifests most commonly as heat. And that he hasn’t figured out complete control yet.

The sliding door opens for me, and I mumble a distracted thanks to Susan - but what if he never gains complete control? If his recent stunt with the portal is any indication, he’s got a lot of energy, maybe even as much as PJ. Maybe more.

I’m really hoping those fireproofing spells turn out to be effective.

I set our plates on the table and Dan joins a moment later, after flinging a branch - well, it’s really more like a small tree - out into the forest. Mellix races off after it, and Dan grins at me as he sits down.

“That’s…wow,” he says, breathless but clearly not from any exertion - he’s staring, bright-eyed, in the direction he just launched the tree, more in awe than anything else. To be fair, I’m quite in awe of his witchcraft as well.

“Yeah, you really are,” I grin, because my words make him duck his head, and a slight blush touches his cheeks. He makes a point of digging into his food, so I do the same, leaving us in a comfortable silence that basically begs my mind to wander.

And as much as it’d really like to wander to all things Dan, it ends up wandering to the little black notebook instead. To PJ’s note, the one I’d definitely transported to my bedside drawer to keep away from Dan. ‘You won’t want these for long’. I’ll admit, it had taken...well, almost long enough that Dan would’ve gotten his hands on it, and then we’d be in trouble. I’m still not fully sure what PJ was implying, but if it had to do with the book, it was undoubtedly sexual.
And even though I absolutely trust Dan, I’m not sure I trust his witchcraft, and I don’t want him to get the idea that we wouldn’t need some kind of protection.

“You’re thinking,” Dan’s voice interrupts my thoughts - he’s made a very accurate observation, at least - and I sort of inhale the bite I’ve been absently chewing. Then cough a couple times.

“About?” Dan asks, blatantly ignoring - or maybe counting on - the fact that I’ve clearly been thinking about something I may not want to share. In this case, that I definitely don’t want to share. Eventually, maybe, once he’s under control. Maybe that’s all PJ really meant, that we won’t want to use the spells because Dan will have control soon.

It’s hard to picture that, but maybe I should have more faith - both in him and in myself, since I’m meant to be teaching him.

“Teaching!” I finally sputter out, which is at least sort of true, and Dan’s hand pauses mid-air, lifting his fork to his lips. I watch those lips for a moment, remembering how they feel, remembering the breathy moans they’d let out, and-

“Teaching?” His voice comes out flat, a little disbelieving, so I nod. Mostly to clear my own head.

“Yeah! I was thinking, uh, we could practice more?” I’m fully aware I’m making this up on the spot, but Dan’s nodding, and it doesn’t look like a ‘sure, whatever you say’ kind of nod, so I keep going with it. “Right, like, you’re clearly getting the hang of channeling your energy.” I gesture toward the forest with my fork, where Mellix has yet to reappear. “But maybe we could try some spells?” It’s a safe enough idea; as long as I’m with him, checking his work, he’s not likely to do anything disastrous.

Dan takes another bite, and his gaze drifts off for a moment while he chews.

“So like the flying spell?” He asks after a moment, and I nod.

“Yeah, like that, or we could practice some transport or healing spells, nothing too complex just yet,” and now I’m the one letting my thoughts wander, trying to come up with the more basic spells - preferably ones I actually have ingredients for.

“Well what all can we do?” Dan’s voice sounds bright, enthusiastic, dripping with possibility, and I refocus and grin at him. I imagine teaching someone who’s excited to learn is probably a lot easier than trying to teach someone who doesn’t care. I huff out a laugh - that’s the thing about spells, there’s not much you can’t do, as long as you’re willing to experiment.

“A lot,” I answer, because we’re definitely not going to be experimenting with anything just yet. Best to stick to the tried and true spells, the ones that are nearly impossible to get wrong. “But not just yet.” Dan’s face falls a bit, “but they’re still cool!” I realize I’m just going back and forth without giving him any real answers, but I’m not entirely sure myself - I’m trying to make a mental list of ingredients, but it’s much easier to have a spell in mind first, then determine if I’ve got the stuff to do it or not. The inverse is harder.

“Healing,” Dan says after a moment; I’ve just been lost in my head, so I have to blink a few times. My face must give away my confusion, because Dan sits back in his chair and sets his jaw. “It’s probably best if we start with healing spells, just, uh, just in case.” Now his eyes drop to the table, to the mostly empty plate in front of him. He’s set his fork down, and his hands fidget in his lap - I assume, anyway, by how his arms keep shifting slightly.

“Right, okay.” I feel a little awkward, unsure how to answer, because I don’t want to imply that he should be worried he’ll hurt me - or someone - but he’s not wrong, and it’s definitely better to be
safe than sorry. “Finished?” I gesture at his plate, and he nods, but it’s a subdued movement with pursed lips that only makes me want to frown.

Before I can stand and take his plate, he’s got it hovering mid-air - when I look past it, though, I’m pleased to see a tiny curl at the corner of his lip. If he has the energy, I suppose there’s no reason not to use it...I still can’t help the feeling that it’s a waste, when we have two perfectly capable hands, but hadn’t I been new to witchcraft once? A child, sure, but eager to use my energy whenever I could, however I could manage?

I follow Dan’s - and the plate’s - progress into the kitchen, but don’t bother wasting my own more limited energy on unnecessary levitation. I got that out of my system ages ago, and prefer to put my witchcraft to more practical uses.

“Is the dishwasher spelled as well?” Dan asks as I approach the sink, where he’s already got the tap running over his plate. Practical uses like that! I keep my grin to a more moderate half-smile.

“Yeah, almost everything is spelled in some way.” I’ll admit, I’m definitely savoring the wide-eyed stare he gives me, clearly impressed. I shrug, even though I’d very much like to grin and accept the unsaid praise; for some reason, I feel like I should be a little humble.

“Fuck!” Dan mutters under his breath a moment later, because the plate’s clattered in the sink, and I’m not sure why he dropped it but I’m suspecting it maybe has to do with me, and then I can’t help but grin. There’s something really satisfying - and a little exciting - about the fact that I’m the reason Dan loses control of himself and his witchcraft.

Then he’s clearing his throat and loading the dishwasher - manually, I notice - and I quickly do the same. It only takes a little spark of energy to start it running, then I’m turning toward the stairs, intent on grabbing a few necessities for some healing spells. It’s not til I’m stood on the first step that I realize Dan hasn’t followed, still standing in the kitchen and frowning at the dishwasher.

“Dan, are you-”

“How does it work, then?” He interrupts me mid-sentence, and I smirk at his dedication to learning. He does turn to look at me, then, so I make my way back over.

“A spell, first, then a bit of energy whenever it needs to do its job.” I hope he doesn’t ask for the details, because I’m not sure I could ever really explain them myself - PJ was an excellent teacher, sure, but he was big into feeling, not so much about the precision and inner workings of witchcraft. And then I’d been on my own, teaching myself after a while; unfortunately, I’d been unable to find the manual titled ‘How Witchcraft Actually Works 101’. So I just...rolled with it, figured out what I could and asked PJ whenever I needed help.

“Okay,” Dan nods, apparently satisfied for the time being; tension I hadn’t realized I’d been holding onto seeps out of my muscles as he turns toward the staircase. “The locked room?” He asks without turning around.

“Yeah, we’ll need a few things for the, uh, the healing spell,” I follow behind him, maybe a little too distracted by his hips swinging right in front of my face. I clear my throat halfway up the stairs, hoping to clear my head as well, but it doesn’t exactly help. There’s a soft breath as Dan reaches the top step, and I’m not sure but it sounds a lot like a chuckle. I frown, then make an effort to stare at the back of his head instead. That’ll teach you to laugh at me!

Although I’m not entirely sure what it’ll teach him, or if I’m really only punishing myself, denying my eyes the view they very much would like to see.
Dan pauses at the door, turning to face me, and I gesture at him to go first.

“It’ll open for me?” He quirks a brow at me, but lifts his hand and turns the handle, and the door swings inward. Really, I suppose Susan could’ve opened it for us, but I’m sure there’s a reason she didn’t.

Maybe it has to do with the brief smile that crosses Dan’s face before he turns and steps inside. *I mean, sure, I keep it locked for a reason, but I trust you. Plus I’ll be in there with you, it’s not like you can get into much trouble when I’m stood right there.* I guess I didn’t even think about it much until he stopped there, outside the door, but I could probably do a better job of showing I trust him. Because I do. Right?

*It’s just his witchcraft I don’t trust, and we’ll get that under control in no time!* I don’t like the forced positivity in my head, but it’ll have to do for now, as Dan’s already wandering the room, poking at items and opening drawers.

“So what’ll we need, then?” He holds up one of the more intricate hand-held mirrors I keep in the corner, then runs a hand through his hair, smoothing down the fluff. I take a few steps closer, until I’m right beside him, and he looks up at me. Because I can, I run my own fingers through his hair in the exact opposite direction, turning it into a spiky mess. Which leaves me grinning and him pouting at me, then at the mirror as he tries to fix it again.

“*Rude,*” he mumbles, managing to get it somewhat tame. I’m tempted to do it again, but one glare and a smack in the chest from Dan says I probably shouldn’t.

“Alright, alright,” I can’t help but giggle as I step back. “Quartz, garlic, marigold, and a white candle.” I list off the items, hoping Dan will catch my drift that I mean for him to find them himself. *Trial by fire seems appropriate for him,* I smirk at my own thought. Dan frowns for a moment, brows scrunched, then sets the mirror aside and heads over to the shelves across the room.

He picks up the same crystal he’d grabbed when Mellix had been sick, clearly remembering it had been correct, but he still shoots me a quick look over his shoulder. I give him a small nod, even though I’d really meant to wait to tell him how he’s done *after* he collects all the items. The herbs are easier, since they’re labeled, and he pulls out a couple dried cloves and a handful of yellow petals. I step aside as he passes me, heading toward the back corner with the collection of candles, and he picks a white one at random - short and stumpy, half used.

Then he’s juggling all the ingredients, coming to a stop right in front of me; he gives each thing a quick glance, then looks up at me, eyes wide as he waits for my approval.
I mean, surely I can’t have messed this up, right? The quartz I’d grabbed before, so I’m sure that’s right - plus, Phil sort of nodded at me, so I think it has to be - and the garlic and marigold were labeled, so unless I’ve gone completely blind or there’s something special about candle \textit{shapes} I’m not aware of, I’m \textit{sure} I’ve got it all right this time.

Right?

I’m staring at Phil, watching his eyes as they flick over each of the ingredients - something about them sparks in my memory, but I can’t quite recall what, and I’m too focused on Phil to properly dig inside my brain. I realize I’m holding my breath, which I probably don’t need to do, so I let it out slowly.

“Perfect!” Phil exclaims with a bright grin, and I can’t help but mirror it. It’s got nothing to do with controlling my witchcraft, I suppose, but it’s still gratifying to be \textit{right}. “Now we need, uh,” he pauses, glancing around the room, then walks over to a dresser - the same one I remember him pulling that giant tarp out of. Except this time, he opens a different drawer and produces a much smaller item.

“Okay! And the coconut oil is downstairs, so we can finish down there,” he says, wielding the small, shiny object at me, and I realize a moment later it’s a circular tin, much like the one- oh. \textit{We’re making the healing stuff he used on my foot, duh.} I’m tempted to smack my head - \textit{I knew} the whole ‘garlic and marigold’ thing sounded familiar - but I don’t, mostly because my hands are still full. Also because Phil’s already out in the hall, so I rush to follow.

I don’t manage to catch up til he’s already in the kitchen, standing at the sink with the tap on - I had to be extremely careful walking down the stairs whilst trying not to drop everything, and my grip on the crystal is getting more tenuous by the moment; I stop by the coffee table to deposit the items, then join Phil.

“Here,” he hands me the tiny tin, still wet, then turns off the water and dries his hands. Then he takes the tin back, dries it as well, and opens a cupboard to pull out a jar of coconut oil. “Okay! That should be- oh!” His eyes go wide and distracted as he shoves both things at me, and I barely manage to catch them before he’s turned around and digging through another drawer. “\textit{Now we have everything!” He holds up a sharpie, which seems a bit pedestrian, but I suppose I’m not the expert on spells, so I just shrug and head back to the coffee table.

He sits on the floor near the armchair, so I sit opposite him, my back pressed against the sofa; he’s focused rather intently on the items on the table, scooting them around, collecting the marigold petals into a neat pile, placing the tin on one end and the coconut oil behind it. I watch his movements, the way they bounce between confident and nervous as his hand hesitates over the garlic, then moves to the quartz instead, rearranging everything a few times until he seems to have deemed the setup perfect. Then he looks up abruptly, and I’m caught staring. I’m not even sure I can be bothered to feel embarrassed.

“Okay, so first is just the base,” he gestures at the collection of ingredients I assume we’ll be actually putting into the healing…\textit{stuff? Is it like, a poultice or something?} That sounds rather fancy, but cream doesn’t quite fit either. \textit{Salve?} I opt to stop that train of thought when Phil shifts
back, leaning against the armchair.

“What, don’t I get any instructions or anything?” I lift my brows at him, but he just smiles; there’s a moment when he inches forward, like he might be about to point something out or tell me how to start, but then he’s back to relaxing.

“Just mix them together, this bit isn’t so much about the witchcraft,” he nods again at the pile of herbs. “You can, uh, like infuse some energy if you want, but it’s not necessary,” he adds. And, because I’ve always been an overachiever - okay, when it comes to things I’m actually interested in, I have been - I decide I’ll be doing just that.

I lift a hand cautiously, then pick up the tin, but I just stare at the coconut oil. Because Phil’s forgotten a spoon, or any sort of scooping device. Now he does sit up, but I shake my head. Come on, Phil, start thinking with witchcraft. I smile and let out a tendril of energy toward the oil, scooping a bit and letting it drop into the tin. Phil sits back, a half-smile on his lips, but it doesn’t look as confident as it’d been before.

Shit, have I gone and fucked up already? And now I’m second-guessing the small amount of garlic I’m about to crush and mix in, hovering mid-air over the tin.

“Is this... I mean, do I just...” I wave a hand, and Phil’s original bright smile returns.

“Whatever feels right,” he answers, which is the stupidest non-answer he could possibly give. I do far better with clear instructions. Alright, alright, fine. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to feel whatever it is I’m meant to be feeling, except I don’t really feel much of anything except a floor under my ass and that tiny siphon of energy I’ve been using to hold the garlic.

With a frustrated sigh, I send another spike out and squish the garlic into crumbly bits, then let them fall into the coconut oil. Still spoonless, I stir them purely with my witchcraft, sort of just imagining an actual spoon doing the work. Which seems to do the trick, so I pretend I knew it would and challenge myself to a bit of multitasking.

Overall, it’s not hard, I guess, just like trying to pat your head and rub your stomach at the same time - it’s requiring more concentration, lifting a few of the marigold petals whilst simultaneously stirring the mixture, but I think I’m doing a halfway decent job. Nothing’s exploded or caught on fire, so I’m considering it a win so far.

“Oh! Actually, I guess we should’ve done this first, uh...” Phil’s startled from his staring - and he had been staring, not that I minded one bit - and he fumbles around the table, grabbing the sharpie and the lid that had accompanied the tin. “So, here,” he shoves both at me, and I do the only logical thing that comes to mind and take the lid first, twisting it on and sealing the tin shut.

“Alright,” our fingers brush as I take the sharpie, which sends a thrill through my veins even though that’s silly as it’s not the first time we’ve touched. And hopefully not the last. I lick my lips, trying not to let my head go in the wrong direction. I need my energy here and now, for whatever I’m meant to do next.

“Right, okay, so on the bottom- yeah, okay,” Phil nods energetically as I flip the tin over, “so you’ll write like...it’s sort of a backwards N, but with a tail and, uh...” he trails off, tilting his head while he thinks. Then he holds his hand up and cups nothing. “A macaroni hat!” He stares
pointedly at the shape he’s made, a semicircle with his palm toward the ceiling, and I sputter out a laugh.

“A mac- are you, I mean, what even is that?” I can’t keep a straight face, and it seems he can’t either, as he giggles and does his best to form whatever obscure symbol he’s trying to describe in the air with his arms. “Phil, I’m not- I can’t-” I end up failing to speak entirely, too lost in laughter, when he twists the whole upper half of his body into what I assume he thinks is a decent representation of the thing I’m meant to be writing.

“Wait wait wait,” he sticks his hand out across the table, so I offer the sharpie and tin, expecting him just to show me for next time - he does take the pen, but then grabs my newly emptied hand and flips it over so it’s cupped in his. “Okay, so it’s just-” he breaks off, leaning over to try to show me what he’s writing as he’s writing it. On my palm. Which tickles a bit, but I try my best to hold still.

“Oh,” I say after a moment, when he’s finished drawing and I can get a proper look - it really is a backwards N, with some sort of line on one end and an accent mark in the shape of an upside-down macaroni noodle. Of course that’s how Phil had chosen to describe it. Just like an R falling down the stairs. I chuckle, then take the pen Phil’s now sticking in my face.

“Right, just one?” I ask, lifting the tin and double-checking the way the symbol’s written on my palm. He hums, so I make slow, deliberate lines that cover most of the bottom of the tin. Once I’m finished, I check it against the drawing on my palm - it looks just about the same as Phil’s, I think, but I hold the tin out for his approval anyway.

“Yes! Exactly like that.” Phil grins at me, eyes wide and bright, and I’ve almost forgotten the fact that we haven’t actually done anything yet. Well, no spells or anything.

“Okay, so now what? This is when we get to the witchcraft, yeah?” I mean, I guess I’d thought we were there before, but then there was a symbol to write, so I could be missing something else as well. But Phil’s nodding, so I set the tin down in the center of the table.

“Right, now it’s just the spell itself. Do you think you can light the candle?” He asks, and I roll my eyes. Can I light the candle, ooh, let’s find out, shall we? I barely even have to think it before a tiny flame has popped into existence, wavering briefly before steadying. Then I smirk at Phil. He just grins back, so I shrug and huff out a breath. I’m tempted to tell him to quit looking at me like that, except I kind of like it.

“Okay, so basically what you’ll need to do is send your energy through the quartz, and- wait, hold on…” he trails off as he adjusts the candle, setting it between himself and the tin - there’s now a line across the table: me, the crystal, the tin, the candle, then Phil. “Okay, so through the quartz, think about healing,” he accompanies the word with a spread of hands, “and then the candle will keep the energy from going anywhere wayward.” He nods, and I’m suddenly concerned.

Wayward? My witchcraft is unruly, that’s not news, but I hadn’t realized I could fuck up a spell. I guess I’d just figured it was sort of like a potion, just mix the right stuff together and say the magic words. But this isn’t ‘magic’, like Phil said. It still feels strange, though, and a little unsafe, given my lack of practice.

“Don’t I need to, like, say some words or something?” I mean, to be fair, it’s a spell, I’m just trying to be logical. Phil shakes his head at my frown.

“No, nothing like that, you just sort of…” I can see the way his teeth meet his lip, and I roll my eyes before he’s even gotten the words out.
“Feel it, right, yeah, okay.” I grumble, staring down at the crystal. *Okay, energy, let’s do this.* I try to focus it the same way I had a few minutes ago with the stirring, but now I’m imagining a sort of stream, flowing through the quartz and into the tin to blend with the rest of the healing stuff. *Oh, right, okay, healing healing healing healing...* I repeat the word in my head until it doesn’t feel real anymore, and it sort of smears and squashes into a humming sound that I know *means* healing, even if it doesn’t really translate to a proper word.

“Dan?” Phil’s voice breaks my concentration, and I glance up to find him staring down at the candle. Which has not only stopped burning, but fully *reformed*, wick and all. After a solid thirty seconds of both of us just staring, Phil picks it up and inspects it from all sides. All...well, okay, not *sides*, because it’s a cylinder, but all around it. *Alright brain, let’s focus more on the current situation and less on the semantics of geometry.*

“That’s...” Phil trails off, glancing between me and the candle. I think I’m holding my breath, waiting for *something*, though I can’t say what. Maybe just an indicator of how I ought to react to this. To whatever I’d done. *Healing? Did I ‘heal’ the candle on accident?* “That’s a useful thing.” Phil says finally, eyebrows raised as he sets the product of my unintentional witchcraft back on the table.

“It’s- a *useful thing*?” Now I’m staring, because that’s it? No ‘you could’ve killed me’ or ‘that was dangerous’ or ‘you need more control’ or-* although I guess it’d been healing, not a poison spell or something obviously dangerous...* but that doesn’t mean I couldn’t have done something wrong and *made* it dangerous.

“Yeah,” Phil sort of chuckles, but it’s clear he’s not sure what else to say. Which is fine, I’ve got plenty to say for us both.

“*Phil*, I clearly messed up, I mean, whatever I *felt,*” I add air quotes for good measure, “I clearly did it wrong, I mean-”

“Dan, Dan,” he interrupts, staring at me until I clamp my mouth shut. It’s a battle, because I’m nowhere near finished with my rant, but I suppose he needs to explain where I fucked up or I’ll never get better. “You did just fine. I mean,” he lifts the candle again, “impressive, really.” Then he picks up the tin, weighs it in his hand for a moment. “*Wow,* this is strong,” he glances back up at me.

“It’s- I mean, I did okay?” My voice comes out all kinds of small and hopeful, which I’d really rather it didn’t, but I was *sure* I’d fucked up.

“Amazing, actually.”

Chapter End Notes

**it’s important to note that the symbol phil tells dan to draw for the healing spell is pronounced 'yee' (x)**
Phil

I’m still in shock - watching the candle regenerate in front of my eyes had been...something else. Dan is something else, powerful in a way that I think only PJ could rival, and that’s on a day where he’s hell-bent on trying. Dan’s energy, though, it seems almost effortless. Not for the first time, I’m far more worried about him keeping ahold of it than I am about him using it effectively.

Okay, actually I’m more concerned by the way he keeps trying to take blame for what he can do - even when there’s no real blame. He just saved me having to buy a new candle, I’m not about to complain. Sure, the fact that he’s having trouble containing his energy is troublesome, and he doesn’t always realize it’s gone out of control, but at least I don’t have to worry about a burnout. Or about any of the tough ‘how to use your energy’ techniques I’d struggled to learn as a kid.

“Really, amazing?” Dan breathes the words out, staring at the quartz on the table. Then his eyes shoot up, wide and focused. “I didn’t hurt you or anything, right?” His voice comes out soft, definitely concerned, but I end up chuckling. Which probably isn’t the right thing to do, but it was sort of a silly question.

“You were healing, the worst you could’ve done is make me healthier,” I point out, and relief courses through me at the way his shoulders relax, the way he exhales a slow breath and gives me a tentative smile. “Really,” I promise, “well done.”

Then his entire face lights up, and I vow to offer as much praise as I can if it means I get to see him look like this, glowing with pride and confidence, but not in an egotistical, haughty way. Just genuinely pleased he’d done a good job.

“Right, so what’s next, then?” He scans the table, and a few of the remaining ingredients shift around on a phantom wind that I assume to be a product of his witchcraft feeding off his interest and excitement.

“Hold on,” I chuckle, “how do you feel, first?” I’m guessing he’s still got plenty of energy, but I’ve no idea how quickly it’ll restore itself, and he did hijack the portal of the most powerful witch I’ve ever met just this morning, so I’d rather play it safe. He quirks a brow at me, which is about all the answer I need.

“I feel amazing, Phil,” he answers anyway. “I mean...did you see that?” He’s staring at the candle now, eyes wide with awe. “Like, imagine all the stuff I could do...” His eyes have gone unfocused, and he takes a deep breath.

“How about we start with fixing the cleansing spell upstairs?” We won’t need any ingredients, and it shouldn’t even require much energy. Dan blinks, then nods a little absently. Then he’s shifting forward, using the coffee table to balance as he stands, and I watch for any sign he’s more tired than he’s claiming.

But in spite of the spaced-out look he gave, he seems completely fine, already climbing the stairs before I’ve even properly stood myself - I rush to follow, figuring it’s better I’m nearby, just in case something goes wrong.

Except nothing does, not the whole walk to the storage room; I thank Susan for opening it ahead of us, then head over to the shelves. Dan stops in the middle of the space, turning to - I assume - wait for my instructions.
“Right, some chalk, which I think I’ve left in the top drawer,” I point at the dresser, and Dan steps over and pulls it open, shifting a few items around inside. I try to ignore the heat rushing to my cheeks, hoping Dan won’t comment on how disorganized that drawer is, crammed to the brim with miscellaneous items that didn’t quite belong anywhere else. And a lot of things I bought for some experimental spell or other but never ended up getting round to using.

“Jesus, Phil,” he says anyway, clearly taking no notice of my silent request. *Maybe he was talking about something else. Or praying!* “Alright, here,” he holds up a stumpy bit of chalk; it’s far too tiny for either of our fingers, really, but this symbol isn’t all that complex. I hold out a hand, but he doesn’t move, just stares at the chalk.

It takes me half a second longer to realize than it should, but then there’s a slight pressure in the air and the chalk doubles in length right in front of me. Well, in front of Dan, because he’s still stood by the dresser and it definitely wasn’t *me* that decided to practice some regeneration.

Instead of speaking, he just looks up with a bright grin, then drops the chalk into my palm.

“Right, actually, uh,” I frown, because there really isn’t much to this spell, just the symbol and some energy. “Here, you should take this,” I wave him over with one hand and hold the chalk up in the other, and he takes it back. *I probably should’ve just had him do this to begin with...* I’m suddenly feeling quite like my teaching skills aren’t up to par, especially not for someone so powerful.

Already, the pressure of being a good instructor doubles on my shoulders, and when I swallow, worms squirm in my stomach. *What happens when he gets better than me? What do I do when there’s nothing else for me to teach him?* Then fear, a spike that makes my hand shake and nearly drop the chalk - fortunately, Dan takes it just then. He doesn’t take the thought away, though. *What if he gets bored of me, when I run out of cool things to show him?*

“What’s next?” Dan’s voice pulls me back, and I force a smile to my face. I hope it’s bright enough to hide the swirling worry in my chest, to keep it from reaching my eyes - Dan’s staring into them, surely he’ll see if I can’t keep it hidden. And then he’ll *ask*, and then what? *How do I tell him I’m afraid he’ll leave me?* It seems...like too much. Because he hasn’t got a reason to stay, really, does he?

“Right, so you can sort of still see it,” I pretend for a minute that I’m not freaking out at all, just a happy calm Phil, teaching Dan something new. I think my finger stays steady as I trace the faded mark of the symbol on the side of the shelving unit. “It’s basically a big A with a little T in it. Or like a triangle with a T in it.” Then I step back, and I pretend I’m alright with that, with being farther away. Even though I suddenly want nothing more than to pull him closer and say *screw* all this teaching nonsense and just be the one that provides him with everything he could ever want or need.

*That’s it, isn’t it? Before it was a safe place, now it’s new things to learn about his witchcraft, but what happens when I’ve got nothing left to give him?* I barely notice he’s finished tracing over the symbol until he turns toward me, grin brighter than ever. Or maybe it’s just as bright as it has been, and I’ve just gotten so dark that it looks all different.

“Did I do it wrong?” His lips drop and his brows scrunch together and I *really* need to get myself together if I’m going to properly teach him something. Even if I’ll eventually run out, and he’ll be better than I am, and then he’ll want to go find somewhere else where someone more powerful has more wisdom than I ever would.

“No, it’s perfect!” I hope my enthusiasm makes up for whatever concern he’d seen in my
expression, because he deserves it. *He deserves the whole damn world, doesn’t he?* I only wish I could be the one to give it to him.

*But I can give him something, a little bit, right now.* I have to let that be enough. If I care for him *at all,* I want him to have everything he wants. Even if it means he’ll move on from me, eventually.

“Are you sure?” He’s frowning at the symbol now, so I take his hand in mine and squeeze it; he sucks in a breath, just a small one, and whips his head back to lock eyes with me. *If I can give you anything at all, no matter how small, it’s worth it.* I don’t say that out loud, though.

“Yes, absolutely,” I say instead, then tug him to stand right in front of the row of shelves. “Now, instead of healing, just think of...well, it’s *cleansing* I suppose, but not quite, more like...” I trail off and let my gaze drift, trying to focus on the spell in my head instead of the worry in my heart. “I don’t want to say ‘the absence of anything’ because I’m not sure I want a giant gaping hole in my wall,” I turn to find Dan frowning at the shelves, though, so I squeeze his hand again until he’s back to looking at me. “It’s a joke. The absence of negative energy?” I suggest. “Purity, maybe?”

This is part of the technique I always struggled with - PJ told me a *feeling* I was meant to be going for, and I tried my best, but I never really had a great grip on what he meant until I’d gotten older, had lots of practice. Even now, I occasionally struggle.

Dan, though, seems to have no problem whatsoever. His eyes drift shut, eyelids fluttering like he’s not fully relaxed, still present and focused on the task at hand. Then I can practically *see* the sort of glowing bubble around the shelf, and I can definitely feel whatever Dan’s doing. So far, no holes in my wall - even though it’d been a joke and I don’t *really* think he’ll harm anything, my brain won’t let that little bit of anxiety go.

After a few moments of silence, he opens his eyes, and the translucent bubble fades.

“Did I do it? I mean, is it fine?” He’s frowning at the shelves again, but it’s a more focused frown, and he squints like he’s searching for physical evidence of his efforts. Even without really *checking,* I can easily tell he’s done it - and done it *well*; the amount of energy pulsing from the space in front of us says I won’t have to worry about redoing the spell anytime soon.

“It’s fantastic,” I reassure him, and his soft smile makes it impossible to feel anything but pride. Even if he moves on eventually, I’ve played a part. I’ve made him smile, in the same way he is now. I wish I could take a picture, so I can pore over it when he’s inevitably gone, but I’ll have to be happy with knowing that I’ve done something. Knowing I was, at some point, the indirect cause of that smile. “Really fantastic,” I add, because I hope it’ll make him grin properly, make that small dimple in his cheek deepen a bit more.

It does. My heart soars.

“Alright, then, what now?” He rocks forward on his toes, and the slight movement reminds me our hands are still linked - I hadn’t really even realized, and it probably wasn’t the safest thing for us to be touching while he’d been doing that spell, but I suppose it turned out alright. And I can’t see any good reason to let go now, so I don’t. Our fingers laced together like this, it’s comfortable. Easy.

I can’t help but smile, both at how *nice* it feels to be around him - to be with him, to be touching, to be connected - and at his enthusiasm.

“Still not tired?” I check again, even though I know his answer. He rolls his eyes, lips parting to, I assume, reassure me he’s *perfectly fine* - I interrupt before he can. “Okay, okay,” I chuckle, an idea already forming, “how about a challenge, then?” I don’t know why I’m surprised at the way his
eyes light up, the way his lip curls in a smirk that practically screams ‘bring it on’.

I tug his hand, leading him from the storage room and out into the hall - I have a plan, I just need...well, the rest of the plan, so I end up stalling by heading downstairs, then turning toward the sliding glass door at the last minute. *Outside is probably safer, anyway.*

“Are we flying again?” His voice comes out light, a level of forced casualness that tells me exactly how excited he is about the prospect. I twist my lips as Susan opens the door for us; the last rays of sunlight peek over the edge of the trees, distracting me for a moment - I hadn’t even realized how long we must’ve slept earlier.

“No,” I shake my head when I finally pause in the middle of the garden, Dan coming to a stop beside me. “I used the rest of the coriander on the spells to fix Javier’s sprinkler system,” I clarify before he can get to looking too disappointed. “Remind me, and we’ll pick some more up tomorrow at the shop?” I’m starting to think I really ought to make a list.

“Sure,” Dan nods, “what, then?” I glance around, then drop his hand to head over to the gardenias - they’re sort of just aesthetic, since they aren’t native to the area and frankly aren’t even all that practical to have on hand for spells, but I like having them around, I just find them really pretty. I’d even told Javier, when he’d handed over the tiny little pot with the plant, that they were clearly too pretty to be real. *So’s Dan.* I grin as I pluck one of the white blooms and return to him. *Seems appropriate.*

“Okay,” I hold the flower in my palm, but snatch it back the moment he lifts his own hand to take it. “No no no! No, do it- wait, no,” I put my other hand on his shoulder when he closes his eyes, because that’s the exact same focused-eye-closing-thing he did earlier with the cleansing spell. “Hold on, let me tell you what to do first!” He peeks at me from behind squinty eyelids, then exhales a breath and crosses his arms.

“Alright, go on then,” he waves a hand.
Dan

I’m eager to get on with this ‘challenge’ Phil’s proposed, though I can’t quite figure out what it’s meant to be. A flower? Am I making it float, or grow, or something like that? Growing, that could be a challenge...but I’ve never been any good with plants - not terrible, but I certainly don’t have a green thumb - so I twist my lips and hope that’s not what Phil has in mind.

“Transporting,” he says with a nod, like it’s very clear what he’s talking about, so I purse my lips and tilt my head.

“What, like before? That’s hardly a-”

“No, no,” he looks up toward the sky, frowning. “Like, teleportation, sort of?” My eyes go wide. Teleportation? He wants me to- shit, I’d totally forgotten that was a possibility, or I guess it just hadn’t really occurred to me that I could do it. Although, I did sort of teleport us home earlier, didn’t I? I frown at the flower - a white bloom with petals spiraling out from the center, frankly looking a bit too perfect - and try to determine the logistics. How would that even-

“Okay, so what you’ll do,” Phil goes on, and I blink and try to focus on his instructions. It’s probably better than trying to guess how this’ll work. “Sort of think about the flower,” he points to his palm, “then about where you want it to go. But you have to really visualize it,” he emphasizes, and his eyes find mine.

“Like I did earlier?” I quirk a brow - surely, if I could unintentionally transport people, transporting a tiny plant will hardly be a real challenge. I close my eyes, picturing the curls of the petals, the precise way it had fit in Phil’s hand, the color just a shade lighter than his skin.

“Right, but you really have to-” but I’m ignoring him - I suppose he hadn’t actually told me where I should be teleporting the flower, so I start small. I lift my hand, and though I can’t see it, it’s my hand, so I hardly have any trouble imagining it.

I’m not sure if Phil’s actually just stopped talking or if I’m paying so little attention that he may as well have, but my ears fill with a sort of subtle humming sound that I take to mean something’s happening, so I concentrate on the flower, on it appearing in my own hand, on the way it would feel, soft and light and tickling my palm.

“Wow,” this time I hear it, a soft breath that I know comes from Phil’s mouth because it’s Phil and it’d be impossible not to recognize his voice. Also, we’re sort of alone, I’d be worried if I’d zoned out so heavily that someone else could approach without my realizing.

But he said ‘wow’, not ‘oh no’ or ‘you fucked it all up’, so I figure I must’ve done a halfway decent job - I blink my eyes open to find him staring at my palm, the white flower resting there as if Phil had- wait.

“You didn’t just drop it in my hand to boost my self-esteem?” I check, and Phil’s eyes go wide, brows arched up his forehead, before he coughs out a surprised laugh.

“No, Dan, you did that yourself,” he nods at my hand, but I twist my lips.

“Where should I send it now?” I need proof I can do this without his help, I need to know for sure he didn’t just make it seem like I’d done something I hadn’t; I’ve suddenly started second-guessing every other bit of witchcraft I’ve ‘done’, but Phil’s been so genuinely shocked at everything, I suppose he can’t have orchestrated it all.
“Well, what’s a place you know well?” Phil tilts his head at me, face relaxing into something a little less astonished and a bit more curious. *Somewhere I know well?* Unbidden, the first thing that comes to mind is my old flat - probably abandoned, or put up for sale. *No, more likely abandoned. Looted, maybe.* It hadn’t exactly been in the nicest part of town.

I must be frowning, because Phil’s hand finds mine - the flower-less one - a moment later, twining our fingers and squeezing gently.

“What about the coffee table?” He suggests, voice soft and light. I glance up - *when had I even looked down*? - to find his smile matches, soft and light and comforting. I nod.

The humming coil of energy comes faster this time, perhaps in an attempt to bury any memories from *before* - it’s strange, the sudden need to label that time of my life as *before*, as over and done and in the past. And not at all connected to *now*, aside from this tenuous bridge that is *me*, myself and my memories. *I wonder if I can erase those.* I can fucking *teleport* shit, so I imagine I could get rid of some less-than-fun bits of my past, but then, would I be the same person?

Would Phil still want me, if I were different?

“Dan?” My eyes fly open, and I glance down at my hand. The flower hasn’t moved, but flames lick the edges of the petals, curling the whole thing in on itself and turning it into a monochrome mess of black and white, accented by orange tongues of fire. It’s not hot, though - warm, maybe - and utterly entrancing, so I just watch it until it’s collapsed into a husk of black in my palm. The flames die of their own accord.

“Dan?” Phil tries again, and I manage to look up at him. Watch his nostrils flare as he sucks in a breath. See the widening of his eyes as he glances down at the destroyed flower, then back up to my face. “Are you alright?” His words are careful, soft in the way they were before but sitting on the edge now, concerned. I nod.

“Got distracted,” I supply, because ‘I was worrying about something that I probably shouldn’t bother you with because I don’t think it matters but it did for about five seconds in my head and also you like me right?’ seems a bit...over the top. Phil’s hand - the one, I realize, that still hasn’t left mine - gives me a quick squeeze.

“Maybe we should take a break?” He says it like a question, but he’s already tugging me lightly toward the house. I plant my feet.

“Hold on, let me-” I break off, squeezing my eyes shut with more force. Phil doesn’t continue to drag me, at least, but I can practically *feel* his hesitation, can almost hear the words he’s surely *barely* holding back from saying: ‘it’s been a long day, you need some rest, maybe this was too much of a challenge for now, we’ll try again later’. I ignore them, even though they’re still unsaid.

The burnt flower in my hand feels so light it might float away on its own, but I ground it with my own energy until I can feel its exact presence in my palm. Then I’m focused on the table inside - wood, a dark color that’s two shades off from black and doesn’t fit any of the other furniture in the room, but somehow still *fits*. The husk in my hand matches quite well, actually, now that I’m envisioning it there. It nearly blends right in - but no, I can see the warped edge of the petals, the barest hints of white where the fire had given up before it could finish its job.

And then I can’t help it - I’m imagining the inverse, the flower growing back to its original lovely splendor. But even in my head, it doesn’t, not quite: the petals reform, perfect edges, curved and soft, but they don’t take on their original color. Instead, they remain the same muted black as they’d been in my palm, and laced through with fiery lines of red and orange, like a snapshot of
when the flower had been burning. It’s almost prettier than the original pale white, but in a dark, edgy sort of way. I can’t help but grin as I open my eyes, already knowing to expect my empty palm but still elated.

Phil offers me a bright grin that says he’s proud but maybe a little concerned I’d pushed myself too far.

“I’m good,” I promise before he can ask. Then I’m the one dragging him inside at a near-sprint, sliding to a stop beside the coffee table.

Okay, I sort of thought it’d happen, but it’s still incredibly satisfying to see the altered flower nearly blending in with the shade of the coffee table, aside from the veins of fire across the petals. Phil lets out a soft ‘oh’ that does more for my self-esteem than probably anything I’ve managed thus far. Because there’s no way he’d predict that I would do that, surely.

I lean over and pluck the flower from the table, twirling the base of it between my fingers as I turn to Phil. Who looks exactly as surprised as I’d hoped.

“For you,” I offer in what I’m definitely calling my cheesiest move to date. It’s Phil’s fault, really, I think he just makes me want to be cheesy. He stares at the flower, eyes wide, but manages to lift a hand - the one not still holding onto me, and the fact he hasn’t let go sends a bolt of fire through my chest.

For a moment, though, my excitement shifts to worry - Phil’s still looking shocked, and I’m not sure how I’m meant to interpret that. He does take the flower, at least, and stares at it for a solid minute; then his face lights up, a complete transformation, and he’s grinning at me.

In seconds, he’s wrapped me in a crushing hug, and all the air whooshes out of my lungs. But who even needs to breathe if it means I get to be pressed up against Phil for eternity?

“Thank you,” his voice comes out soft and genuine, a complete contrast to his overly-excited attack, but I just grin into his shoulder and loop my arms around his waist.

“Welcome,” I try for a nonchalant tone, like it hadn’t been all that much effort to completely regenerate and transform a flower. I mean, I suppose it hadn’t, but I still want to play it off. I take quick stock of my energy, which feels pretty much the same as it had before the witchcraft, so I’m assuming I’m still alright. I don’t feel tired.

A few moments pass, then a few more, and I’m still waiting for Phil to let go - I sure as hell won’t be the one to let go first, not when I could keep him pressed against me for a little longer. After another minute, I’ve honed in on the soft breaths against my neck, the ones I’m sure he’s not doing on purpose but have already started to make me wish he’d just lean in, just a little bit closer, and press his lips there. Or his tongue. Or bite, because fuck that’d be hot and-

And wow, am I really that out of control I’m already imagining turning a slightly-longer-than-average hug into foreplay? I decide now’s about as good a time as ever to pull back, if only so I don’t accidentally set one of us on fire.

I immediately regret it.

Phil’s eyes match my insides, all flickering flames and passion and shit I can practically feel my skin heating up. I stumble back, brain winning out over pretty much every other piece of me that’s desperate for us to have this whole ‘catching things on fire’ situation under control already. Fingers trail down my arm as Phil lets me go and I swallow thickly at the contact.
But the moment’s completely broken when Phil frowns, shifts on his feet.

“Are you alright?” He’s back to that on-edge tone, the one that says he’s sure something’s wrong and he’s just waiting for my confirmation. I shake my head, more to clear it than anything, then nod when his brows furrow.

“No, no, I mean, I’m-” I sigh. “I’m fine, don’t worry,” I say, which is exactly the kind of thing not to say if you want to convince someone you’re fine. But I’ve gone and done it, and Phil hasn’t stopped frowning. A tiny movement at the corner of my vision makes me glance down, to where his fingers spin the flower in his hand.

“I’m good,” I promise, again a horrible thing to say, but I emphasize it by leaning in and brushing a brief kiss to his cheek. “Overwhelmed,” I admit in his ear just before pulling away again. In spite of...well, everything, I still feel a blush crawl up to my cheeks at the idea that he’s able to get me worked up so easily. Apparently, though, this is the right thing to say, because Phil’s tension disappears almost immediately.

Then he has the audacity to fucking laugh at me, so I swat his arm.

“Sorry, sorry, I just- I was worried,” he says, and it sounds like a confession. “Like maybe I’d done something?” Now it’s my turn to chuckle, but I don’t even really mean it. Apparently, we’re both nervous wrecks half the time, whenever we aren’t actually making out. Sometimes even then.

Instead of responding - I feel like laughing was response enough, to be honest - I lean into him and rest against his shoulder. I don’t even bother pulling him into a proper hug, I just sort of want to exist whilst touching him for a bit. Which sounds all kinds of wrong in my head, but I know what I mean.

Phil must as well, because he doesn’t do anything other than drape his arms over my shoulders and support me; we stand there in silence for who knows how long, until my feet would rather not be holding all my body weight and I pull away.

“Okay, okay, now I’m tired.” It’s not strictly true, but I’m mentally crossing my fingers that Phil will invite me to bed with him - I mean, it would make sense, at this point, right? We’ve shared a bed already, although I suppose I could sleep on the couch, that wouldn’t really be a huge deal, but...that’s not what I want.

Right, because I’m just so used to getting what I want, aren’t I?
I try not to chuckle again at his admission - I sort of got the message when he just slumped against me for a while. It doesn’t even seem like a used-up-his-energy kind of tired, more just a ‘I’m done for the day’ kind. The same kind that would occasionally hit me at eight at night, when it really wasn’t time to properly sleep, so I’d just curl up in my bed with a book and read until I was ready to fall asleep.

“Should we go to bed, then?” I ask, and it’s not til Dan’s eyes drift to the floor that I realize we’re sort of in a position we hadn’t been in before: there are technically two places to sleep, unlike there’d been at PJ’s, but I really would rather we only use one. But I don’t want to push boundaries, especially given Dan’s reaction earlier. And I really hadn’t been trying all that hard to get him worked up.

Okay, maybe just a little. We really need to get to the store tomorrow, sooner rather than later...

“Yeah,” Dan nods, but his eyes stay focused on the ground.

“You could, uh, stay in my room? If you want?” I offer, but Dan’s gaze fixes on me, and he sucks in a breath. “If you want! You don’t have to, the sofa is still-”

“I do.” He says, exhaling, then he’s grabbing my hand with way more energy than he seemed to have two minutes ago and dragging me up the stairs. I’m suddenly wondering if this maybe wasn’t the best idea, us both in a house by ourselves in a single bed and-

Dan must have a very similar idea, because he stops short at my door and pulls his hand from mine, frowning at it; I hadn’t even realized, but he must’ve been heating up - I’m not even sure he realizes he does it, that little scrunched face thing, but it’s sort of cute. And a really good way to tell what he’s thinking.

“If you don’t think you can-”

“I can handle it, Phil,” he cuts me off mid-sentence, voice sharp as a knife, and I think my mouth just hangs open. He sighs, then glares at his hand - it’s clearly on purpose this time. “I can, I promise, I think it’s alright when I sleep,” his tone has softened, more like a dull knife now, and directed at himself and his witchcraft instead of at me. I reach for his hand to tug him close, then press a kiss to his forehead.

“I trust you,” I promise once I’ve pulled back, once I can look in his eyes and make him know I’m serious, that I’m being fully honest and I don’t doubt him. Because I don’t, I realize with a start - his witchcraft might be...whatever it is, uncontrollable or overwhelming or overpowering, but between us, we can handle it. He pushed me back earlier, when he’d been worried he’d lose control.

He doesn’t respond, which is just as well, as I’m not sure what I’d say. How could I ever express exactly what I feel, exactly how strongly, without scaring him off? Or maybe my problem’s the other way round, and I couldn’t ever find words to properly tell him, that would do my feelings justice?

I’m still holding the black and red gardenia he gave me earlier - the one he made me, that he burned and brought back to life and changed - when he finally pushes my door open and pulls me inside. Then he’s paused, staring at the bed, completely still - I’m about to ask if something’s
wrong, but he drops my hand and crawls under the covers like it’s his own bed and he’s just been gone for a year.

“Dan,” I huff out a laugh at the way he’s pulled the duvet up to his chin, staring at me with wide brown eyes. “Don’t you want to like, brush your teeth or anything?” I realize only after I’ve said it that I’ve just completely implied he has bad breath, and I’m a second away from backtracking when he frowns at me.

“Fine, yeah,” he says, exasperated as he gets out of the bed with as much frowning and grumbling as he seems able. I don’t bother trying to hide my smile as he bumps my shoulder on the way to the door.

I figure I’ll just wait til he’s done, given there’s only one sink and all, so I flop down on the bed myself and stare at the ceiling. Dan’s only laid in it for a second, but I can smell just the smallest whiff of him - something salty, warm like the sun, and something else I can’t place but just feels familiar. Then the door creaks open and I’m sitting up and swapping places with him. But I suppose I have all night to smell him, if I really want.

*That sounds...really creepy, Phil,* I tell myself as I stop in front of the mirror; my reflection says I could probably use a shower, but the prospect of going to sleep has made me tired, and besides, maybe we can...well, Dan probably will want a shower as well. I have to fight back a grin so I can stick my toothbrush in my mouth.

I brush my teeth as quickly as I can and splash some water on my face, which doesn’t actually end up doing much to help with the flush on my cheeks; Maybe Dan will be warm, and I can blame it on him, if he asks.

When I’ve returned to the room, Dan’s already back to snuggling under the covers, and I’m suddenly just thrilled by the idea that I can wrap myself around him and we can drift off together without any of the fear of being in the middle of the forest or of any *untimely* interruptions - it’s so *peaceful.* For the first time in nearly a week, there’s nothing pressing down on us, nothing strange or exciting or unusual. Although I suppose the fact that we can just sleep together like this, that’s unusual and exciting in itself.

“Phil?” Dan’s voice sounds full of sleep already, and I blink at him. Apparently, I’m still just stood by the door, so I make my way over and join him under the covers. He keeps wide brown eyes fixed on me the entire way over, until I’m laying right across from him, resting on our own pillows but facing each other and less than a foot apart.

Without warning, he tucks himself into me, burying his head in the crook of my shoulder and pressing his body against mine. His arm drapes over my waist, gently, not pulling me closer - although I’m not sure how much closer we’d even be able to get. I put my arm over him anyway, just enjoying the contact; I can’t help my smile because it’s clear he *wants* this. He wants to be here, right now, with me. I press a soft kiss to the side of his head, then settle back onto the pillow.

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“Phil?” I groan and turn my head further into the pillow, intent on avoiding whatever it is trying to wake me. But something’s nudging my side and I’m a little too warm and maybe I should just peek to see if I can make the thing- *oh.*

Wide brown eyes stare back at me, belonging to the person all my limbs are currently tangled up with. So I close my eyes and snuggle into him, content to just lay here a while. Until he pokes me in the side again, and I flinch away.
“What?” I sort of whisper back, trying to sound annoyed but definitely not pulling it off.

“What happens now?” His voice stays soft and low, but the words aren’t really making sense to my still-sleepy ears. So I turn back to him and hum, about the closest to a question I can properly manage. Some light must be coming through the windows, because everything’s gone silvery - the edges of Dan’s curls look grey, like they might if he were eighty years older. A smile touches my lips at the thought of waking up beside him nearly a century from now. It’s nice to pretend, even if he’ll eventually get bored of me and my limited skills and leave.

“What happens,” he starts again, and I try to refocus on the present. “After this?” And it’s still so vague that my brain doesn’t want to put pieces together or acknowledge what he’s obviously implying. After. After I’ve taught him everything I can. I blow out a slow breath and fight the urge to squeeze my eyes shut and pretend this is all just a nightmare. A soft, warm, comfortable nightmare.

“After what?” I ask as if I don’t already know. His fingers find my side and trace little patterns there. I think about those instead of his lips, which are parted just slightly, words ready to spill out and probably break my heart.

“After…” he stares at a spot somewhere past me for a while, long enough that I blink a few times to make sure I haven’t accidentally drifted off to sleep with this image in my head. “I don’t know,” he rolls onto his back, pulling away from me. I want to chase him, to curl against him, but I’m afraid that’s the wrong thing to do, like maybe it’ll make it harder for him to say what he’s about to say, if I’m clung to him. I stay still.

My hand still rests on his stomach, though, and he makes no move to brush it off. I don’t either.

“First it was just til I was healed, then until I ‘had a plan’,” he lists at the ceiling, his arm wiggling out from under the covers to supply air quotes. “And now, what, until I’ve graduated witch school or something?” He turns back to me, lips twisted like he’s bitten into a lemon. “And then you kick me out?” The words come out on a breath, soft and uncertain.

I really really need to work on my inappropriately-timed laughing. At least it’s just a soft chuckle this time, like my throat was wary of making too loud a sound in the silence and darkness of the room around us.

“No, Dan,” I say through another giggle. “I’m not-” had he really thought that was it? I’d just...be done with him? “I wouldn’t kick you out.” A weird bubbly sensation replaces the churning in my stomach, like someone’s taken the fear of Dan leaving and inverted it completely. Except Dan’s frowning, still - grimacing, really, a look I’ve decided I never want to see again.

“I don’t need your pity, you don’t have to-”

Because I can’t think of a faster way to shut him up, and because I’m allowed to do this, I prop myself up on my elbow and lean over to capture his still-pouting lips with mine. He lets out a surprised squeak, but doesn’t protest any more than that - in fact, quite the opposite; in moments, his hands find their way to my side, grabbing at my shirt in an attempt to pull me closer. I grin against his lips and let him, sort of flopping down half on top of him. If he minds, he has a funny way of showing it.

One leg wraps around mine, a close replica to the position we’d woken up in, and Dan’s free hand finds itself sliding up my neck, into my hair. But when his fingers tighten, he tugs me away, not closer.
“Wait, wait,” he says, breathless; his eyes haven’t opened, so I just watch his lips as they form more words. “If this is just because you pity-”

“Dan.”

“No, if it’s pity, I don’t-”

“Dan,” I try again, because I need him to open his damn eyes and look at me when I say this, I tell him as much, and he peeks up at me through thick lashes. “I don’t want you to leave.” I exhale slowly once I’ve said the words, waiting for his reaction.

The corner of his lip curls up, just a little, and he lets out such a soft ‘oh’ that I’m not even sure I heard it, but then his grip in my hair changes and he’s pulling me back in and giggling against my mouth in probably the messiest attempt at a kiss we’ve had to date, but I don’t really care because he’s happy so I’m happy and fuck I don’t think I’ve ever been this happy maybe in my whole entire life.

“I don’t want to leave,” he mumbles against my lips, once we’ve both decided to separate just enough to breathe. I think he’s smiling, I can hear it in his voice, but I can’t quite see it with how close we are; it doesn’t matter, because he’s smiling, that’s the important thing. And I think every single fiber of my entire body and heart and soul and whatever else exists is smiling back at him.

He wants to stay.

For a few moments, we just breathe, then Dan’s arm wraps around me and tugs me into his chest until I’m sort of squashing him, but he doesn’t seem to mind - he lets out a long, heavy sigh, then mumbles something like ‘good night’ in my ear.

Admittedly, I feel a bit like a teddy bear at the moment, but I’m not uncomfortable and I don’t at all mind.

“Good night,” I say as quietly as I can manage, then press a soft kiss to his nose before settling my head on the pillow beside him.

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This time, a soft light through the window wakes me instead of the insistent whisper of my name. But I’m just as tangled in Dan as I was the first time, only a whole lot warmer. I startle when he moves against me, and I wonder briefly if the sun hasn’t woken him up as well.

Only briefly, because Dan repeats the motion a moment later, and I’m suddenly very aware of why it’s so hot under the covers.

The third time he ruts into me, I have to suck in a breath - he’s hard against my thigh, rolling his hips slowly, and his soft gasp echoes mine a moment later; his eyes haven’t opened, and I’m almost tempted to just let him continue, but there’s a fifty percent chance he’d burn me on accident and a fifty percent chance he’d do it on purpose if I didn’t wake him.

“Dan,” I mumble into his ear; then I have to squeeze my eyes shut for a moment because he’s biting his lip, and I want to be the one doing that, I want him to wake up and maybe not be so hot I can feel myself sweating already, and we could really use some of those fireproofing spells sooner rather than later. “Dan,” I try a little more insistently. He bucks into my hip again.

The temperature of his skin through his shirt is manageable, at least, so I poke him once, twice, and a third time before he finally sucks in a deep breath; his eyes fly open, wide and brown, but he
hasn’t stopped biting his lip.

A heavy tension settles between us, like we’re both not quite sure what to do, or how to act - neither of us moves, not for what feels like ages.
Dan

I think I’m holding my breath - I know everything else is completely still, surely my lungs have got the message as well. I would say I’m surprised at this current...\textit{predicament}, but it was bound to happen eventually, if I’m being honest.

I can’t decide what Phil’s reaction is - he woke me, apparently, so did he want me to stop? \textit{Or maybe he wanted...} I can feel the core of heat in my stomach - two, really, the one that’s a direct effect of the dream I’d been in the middle of and the one I’m learning to distinguish as my energy. That one I tamp down on until I’m sure my skin has cooled.

Then I lift a hand, slowly, because this feels like it needs to be slow and careful. \textit{I need to give him time to pull away}. A part of me - in spite of everything Phil said last night - prepares itself for rejection.

But it never comes. Phil’s eyes follow my hand until it reaches his cheek, until it slides up and into his hair, pushing it back off his forehead. Then they’re fixed on me, and his lips part as my hand finds its way down to his neck. I tug just lightly enough to say that I want him - \textit{as if he couldn’t already tell} - and then it’s like I’ve gone and shattered a time-freezing spell that had held us so still.

I don’t even get a chance to wonder if such a spell exists before Phil’s straddling my lap, duvet pushed aside in a crumpled heap by my legs. His lips find mine in a rush, and I’m suddenly completely overwhelmed - between the way he’s grinding down into my hips and the fucking \textit{delicious} friction it’s providing and the way his hands worm their way under my back to pull me closer to him, I completely forget the bloody witchcraft I’m meant to be controlling.

It’s not til I feel the air around us turning uncomfortably warm that I push him back; he frowns at me, then his eyes go wide.

“I hadn’t even...” his voice comes out gravelly and still thick with sleep, which really isn’t helping my grasp on my energy in the slightest. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping to at least eliminate one of the senses currently warring with my emotions.

“I have, uh, if you-” Phil starts again, then shifts on my hips.

“\textit{Jesus christ, Phil,}” I know it comes out almost a whine, but it’s like he doesn’t even \textit{know} what he’s doing. I peek a single eye open to find him frowning at me. Then I open my eyes all the way, just so I can roll them and look pointedly \textit{down}.

“Oh,” he sort of chuckles. And shifts again, with a smirk this time. “I have an idea, if you want to, maybe, uh, try something?” His voice comes out almost as tentative as before, but that smirk hasn’t left his lips; I quirk a brow, feigning like I’m contemplating whatever it is he’s about to propose before finally nodding.

If it’s anything to do with our current situation, I’m definitely not going to say no.

Of course, instead of just \textit{telling} me, he grabs my hand and half-drags me off the bed, so I have to scramble last minute to prevent myself from face-planting on the floor. By the time I’m stood, properly glaring at Phil, he’s got his lips pressed into a line in a very poor attempt at concealing his smile.

“What? It’s not like you gave me much warning,” I grumble; his eyes flick down, just once, before he turns toward the door. At which point, I realize the \textit{very} noticeable tent in my sweatpants and
my face flushes with heat. Of bloody course. I follow him out of the room in spite of my embarrassment. It’s not like he didn’t know.

My brows scrunch together, most of my momentary mortification forgotten, when he pushes open the bathroom door and steps inside. I wait just over the threshold, watching his back as he bends to turn the water on in the- oh.

The shower. Where it’ll be really fucking hard to catch anything on fire.

Phil’s shirt’s already halfway over his head when he pauses, lips twisting.

“Are you- I mean, is this okay? I should’ve properly asked first, instead of-“

I pull my own shirt off before he can get much farther in his sentence, my eyes locked with his the entire time. How many times do I have to say I want this? Or maybe that’s the problem, maybe I just keep saying it in my head instead of out loud.

“I really,” I let my shirt fall from my hand, “really,” then I tug at the hem of my sweatpants until they’re at mid-thigh, and they drop around my ankles, “want this.” I don’t think I’ve blinked, which was sort of the point - to show him just how serious I am, just how much I want him. For a moment, he looks frozen in place, then he’s copying my actions and we’re both just stood across from each other with our boxers on and breathing in the steam from the shower.

Phil bites his lip, though, and makes exactly no movement to remove his pants, and I can’t- oh. Oh. He’s seen me, but I haven’t-

I take a step towards him, slowly, and suck all my energy back into my core. Now would be the absolute worst time to accidentally hurt him. His chest rises and falls a bit too fast as he watches me move closer, lift a hand, trail it from his collarbone down and across his stomach, pausing right at the edge of his boxers. We’re so close that I think if I breathed too deeply, our skin would touch. I hook the finger of my other hand under the hem of his pants on the other side, then look up to meet his gaze.

Just as my lips part, intent on asking if this was alright, if I could, he nods; it’s a sharp, quick motion that suggests his concern, so I lean forward to press a soft kiss to his lips.

"Please," he practically begs when I pull back, and it’s such a fucking turn on to hear him be needy for once that I can’t help but smirk. I let my fingers tug at the fabric around his waist, slowly dragging it down and following it as I go - the moment his cock springs free, I pause and exhale a purposefully slow breath across its length.

I grin when Phil makes a strangled sort of sound in the back of his throat, then I’m letting his pants fall the rest of the way to the ground and mine join them a moment later. And fuck if I don’t just need a second to stare, because reality will always be better than any dream, without question. I think Phil notices, but I don’t really care; then my view changes completely as he steps into the steaming shower, and I take another step forward.

“Coming?” He asks anyway, as if I’m not literally half a step behind him. Then water’s running across the smooth planes of his shoulders, his back, his chest as he turns back toward me, head tilted just slightly.

“I really fucking hope so,” I say on a breath as I step in - Phil gives me no time to adjust to the slippery surface under my feet nor the warm water pelting my skin, wrapping an arm around my back and pulling me flush against him. And if there’d been any breath left in my lungs at that point,
it’s all completely gone, because shit this is so much better than I could’ve anticipated. I all but literally melt into him, into the soft and slightly wet kiss and the smooth sliding of our skin against each other, into the slow but urgent grind of his hips on mine.

My eyes fly open a moment later, and I nearly fall on my ass trying to scramble away from Phil. Because my skin’s definitely too hot, I can see the steam rising off it, and for the second time this morning, it seems Phil’s not noticed. He’s just watching me with wide, uncertain eyes, and I can’t decide if I’m meant to assume I overreacted or if this is another test, another way to see if I can keep control.

It’s then I notice a small mark on his shoulder, one that, on closer inspection, looks suspiciously like a handprint. My handprint, I realize as I lean in - it’s red, a bit swollen, and looks like the very clear beginnings of a burn. Like the kind when you accidentally touch a pan right out of the oven, not dangerous but certainly not good.

“Phil, I-”

“I trust you,” his words interrupt mine, sure and solid and fuck how am I meant to keep control when he’s looking like that? When he’s looking at me like that, like he really does trust me and he wants me and-

His hand drops to his cock, stroking slowly across it as he watches me, and I swallow thickly.

Fuck, I really want to touch him, to be the one doing that, but not if I’m this close to losing control, to hurting him. I suck in a breath, lousy with steam, and try to clear my head enough to get the heat in my core to back down for just five minutes, jesus christ.

But it doesn’t listen, because Phil’s leaned back against the wall and continues his lazy strokes and I’m having a hard time concentrating on anything at all until his lips part.

“Touch me?” His voice comes out soft and hesitant, not at all what I expected given the way he dragged me in here, the way he pulled me against him and-

“T-” I practically choke the words out, around malice and venom at my own stupid abilities. And inability to control those abilities. “I’ll hurt.”

“I’ll be fine,” he says, as if his wellbeing doesn’t matter, as if it’s all fine and grand if I just literally fucking burn him. “Please?” And fuck I want to, I want to so damn badly, and I guess I can’t ignore temptation because I’m leaning closer, trailing a finger down his chest, down to his hips - just a finger, I promise myself, just the slightest touch, enough to give him what he wants, to give me what I want, without hurting him too much.

I jerk back when he sucks in a breath - in spite of the water cascading around us, there’s a clear pinkish-red line from his shoulder to his waist, evidence of my failure. Except he doesn’t stop, doesn’t frown and tell me I should get a grip, doesn’t even pause his hand fisting his cock. His teeth find his lip, biting hard into it, but his eyes never leave me. But didn’t that-

Oh. Oh.

Curiosity and a spike of adrenaline replace my fear, ironically providing the first ounce of clarity - and control - I’ve had since I woke up. I direct the heat to pool in my hand, although I’m fully guessing the actual temperature. I suppose Phil will say if it’s too much. Carefully, I trace a line across his jaw, then down his neck - there, he does flinch away, and I pull back immediately.

“No, wait, it was-” he sucks in a breath, “that was good.” He swallows, then leans further back
against the tiles of the shower, eyes drifting shut.

“You’ll tell me if it’s-” he nods before I can finish, so I take a step closer, until I’m pressed up against him - I’m managing to maintain the entire rest of my body at a normal temperature, now that I have something far more interesting to focus on. This time, I let my fingers drift farther down, past his hip and across his thigh. His hand stutters, loses its rhythm, and I can’t help but grin; there’s something immensely satisfying about knowing exactly how I’m affecting him, like a form of payback for the way my witchcraft makes my emotions so obvious.

I let my hand rest there, close to what I’m guessing he wants but not quite there, and pull some heat to my lips, to my tongue. It’s a strange sensation, actively choosing to let my skin burn this way, but not at all painful. Not for me, at least.

When I lean in, I blow a breath against his skin before brushing my lips across his neck, a brief touch just to test the waters, to make sure he can handle it. His eyes fly open for just a second, locking on mine, then he’s squeezed them shut again, tilting his head to grant me better access. I can’t help but grin before leaning back in, alternating between brief kisses and nipping at his skin, then swiping a tongue over the marks I’ve left.

Phil’s hips buck against me, and I’m very suddenly reminded how much I’m enjoying this; I stroke my own cock almost absently, more desperate for the way Phil’s shivering under my lips than for the relief my hand’s finally providing.

“I’m-” the word morphs into a low groan in the back of his throat; I pull back to watch the way his neck pulses, the way he leans heavily against the wall, the way his hips stutter as he comes hard over his hand. It takes me all of five seconds to work myself up to the edge, just seeing him like this. Knowing I’m the cause.

Then he sucks in a deep breath, opens his eyes, and they lock on mine. And suddenly it’s his lips locked on mine, and I have no idea if I’m in control of my energy or if I’m burning him or anything really, because all I can focus on is how fucking good this is, overwhelmingly good, and then I’m the one whining into his lips, high on this, this moment, this...thing that we have.

And on his lips, and his fingers trailing across my chest, and fuck he really needs to stop before I explode in more than just the orgasmic sense.

For neither the first nor probably the last time, I’m wondering if Phil’s able to hear my thoughts - or whatever few there are right now, anyway; he pulls away, and I try my best to remain upright in spite of the trembling in my legs and the urge to lean against him, let him support me for a minute.

Or, you absolute idiot, maybe you’re literally fucking burning him.

My eyes fly open, all remaining bliss draining out from under my skin as I search Phil for any sign of damage - well, anything I didn’t consciously put there. But aside from a flush across his chest that I’m mostly certain hadn’t been there before, he looks mostly the same. I do my best to cool myself down, to focus that heat back into my core. Most of it had disappeared the moment I feared I’d unintentionally hurt Phil.

He’s just staring, wide-eyed, as I reach out and trace over the raised marks on his skin, pinkish-red lines that feel far too warm under my fingertips. Phil winces when my fingers reach his thigh, where my hand had lingered longest.

“Are you-”
“I’m okay,” Phil says in a voice that does not at all sound okay.
I hadn’t expected *that* to be what PJ’s note meant.

I can’t even tell if the heat around me comes from the hot water or Dan or the marks Dan’s left or my reaction to those marks - I mean, I guess I’ve never been big on socializing, so my dating life hasn’t exactly been...*existent*, but I really really didn’t think-

“You’re not,” Dan says, lips twisted in concern, and I have to blink and refocus. Which, of course, brings me back to my current predicament: I just got off to Dan burning me, the overly sensitive lines still stinging with each drop of water. *Am I okay?* I’m honestly not even sure, maybe that’s what Dan’s picking up on.

“I’m- I don’t know,” I frown - I guess there’s nothing *wrong* with it, I’m just surprised. And a little embarrassed. Especially since Dan won’t stop staring. I duck my head, trying to avoid the wide brown eyes watching every reaction, searching for answers I don’t think I have yet.

“Are you- I mean, is it- I can-” Dan starts, and his fingers appear near my chest, hovering over the red marks he’s left; honestly, they’re the least of my concerns, I can heal those without much-

Oh. And then Dan’s already doing it for me, a tingling sensation replacing the residual ache as the lines fade into the slight flush on my chest. His hand drifts down, lightly tracing my skin in the same way he had earlier, except instead of pain, all I feel is a cool relief.

“Better?” He asks, but I keep my gaze fixed on the floor between us, on the rushing water that passes and doesn’t feel quite so hot any longer. Slowly, I suck in a breath full of steam that does nothing to help clear my head.

Then Dan lifts his hand back up, gently tilting my chin so I’m forced to look him in the eyes. He’s frowning.

“If I hurt you, please tell me, I can’t-” he breaks off, gaze dropping for a moment before it fixes on me, harder and more determined. “I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m not- I don’t *know*, so please tell me, I’d never be able to forgive-”

“Dan.” I finally manage, and it comes out clear in spite of the cloudiness in my brain that still doesn’t want to leave. “You didn’t hurt me.” I wait for him to nod, only he doesn’t, just furrows his brows - when his lips part, I realize my mistake. “I mean, you *did*, but not- it was, uh, I mean-” in the heat of the moment - literally and figuratively - it had been a *lot* easier to tell him what I wanted. *Needed*, it had felt like.

But Dan’s features soften, and he blows out a soft breath that stirs the steam between us, sending it billowing in little whirlwinds.

“Okay,” he offers a small smile with the word, and his hand leaves my chin to snake around the back of my neck and pull me in; at first, I’m expecting a kiss, but our bodies press together in a tight hug and he’s rubbing slow circles across my back and I’m not sure why it matters so much but relief suddenly floods my chest and my veins and every single piece of me that Dan’s healing hadn’t fixed.

“We can talk about it later,” he adds in a soft voice right by my ear, and even though there’s no good reason for it, fear spikes in my heart.

Phil
The rest of the shower is a much less intense affair, mostly full of Dan and I shuffling around each other and trying to actually get clean. And me trying to avoid whenever ‘later’ is. *Surely he wouldn’t say that if he only meant ‘five minutes later’, right?* But I can’t get it out of my head.

And I’m not even sure *why* I can’t - it’s not like he laughed at me or judged. But I can’t focus on anything else, not even the very naked and wet Dan right in front of me, suds sliding down his skin and chest as he rinses out his hair. *I want* to focus on that, very very badly, but I just *can’t*.

To his credit, Dan doesn’t even try to say something until we’re out of the shower and wrapped in fluffy towels. Dan’s hangs around his waist in a way that should make me want to trail a finger there, just at the spot the skin meets the fabric, but I’m far too preoccupied by his lips, and not even in a *good* way: they purse into a thin line before parting, and I may not have PJ’s abilities, but I can certainly tell he’s about to say *something*, and I’m not quite ready to deal with that just yet.

“We should get dressed!” I blurt out before Dan can speak, and his eyes narrow slightly before he closes his mouth. “So we can, uh, head to the store, lots of supplies to get,” I turn quickly from the bathroom, intent on avoiding any further conversation on the topic. And avoiding the fact that PJ was absolutely right - I’m not even sure we even *need* the fireproofing spells anymore. *But we should have them, just in case...just in case I change my mind. Or Dan does...he hasn’t said it yet, but what if he didn’t *like* that?* He’d been so distressed when he thought he hurt me…

I’m already digging through my dresser, searching for a pair of jeans, when Dan’s hand on my shoulder makes me jump and whirl around. He’s just staring with wide eyes, and I probably am too; his are wide with concern, though, and I’m sure I look like a deer in headlights.

“We will talk about this later, right?” His sentence had started off matter-of-fact, a statement, but it turns into a question at the last second, unsurety slipping into his tone. I nod. ‘Later’ doesn’t have *to mean later* today, right? I’m still not sure I’m ready to unpack whatever just happened.

Dan gives me a soft smile before pulling out a pair of pants and jeans and grinning.

“Oh! While we’re in town, we should get you some clothes as well!” I’m glad for any reason to be onto a new topic, but Dan seems less than pleased at this turn in conversation, lips tugging down. He turns away, and my brain actually allows me to enjoy the moment between when he drops his towel and when he tugs on the pants, then the jeans.

“Yes, uh, yeah we should,” Dan says, sounding just as distracted as I’d sounded earlier when he’d asked if I was okay. He turns back slowly, gaze fixed on the ground as he stops beside me and pulls out a shirt - a white one, oddly enough, but he doesn’t seem bothered that it doesn’t match his dark aesthetic as he tugs it on over his head.

“Dan.” I deadpan, as if it’s fair of me to ask him to explain himself when I won’t do the same. *Later, I said later.* My issue isn’t time-sensitive, anyway. Whatever he’s worried about, it’s apparently got to do with clothes, which we’ll be buying in town *today*.

His eyes flick up, then back down as he steps away, though I can’t figure out if there’s a real reason for him stepping away other than to not be near me. Even from this angle, with his head tilted down, I can see his lips opening and closing, his chest expanding as he inhales, then collapsing when he exhales. I twist my lips; he *just needs a minute, I can give him that*.

I pull fresh clothes from the drawer and dress, only mildly disappointed he doesn’t make a point of looking up whilst I’m fully naked. *He’s just distracted, stuck in his head.* I’d been the same way.
Would still be, if we were talking about me. Later, my brain reminds me, so I clear my throat to make the thought go away.

“Dan?” I try again, more prompting than poking, at least I hope that’s how I come across. I take a tentative step toward him, but he blows out a heavy breath and flops backward onto the bed, immediately covering his face with his hands. Then he mumbles something that may or may not include the words ‘goat’ and ‘amen’. “What did you say?” I end up giggling through the question, trying to imagine anything that could possible have to do with goats and prayers.

“I said,” he grumbles, still covering his eyes but allowing his mouth enough freedom to properly speak, “I have no money, Phil,” he’s practically whining this at the ceiling, as if he’s trying to make it sound like a joke, but it comes out sour and more frustrated than anything.

“Dan, it’s not- I mean, I’ll pay-”

“No, Phil, I can’t just…” he trails off, dragging his hands down his face until he can properly look at me - properly frown at me. “I can’t keep taking stuff from you.” He says it with such finality, like slamming a book shut before the last page.

“You’re not taking, it’s- I’m giving, I want-” but he just rolls his eyes, squeezes them shut. How am I supposed to explain that I want to do this? That I want-

“I want you to stay,” I say, sure and absolute, the same way I had in the middle of the night when we’d both been half-asleep and those kinds of things felt more like a dream than reality. But it’s bright, the sun streaming through the window, and we’re both very certainly awake.

“I want to stay, but I don’t-”

“When we go into town, we’ll get some clothes- just some,” I amend at his deepening frown, “and we can see if anyone’s hiring?” I offer - I may not be able to stay in town, but if it makes him feel better about money, maybe it’ll be alright. Assuming he can get his witchcraft controlled enough that he can stay under the radar...now that I’m truly thinking about it, maybe him getting a job isn’t the best-

“Okay,” Dan interrupts my train of thought, sitting up and nodding mostly to himself. Then he locks eyes with me, and I give him what I hope looks like a genuine smile. Of course he can do this, it’s me that they’ve banned, not him. But my stomach swirls with worry as I follow Dan out the door and down the stairs - I can’t imagine how he’d feel if another town kicked him out.

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There’s a diner in town - fortunately, one of the few witch-friendly places - and I suggest we stop there for breakfast in spite of Dan’s protests about not being able to afford it. If he’s really intent on getting a job, that’s as good a place as any to start.

“You’ve had no problem borrowing from me and eating my food, it’s only when I pay for it?” I laugh even though he’s glaring at me as we walk, passing the first few buildings at the edge of town.

“It’s not the same,” he grumbles, but doesn’t push it any further. It’s not all that early, but the only clothes shop in town that doesn’t hate me won’t be open for another couple hours, and Beatrice’s shop - I actually exhale a sigh just thinking about having to go in there - isn’t open til noon. So the diner’s our first stop.

It’s a quaint little place, owned by Javier’s cousin’s aunt’s grandson’s wife or something like that,
but there’s some relation to Javier and the acceptance of me and my witchcraft has apparently come along with it. Not that I particularly like spending much time in town as it is, but it’s nice to know I have a place to go if I ever want it.

I push in the bright red door and a bell dings overhead, then the owner - Camille, her name’s on the sign outside and on her little name badge - bustles over and grins at me.

“Phil, dear! Lovely to see you again, and hello! Welcome, honey,” she grins at Dan, who gives a tight smile and glances sideways at me; I turn back to Camille. “Just two, then?” She asks, though she’s already grabbing two menus and gesturing for us to follow. I nod anyway, and Dan trails behind me as we walk to the empty booth she leads us to.

“Alright, and Dennis will be right with you,” she beams at us again before making her way back to the kitchen. I barely have time to turn back to Dan, who’s got his eyes fixed on the menu, before a kid approaches with a couple glasses of water.

“Hello, my name’s Dennis, I’ll- oh,” the guy - okay, maybe kid had been a bit of an understatement, more a gangly late-teen, but still - stops mid-sentence, then he huffs a breath out, glancing between Dan and I for a solid ten seconds. Then he’s clearing his throat. “Right, I’ll be your server, anything else to drink.” He deadpans, voice dropping into something disinterested and monotonous. I look briefly at Dan, but he’s still focused on the menu.

“Water’s fine,” he mumbles out, so I quickly scan the drink offerings.

“Orange juice?” I ask, and Dennis scribbles something on his notepad before turning and heading back to the kitchen. My eyebrows lift for about half a second, then my brain catches up with what just happened and I exhale a sigh. Of course, just because Camille’s fine with witches doesn’t mean everyone she hires will be.

“Hm?” Dan doesn’t look up from the menu, but it’s clear he heard my annoyed breath.

“Nothing,” I force some lightness into my tone - it’s not worth him getting worked up about it, especially if he’s liable to do something damaging. If there’s one thing I’ve learned, the best way to change people’s minds about witches is by showing them we’re not evil or malicious. We’re just...people, with differences, just like everyone else. Our differences are just a little more different.
“It’s not nothing,” I lift my head, pursing my lips as I squint at him. “What, did the kid spit in our waters or- oh,” my eyes go wide, then I’m searching the diner; I finally find the only guy walking about in an apron, so it must be our waiter, a frowning kid carrying a glass of orange juice toward us. I don’t stop glaring even after he’s plunked the glass down heavily on our table, almost closer to me than to Phil.

“Actually, I’d like a shake as well, could you blend the chocolate and the peanut butter? But not too much of either, like a perfect mix,” I announce loudly, smirking as the boy startles for a moment before resuming his frown. He scribbles a note on his notepad, then he’s disappeared again.

I absolutely refuse to let this kid get away with this barely-concealed rudeness.

“Dan,” Phil’s voice comes out soft, but clearly warning. I ignore it completely, focused on the swinging kitchen door. “Dan,” he tries again, so I tear my gaze away to find Phil tilting his head slightly, a half-smile that says ‘it’s not fine, but it’s okay’. And it makes me absolutely furious.

“It’s not okay, Phil,” I grumble, afraid to cause a scene without having a proper reason just yet. “He can’t just hate you, he doesn’t even know you, you’re-”

“Yes, I know, I’m amazing,” Phil grins, and I can feel my cheeks flush with heat - which is really fucking silly, because hadn’t we just done...well, all that this morning? And I’m flustered because he remembers I’d called him amazing? “But it’s not gonna change anything if you make his life hell,” he continues. “Is it worth five minutes of satisfaction just to piss him off and let him keep believing whatever it is he believes about witches?”

I grumble to myself, mostly that no, it wouldn’t be great, but he deserves it.

“I’d much rather kill him with kindness,” Phil half-whispers just as Dennis returns to our table, dropping the milkshake and pressing his lips into a line. Fine, I think as I give him the most saccharine-sweet smile I can manage.

“Thank you,” Phil sounds far too genuine, and I wonder how much practice he’s had with these kinds of situations. Too much. I fight back a wave of heat that threatens to burst through my skin. “And I think we’re ready to order, if that’s alright?” He grins up at Dennis, who shifts uncomfortably on his feet before tapping his pen on his notepad.

“Yeah, go on then,” he nods.

“Right, I’ll have the American pancakes, and could I get a side of syrup as well?” He hasn’t stopped smiling through the whole sentence, and I think I’d be blinded by the brightness if it weren’t for the fact that I’m quite entranced by it. Dennis, however, seems more off-put than anything, and he grunts out a confirmation before turning to me.

“Oh, uh, the- uh,” I scan through the options again - I’d been distracted with prejudiced assholes, to be fair. “The uh, let’s do the quiche?” I remember it being one of the less expensive items on the menu, when I’d first scanned through, though I hadn’t had time to find the cheapest. Although I did go and completely blow my ‘spending as little as possible’ rule on a giant-ass milkshake...

“Got it,” Dennis nods, and I remember at the last second to plaster a smile on my face when he takes my menu. It feels all plasticky and wobbly - the smile, not the menu.
“See! We got some words!” Phil practically giggles as he reaches across the table to poke my arm; my fake smile turns genuine, because how could it not when he’s looking like a puppy who just found a bone?

“Yeah, alright, fine,” I roll my eyes in spite of my grinning, then take a sip of the milkshake just for something to do. “Holy fuck this might actually give me a heart attack,” I set it down and slide it across the table to Phil. “Try some, I won’t be able to finish.”

Phil takes a huge sip, then another.

“It’s amazing,” he grins, literally licking his lips to get the bits of remaining shake. I laugh as he slides it back to me, but I stop it in the middle of the table.

“Seriously, drink as much as you want,” it’s your money, after all. I hope my face hasn’t given away my thoughts, but Phil just grabs the milkshake and takes another sip. He’d suggested I could get a job in town, which would actually be...really great, to be able to pay Phil back a bit for everything he’s done. I suppose I could get a place in town as well, but- he said he wanted me to stay, did that mean with him at his house as well? I sort of really hope so.

But at least if I have a job and that isn’t what he meant, I can save enough money to afford it.

One worry at a time, I suppose, and Phil doesn’t seem intent on kicking me out any time soon, not with everything he said in the early hours of the morning. Or right before we’d left for town, right after- oh, we need to have that conversation as well.

“Phil,” I’m about to bring it up, I really really am, but then the king of all horrible timing, our good buddy and waiter Dennis, arrives and sets two plates in front of us, accompanied by a curt ‘enjoy your meals’. Phil wastes no time dumping the entire little container of syrup on his pancakes and digging in. Okay, after we eat, then.

I’m actually quite hungry, so I end up finishing the quiche well before Phil’s done with his food - although he does take frequent breaks to steal sips of the milkshake, and the thing’s already three-quarters empty by the time I’ve had a second sip myself. Not that I mind, it really is far too sweet for my taste.

“So Phil,” I start, and he looks up, blue eyes wide as he chews. Well, best to rip the plaster off, I suppose. “About this morning...” as soon as the words have left my mouth, Phil’s coughing and reaching for his orange juice; after he’s downed nearly half of it, he blinks a few times through almost-watery eyes.

“This morning?” He asks, and the forced casual tone grates against my ears. A few pieces of pancake still sit on his plate and he pokes at them absently, but none ever seem to make it to his mouth.

“Yeah, I thought we could talk about-” I break off, glancing around, although we seem to be one of only a few people in the diner. “About, like, maybe why you got so freaked out?” It’s probably not the most delicate wording I could’ve chosen, but his cheeks are clearly already flushed and I’d rather not drag out the details any longer than necessary. How absurd a thing to think, though, when I’d been more than happy to drag out the actual events this morning.

But this is new - we’re new - and maybe the awkwardness just comes with the territory.

Phil’s silent, though, and I’m not entirely sure what to make of it. Maybe he just needs time. I try to be patient.
“I mean, I know I technically did, but I didn’t actually hurt you, right?” I blurt out after a few moments, the combination of impatience and the tension between us setting me on edge in a way my witchcraft is really not responding well to. Now is absolutely not the time to burst into flames.

“No, I told you,” Phil says matter-of-factly, which isn’t really an answer at all. He still hasn’t looked up from his plate.

“Well, you didn’t actually, that’s why we’re having this conversation,” I quirk a brow and reach across the table, poking his arm the way he’d done to me earlier. He does peek up, ocean blue through thick black lashes, and I offer what I hope is a soft smile. It’s rare - up til I met Phil - that I ever had a real reason to be gentle.

“It’s silly,” he finally concedes, though he doesn’t stay looking at me. I poke him again, a couple more times until he finally pulls back and I’m left wondering if maybe I pushed a bit too far, or maybe I should’ve just let it go, or- “I didn’t know.” He leans back against the cushion behind him, and the words come out on an exasperated breath. His eyes have gone right past me and to the uneventful tiled white ceiling.

“You didn’t know…” I prompt him as I move my leg slowly under the table until it connects with something soft, then let it rest there. I’m here, I’m supporting you, I promise. I’m not really sure what he’s worried about, but if he’s worried, it’s worth my attention and concern. And any reassurance I can give. As soon as I know what ‘it’ is…

“That I would like…uhm, that,” Phil squeezes his eyes shut for a moment. “I mean I guess it just never came up before, although Peej did leave that note, and I-”

“Wait wait, hold on,” I interrupt because fuck. “Peej- oh god, I really did not need to think about the fact that he knows all my kinks,” I slide my empty plate back and drop my head to the table. That’s not at all embarrassing, jesus christ.

“All your kinks?” Phil’s tone has gone high and curious, and now it’s my turn to have a blush crawling to my cheeks. I don’t dare sit up.

“We’re talking about yours, remember?” I quip back, hoping to avoid this conversation. For now, at least. “We’ve got time,” I remind him. When our booth settles into a silence that says he’s done prying, I peek up at him again. To find him just watching me, a sort of smile on his lips that might’ve been a proper smirk a minute ago but has since turned to something softer.

“Boys! How was everything, can I get you anything else?” I nearly jump out of my damn seat when the woman who originally sat us - Camille, her name tag says - stops beside our table, check in hand. I glance over to find Phil already staring at me, so I shake my head.

“We’re great, Camille, thank you so much, it was delicious as always.” Phil’s all smiles as he reaches for the check, then for his wallet. “Oh!” He says just as she’s turning away, and I bite my lip, already knowing what’s coming. “I don’t suppose you’re looking for any extra hands to help out around here?” He says it casually, but I can feel the return of the heat in my cheeks that never really left. I’m not even sure why it’s all that embarrassing, but it is, and I have to resist the urge to duck my head.

“Oh, your friend?” She gestures toward me, then offers a belated grin that says she’d clearly been talking as if I wasn’t there. “Sorry dear, I’m afraid not, but Dennis’ll be off to school if you’re still looking in a few months?” She glances between us, lips pursed in a close-mouthed smile. Then the bell at the door rings, and she leaves with a pat to Phil’s shoulder.
“Well, I guess we’ll have to check elsewhere?” He shrugs, though, like it’s not his main concern. *Or maybe he’s just distracted, still, from the earlier conversation we only sort of finished.* I resist the urge to peek at the check as Phil stuffs a few notes in and slides out of the booth. I give him a tight nod and follow; when we pass Dennis on the way out, I’m suddenly not all that upset at having to look for another possible place of employment.

I hadn’t even realized, but it feels a lot easier to breathe the moment we step out into the street. Like it had been stuffy in the diner, although I don’t really remember thinking so when we walked in. *Was I…*

“I wasn’t, like, warm inside?” I hike a thumb over my shoulder at the diner behind us, though I don’t stop as we head in some new direction. Wherever we are, it’s not in the same area as the record shop was, or the garden center. *I hadn’t realized the town was so big.*

“No, you were...okay,” Phil concedes, glancing over at me with a half smirk, “you were a little warm, but not unbearable.” I drop my head back to stare at the sky, mostly cloudy and far more pleasant to consider than the fact that I’m *still* not as under control as I’d like to be.

A hand finds mine and squeezes, then falls away.

“You’ll get the hang of it,” Phil promises, and I sort of want to believe him. It’s just the *conviction* with which he says things like that, like he has absolute faith in me, so how could I not succeed at whatever it is I’m trying to do? I shake my head, but I can’t help the grin that fights its way to my lips.

“So where to next, then?” I ask, even though I know the answer - this Beatrice’s person’s shop, another witch. It’s not quite jealousy that squirms in my stomach, maybe some weird need to impress. Like with PJ, who’s apparently some super-witch who’s lived for a thousand years and has insane amounts of energy or whatever. I’m worried this witch will somehow be better than me, or that Phil likes them better, or I’ll somehow fall short.

*That’s it, I suppose - I’m worried I’m not good enough for Phil, that someone else will always be better. That he could have better.*
Phil

I somehow manage to resist the urge to groan out loud.

“Beatrice’s shop,” I answer after a long moment of silence. I can already see the black door and sign from here, and my steps slow unintentionally. *Okay, forget my own issues, I have to play peacekeeper between her and Dan.* That’s my main goal: make sure Dan stays calm and doesn’t lose control, no matter what nonsense Beatrice throws at him.

*I really hope this goes okay…*

“Remind me what we need again?” I ask, more for a distraction than anything as we cross the street.

“Mistletoe and jade for the fireproofing spells, and you said you needed some more coriander? Oh! And flour, although I’m not sure-”

“She’s probably got it, flour’s good for summoning spells,” I rattle the fact off absently, the approaching void of a door sending my anxiety through the roof - on a good day, Beatrice is mostly just annoying. Dan could probably handle annoying. But a bad day...some days, she’s just over-the-top irritating, poking her nose in everything and telling you every which way your spell won’t work or why you should really buy the transport spells, honey, because they’ll just be *so much better* than carrying everything, and-

“Oh, is this it?” Dan stops beside me, and I have to force myself to push inside the shop.

Much like PJ’s house, I’ve become accustomed to experiencing these places alone, so everything feels strange and off-balance when I step in and the door doesn’t close immediately behind me, when a warm presence takes a hesitant step beside me; I look over to find Dan’s eyes have gone wide, like he’s trying to take in the entire contents of the shop in a single look.

“*Phil, dear,* it’s a- oh, and who’s this?” Beatrice’s tone grates on my nerves from the moment she starts speaking, and it takes more effort than it normally would to suck in a deep breath and turn toward the source of the voice; she practically floats toward us, platinum blonde hair drifting out along with the actual *cloak* she’s decided to sport today. “He’s quite lovely, Phil, you didn’t say you had such pretty friends,” she coos as she gets closer, passing me and stopping in front of Dan. Jealousy - the irrational kind, of course, because surely Dan will *hate* her - spikes in my chest.

“Hello,” Dan says politely, sticking a hand far enough out at Beatrice that she’s forced to lean back a bit. I try not to smirk. “I’m Dan,” he says, “Phil’s…” and now he trails off, glances over at me with a look that screams uncertainty. Which sort of sucks, because I’m really curious what *he* wants to define us as. *Are we something?*

“Ooh, *Phil’s,* are you,” Beatrice grins, fangs flashing in what’s almost definitely a witchcraft sort of way. Dan’s already looking back at her - to be fair, she’s quite captivating if you aren’t used to her - and his brow quirks up. “I like him, you picked a good one,” she says, this time directed at me.

I’m already preparing for damage control, but I turn to find Dan’s face scrunched in confusion.

“Does she have, like…” he whispers, then lifts his fingers to his mouth to mimic Beatrice’s fangs. I nod slowly, hoping he’s not about to freak out - I guess I hadn’t really considered *that* possibility. Fortunately, he just nods and turns back to watch Beatrice. I try not to feel anything other than
relief that I hadn’t needed to talk him down.

“Alright dear, what’ll it be? Some damiana perhaps? Ooh, I’ve just gotten a shipment of hyacinth as well, or maybe some parsnip?” My face turns hotter at every increasingly inappropriate suggestion - she has no business making assumptions about our sex life, or that there even is a sex life, thank you very much!

“Phil, what’s that for?” Dan asks, and I look over to find him glancing between me and where Beatrice has decided to perch on her counter. Her cloak still manages to float out behind her, and her grin is absolutely wicked.

“Sex.” She deadpans, waiting for my reaction before turning toward Dan, clearly hoping to catch him just as off guard as she had me. Shit, okay, I need to pull myself together before-

“Not the sex stuff we need, unfortunately.” Dan quips right back, crossing his arms and leaning against a bookshelf full of somewhat useful tomes of spells and herbal properties. “What was it, Phil, mistletoe and jade?” He tilts his head at Beatrice, though, and I could swear his grin matches hers, sharp and daring. In spite of the tension I can definitely feel in the air, there’s no heat, and I’m not sure whether to be concerned or not.

But Beatrice is quick, if nothing else.

“Oh, not sexy at all,” she tuts, then hops down from the counter. “I know they say heat in the bedroom is an integral part of any relationship, but…” she trails off, and I watch as Dan actually follows her toward the herbs section of her store.

“We could do without the literal fire,” Dan finishes with a laugh. One that Beatrice joins in, and it sounds almost musical. Actually, it sounds like literal music. I wonder how she managed that, and why, I mean what a useless-

“Are the fangs real?” Dan asks as I catch up to him and Beatrice. She’s already sorting through a collection of dried plants, pulling out bundles and setting them aside.

“Of course they are,” she chuckles, then hands Dan a tied bunch of mistletoe. “Will one do?” She looks over her shoulder at me, and I nod, caught off guard and still trying to digest whatever’s happening right now. Surely Dan’s not...getting on with Beatrice?

But he trails along right behind her as she makes her way back through the shop to the corner that’s been painted all black. I bet Dan feels right at home here... I’m suddenly letting that spike of jealousy spiral out of control, I know, but-

“Phil, darling, please,” she waves a hand in the air at me, and I’m about to spout off something about how she can’t just dismiss me- “with the jealousy, yeah? I don’t want to steal your boyfriend, he’s not my type at all.” She snorts, then turns back to an ornate cabinet that opens to reveal a cavern of sorts, shelves circling the interior and stocked to the brim with most every crystal I’m capable of naming and at least a few I’m not.

“Jealous? As if-” I pause, because Dan’s smirking at me, rolling with this whole thing a lot more easily than I’ve been able to do. I huff out a breath. “How do you even- can you read my mind?” I can feel the indignation swelling up in my chest, because how dare she look inside my head? That’s a low thing to do, even for her.

“Relax, jesus,” she mumbles as she skirts around inside the cavern. Dan’s on his toes, peeking inside, but it’s clear he’s not sure if he’s meant to follow. “Let’s have a little life story sharing
session, shall we?” She pauses and plucks a piece of jade from the shelf - small, but it’ll do for what we need - and turns toward us. Then she lays a hand over her chest. “Beatrice, you can call me Bea,” she winks at Dan, but refocuses on me. “Witchcraft is related to negative energies, so I settled down in a town that hates witches.” She grins, then waves a hand at me. *Negative energy, that makes loads of sense.*

“I’m not-” I start, but one glance at Dan says he’s very interested, and I wish I could’ve done this later, when it’s just us, but… “Fine, Phil, you can call me Phil,” I stare hard at Beatrice, “and my witchcraft is tied to plants. You know what happened to me.” I mumble, because this is also not the time to have this particular discussion, not in the middle of a town Dan might very well decide to burn to the ground just for revenge. I tilt my head at him, twisting my lips, and he fortunately doesn’t seem inclined to push it. Beatrice, I notice, just gives me a curt nod before focusing her attention on Dan.

“Dan? And uh, I guess my witchcraft is tied to my emotions?” He shrugs like that’s it, and I don’t blame him - not only does he not know very much, but what little he does know probably isn’t something he’s ready to spout to a complete stranger. “Got kicked out of my last town, Phil’s been...helping me.” He adds almost as an afterthought, but his glance at me says a lot more. Beatrice grins.

“Oh I’ll bet he has,” she laughs, and it’s got that same musical undertone from earlier.

“Is that- when you laugh, a xylophone?” Dan quirks a brow at her as she exits the cabinet thing, then shuts the doors.

“Well done. Musical, isn’t it?” Beatrice laughs again, brushing past Dan as she heads toward the counter.

“Why?” I don’t think he means it rudely, but now I’m waiting for Beatrice to be the one to explode; surely, if she’s all negative emotions as she claimed, she’s just full to the brim with meanness, ready to strike.

“Do you want the easy answer,” she starts, glancing pointedly in my direction. My brows arch up my forehead, though I have no idea what she’s implying. “Or the complicated one?” Then she’s looking back at Dan.

“The complicated one, obviously,” Dan responds immediately. Weirdly enough, Beatrice actually quirks a brow at me, so I shrug.

“Life story, part two,” she holds two fingers in the air, then *floats* up to sit cross-legged on the counter, cloak still billowing out behind her on that phantom wind. I’m not a fan of the way Dan looks so enraptured, eyes wide as he watches a ribbon drift over from somewhere I can’t see and weave itself between her fingers.

“Once upon a time there was a little girl who had way too much power, so she was sent away and told to contain it. Except everywhere she went,” she pauses, glances up at us both, “she was feared and hated, so her witchcraft only got stronger, more out of control.” Dan flinches at the word ‘control’, and Beatrice absolutely notices.

“Oh, you’re the same, aren’t you, dear?” She says it like she’s talking to a child, and her ribbon - a dark blood-colored thing - winds through the air and toward Dan. To his credit, he doesn’t move, but lets the thing drift around him and finally tie itself in a neat bow around his wrist.

“Maybe we can help each other. But back to me,” she smirks, “little girl, can’t control herself, gets
“tossed—” her smirk turns sour, “well, how about we skip that part, we can save that for another time. Fast forward a few years, I pop up in this old place, open a little shop, and here we are!” She claps once, and it echoes around the space in a way it absolutely shouldn’t.

“That didn’t answer—”

“No, I suppose I didn’t, did I?” She pulls out another ribbon, a golden yellow one, and sets it to spinning in a little tornado over her palm. “Pop quiz, Danny boy,” I glance back at Dan, waiting for a reaction, but the most he gives is a soft exhalation. “You have energy, yes? What happens when you use it?” She lets the little ribbon tornado float through the air, and I try not to move when it comes my way.

There’s an audible pause, like Dan’s searching for a trick or riddle he’s missing.

“It...leaves your body?” He asks, and I’ll be honest, I’ve no clue where she’s going with this either. The ribbon spirals closer, and it’s stupid, but I’m suddenly nervous. Beatrice tilts her head.

“Not exactly that, but for the purposes of this exercise, yes, point for you, dear,” she points at him, and the ribbon on his wrist glows for a moment.

“Phil, your turn, and this one’s worth double. What happens when you have less energy?” The ribbon pauses in a helix, suspended mid-air in front of me. Again, it seems a simple question, but I squint at her, waiting for the moment it turns into a nasty joke or a subtly rude comment.

“You don’t lose control,” Dan says it with far more conviction than he’d said his first answer, and Beatrice’s face lights up with a bright grin that almost definitely has some witchcraft behind it. The ribbon drifts away from me and ties itself around Dan’s wrist.

“A fast learner,” she gives him a little golf clap and he bows dramatically. I can’t help but feel off and distant, like I’m watching these interactions through a lens. What’s even happening right now?

“Bonus points,” she twirls a finger and a green ribbon makes its way up to twist around it. “What’s the lesson here?” I’m suddenly furious - I’m meant to be the one teaching Dan, and now Beatrice of all people is coming in and stealing— “Phil,” she chides and I actually almost feel bad. Dan just scrunches his brows and glances between us, clearly not understanding her reaction to my irrational anger.

And it is irrational - Dan said he wanted to stay, surely he meant that? I know I’d meant it, when I said I wanted him to stay.

“Oh, the lesson,” Dan tries, voice wary as he gives me a final confused look before turning back to Beatrice, “is that if I’m using my energy more, it’ll be easier to manage?” And Beatrice’s fang-filled grin returns, along with the golf clap, as the green ribbon floats over to Dan’s wrist and joins the other two.

“He’s smart, that one,” Beatrice adds, even though Dan’s literally right there. He doesn’t seem to mind. “Phil, it’s quite obvious every time you walk in here that you’d really rather not, but I certainly hope you’ll reconsider, I’d love to see you both more often.” She stands in a rush, then floats herself down from the counter and types a few numbers in the register. Dan steps forward, handing over the bundle of mistletoe, and she smiles and thanks him.

It all feels false, like a cheap paint job over a dingy wall that’s two seconds from peeling off. Except it doesn’t, and it’s only as Beatrice is bagging up our things that I remember.

“Coriander!” I nearly shout, clearly startling the two new best friends - even in my head, the
thought sounds malicious. Fortunately, Dan’s nodding a moment later, and I push past my general annoyance at this whole thing.

“If you say so,” piercing purple eyes, of all things, glance between us, then Beatrice is back by the herb bins, sorting through and pulling out another bundle. It floats to the counter, joining our other purchases in the bag before she’s even returned to the register.

“How much?” I manage to ask somewhat politely as I join Dan. My hand drifts to his back, fully unintentionally. Really.

“Hm, because I like you, Dan,” she grins wide at him, but he just rolls his eyes. I hate that it’s the same way he rolls them at me. “Half price for the fireproofing, although I imagine you’ll find ways around needing too much of that,” she winks at Dan, and he nods. “So that’ll come to twenty even.” I reach for my wallet with a barely-concealed grimace, already expecting an exorbitant pay hike for the coriander.

“And because I like you, Phil,” I don’t get a wink, but she does tilt her head in a way that doesn’t really make much sense. “I’ll take a few bucks off the coriander as well. Keep Javier’s system running smoothly,” she tilts her chin up, and I have exactly half a second to be surprised - she knows Javier? - before she’s stuck a hand out. “So twenty five total.”

I hand over my card, watching absently as she swipes it, prints the receipt, sticks it in the bag; Dan takes it, then I’m walking on autopilot out the door.

“Come back soon, dears! Have a day.” Her unusual farewell follows us out the door, and Dan actually snorts at it.

“I like her,” he laughs as we turn toward the clothes store, but all I can think is what the fuck was that?
so i'm trying a thing, but there's some music in this chapter (and a few upcoming) and i've linked it if y'all are interested in hearing which i songs i was referring to - if that's too imposing or you don't like the way i've formatted it, let me know and i can change it!

I hadn’t at all been sure what to think of Bea, but she seems...well, relatable, honestly. And it’s sort of refreshing.

Except Phil had been frigid the entire time, and had Bea insinuated he didn’t like her? I’d been tempted to ask more, and definitely still am, but I’m wondering if now isn’t the best time; he’s still distant and frowning when I glance over.

“And I mean, that was really useful, to hear about her witchcraft, it sounds like she used to have the same issues I did?” I supply, hoping to bait him on something. Can we go back to normal conversation, please? Whatever this is right now, I’m not a fan. I swing the bag in my hand, hoping for some kind of distraction.

“She sort of just wastes it, though,” Phil finally says, grimacing at the pavement as we walk. Does he actually sound...defensive? I blink a few times, trying to replay his words in my head. I guess I don’t have to worry about him liking Bea more than me, at least…

“Is it wasteful if it helps her keep control?” I ask softly; in spite of the fact that we’re talking about her, I hope he gets that I’m asking about me. Is this something he expects me to be able to control without being wasteful? I’m not even sure what he considers a waste of energy. Moving things without touching them? The aesthetic stuff? Guilt swirls in my stomach - I actually thought the aesthetic touches were pretty cool.

Phil exhales heavily, then stops in his tracks. I pause and turn to find him pushing through the door I’d just walked past, a nondescript pale blue that blends into the off-white exterior of the building around it.

“Anything you want!” Phil offers in a too-cheery voice, and I purse my lips. Fine, we can be serious later.

“Trying to buy my silence?” I chuckle as I join him, and he lets out a breathy laugh full of relief. For a moment, his hand rests on my lower back, just like it had in Bea’s shop; he’d been nervous then, too. Then he’s using it to push me forward, further into the rows of clothes racks.

“Not at all, no idea what you’re talking about,” he says, and I peek over my shoulder to find him grinning, properly grinning, and it’s worth it to just let this conversation go for now. I roll my eyes, then drift toward the darkest section I can find.

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I’m not actually sure how long I spend pulling out clothes, checking the price tags, putting them
back, then pulling them out again when I decide really, it’s not that expensive and I can surely at least try it on, that doesn’t mean I’ll necessarily buy it, right?

Or, rather, that Phil will buy it for me. I need to get a job as soon as possible, pay him back for everything.

I’m trekking through the store with an armload of black and grey and maybe some white but I can’t quite remember when an employee of some sort approaches me, asks if I’d like to try things on. I nod, he points to the back of the place, and I can just make out some bright red curtains hanging that must be where the dressing rooms are.

“Oh! Hey Dan!” I nearly jump when Phil calls my name from what looks to be a plush sofa in the corner, right across from the single dressing room. A floor to ceiling mirror sits across from him and the sofa, distracting me for a moment. “Did you find some things?” He asks, as if he can’t clearly see the hundred or so items I have hanging off my arm.

“Nah, just thought I’d lug around some random stuff,” I joke, adjusting the weight so I can support it with both hands. He grins at me. And then we’re both silent and it’s a little awkward, probably, so I sidestep toward the dressing room and drop the clothes before sliding the curtain shut.

It’s been a really long time since I had new clothes. I fully intend to make the most of this. Well, not the most, because Phil’s paying, but...at least I’ll have a few new things. I grab the first pair of jeans from the pile, pretty uneventful black skinnys that looked good and felt comfortable and didn’t cost an arm and a leg, then slide Phil’s pair off my legs and the new ones on.

And they feel fine, except the bloody mirror is outside, right by Phil, and I didn’t really plan on modeling everything but it seems I haven’t got a choice now. For simplicity’s sake, I swap my shirt for a t-shirt that had met my requirements of cheap and decent-looking, then slide the curtain back and slip out.

Phil glances up from his phone, gives me a blindingly bright smile.

“Right, uh, the mirror,” I point, “is out here.” Wow, eloquent, nice one. I can’t even figure out why it matters, but it just does. I try to assess my reflection, though I can’t help feeling self-conscious. Which is stupid. Phil’s seen literally everything anyway.

“What do you think?” I ask, sort of quietly and I’m hoping he maybe didn’t hear because it doesn’t look that great and maybe I won’t-

“You look fantastic, as always,” he says, and I turn to find him tilting his head at me, a soft smile on his face. ‘As always’? Surely he doesn’t always think I look good. I mean, really, what kind of sappy nonsense.

I grin anyway. Then roll my eyes and scoff on my way back to the dressing room, deciding that these clothes’ll go in the yes pile.

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“Phil, you can’t say everything looks good, that’s not even true!” I grumble after the tenth outfit Phil’s deemed ‘really good’. Except I do quite like this one, a black-on-black ensemble with grey and white lines crisscrossing the shirt; it’s a subtle design, one that adds interest without going over the top or standing out too much.

Phil mumbles something I don’t quite catch, but before I can ask, he’s stood up and turning toward the store.
“If I pick you something, will you try it on?” He asks, and do I even have a choice? He’s paying for it, and besides, it’s Phil. I doubt I’d ever want to deny him anything he wants.

“Sure, fine, but-” I don’t get to finish my sentence before he’s disappeared among the racks, so I resolve to try on the rest of my choices before he returns.

Okay, I may have saved the ripped skinny jeans for last, because they felt a bit risque and I’m not entirely sure I can pull them off. But I’ve got this edgy vision in my head of me in them and the moto jacket I grabbed as well, and I can at least try to see if it looks good.

I’ll admit, at least, that the jeans are really comfortable. As is the grey t-shirt I’ve chosen to wear under the jacket. Which is also very edgy and full of various zips and such, and I don’t know if I look quite as badass as I had in my head but I definitely look-

“How, Dan, that’s…” Phil steps up behind me and into view of the mirror, peeking over my shoulder at my reflection. Our reflection. Phil’s, and the way his eyes scan my body, slowly and purposefully. When he reaches my face, we lock eyes in the mirror. “You should buy this,” he comments, voice low and husky. I swallow thickly.

“Also!” He steps away, brandishing an armful of far too colorful items. “You promised!” He frowns when I grimace at his reflection. And since the moment’s over, I exhale a breathy sigh that I’m able to sort of force into an exasperated one, then Phil’s grinning as I take the clothes from him.

“Ugh, Phil, I’m literally going blind and I haven’t even put them on yet,” I grumble as I make my way to the dressing room. I’m suddenly loath to part with the outfit that Phil’d been so attached to. A definite yes, then.

It seems Phil’s exclusively chosen a colorful array of shirts, so I opt to keep the ripped black jeans on for now - they’re just comfortable, that’s all, no other reason. There’s a black and yellow plaid button-up, so I pull that one on first, then step out.

I stay silent as I approach the mirror, but Phil just watches from the sofa without a word. I wait for another moment, until it feels too awkward to just keep standing here, then retreat to the dressing room. Color does not suit me, end of story.

The temptation to just get back into my - or I guess Phil’s - old clothes tugs at my chest, because really, colors? And do I have to try them all on? The shirt’s completely unbuttoned and halfway off my shoulders when Phil calls my name.

“Do the red one next!” His voice sounds closer, a little quieter, like he’s waiting outside the curtain, so I stifle a sigh and roll my eyes twice as hard to compensate. Then I’m digging through the pile, searching for the only red-

No. Abso-fucking-loutely not. I stare at the piece of red fabric, although it’s really more maroon than red. Oh, and also way too fucking short.

“Phil, I’m not wearing this,” I argue, staring at the crop top. There’s a black stripe across the middle and around the sleeves, but it’s otherwise uneventful. Maybe if it were a whole fucking shirt I’d be into it, but not-

“Come on, please? I promise I won’t ask you to try on anything else,” Phil says back, low and soft and definitely stood right outside the dressing room. I stick my head out and glare at him.

“Fine, but I’m not coming out. I’ll put it on and take it off and that’s it,” I frown at him, but he just
“Fine!” Then he pushes the curtain aside and steps into the dressing room with me. “As long as I get to see it.” I’m stood back against the wall, pretty much gaping at him.

“Phil, you can’t just- this is a private- you, I mean…” I’m too dumbfounded to actually grab his shoulders and shove him from the little space, and he’s just staring, eyes wide and expectant. And my other shirt’s already been discarded on the floor, so I may as well get this stupid spectacle over with.

Even as I’m pulling the shirt over my head, I can feel my cheeks heating up. *Maybe I can accidentally burn the thing, ‘oh whoops lost control, can’t be helped!’*. But I dismiss the idea immediately - not only would Phil have to pay for it, but I can’t afford any setbacks in how he thinks I’m capable of managing. *Ah yes, another awkward conversation for us to continue.*

“There,” I stick my arms out, feeling weirdly exposed in spite of the fact that I was technically *more* exposed a minute ago. “Fine, done, taking it-” I’m halfway to the hem, about to pull the damn thing off, when Phil steps forward and pushes me hard against the wall behind me. His lips capture mine before I can even ask *why*, or what, or anything at all, really.

His mouth slides against mine, soft and familiar and warm, and I melt into it; his hands find the same edge of the shirt I’d been ready to pull off a minute ago, sliding under the loose fabric and up my sides before trailing back down toward the waistband of my jeans. Already, I can feel heat pooling in my chest, begging to be let out, and I decide maybe - if Phil can stop being so damn *distracting* for just a minute - I can use this as an example, a test of how I could let my energy escape in a less fiery way.

“Will you get this as well?” He asks in my ear, and I barely manage a nod before he’s back to distracting me, sucking at my neck in a way that will absolutely leave marks. *I hope* he leaves marks, the thought alone sends my head spinning, and I nearly forget my goal of maybe *not* burning this place to the ground just yet.

But I can barely *think* straight, let alone come up with something non-destructive to channel my energy into - *what did Bea do? Wind seems a bit messy, I don’t think I want to just...levitate everything, maybe...*

The softest notes of a *song* I’d heard played a thousand times just before drifting off to sleep fill the air around us, a little repetitive as I try to remember the progression - it’s been ages since I’ve thought about this song, but it’s soft and lovely and calming, and it’s helping not only divert some of my energy but also slow my heart rate to something moderately manageable.

Well, that and Phil’s completely stopped his ministrations, leaning away from me and eyes wandering the space as if he could see the notes floating around us. I do a quick scan, just to be sure I hadn’t done that on accident, but I’m pleased to find the air is clear. The music continues softly around us, and I take a deep breath to clear my head.

But it doesn’t really work because Phil’s still not said anything, his lips are hung open like he’s about to speak but the words aren’t coming out, and I’m not sure how to react; fear swirls in my stomach, unreasonable but *there* - is this something he considers excessive? Heat coils back in my stomach, cooling to an almost frigid temperature. I let the notes fade out around me until we’re surrounded by silence.

It’s like breaking a spell, and Phil turns toward me with a look I really can’t read but includes a tilted head and wide eyes and pursed lips and I’m *pretty damn sure* I’m about to hear all about how
That was beautiful, what was it?” His voice comes out soft, on par with the gentle piano from a moment ago, and the tension in my muscles melts immediately; I slump against the wall, only wincing slightly when the cool brick meets the bare lower half of my back.

“I’m, uh, not sure exactly,” I answer, “my mum used to play it when I couldn’t sleep, and it calmed me down, so…” I shrug, drop my gaze to the floor. “Sorry, it really wasn’t necessary, I probably could’ve stayed under control, it just-”

“It was a good suggestion,” Phil admits with a small smile that shows he’s not exactly happy it was a good suggestion, but he’s glad for it anyway. Then he leans against me, resting his head on the wall, and mumbles something that definitely includes the word ‘jealous’.

“You were jealous!” I sort of shout, then clamp a hand over my mouth, mostly to hide my grin even though Phil’s not actually looking. There’s a poke in my side that makes me jerk away, and I shove at his shoulder lightly enough that I hope he understands I don’t actually want him to move away.

“Not of her!” Phil pulls back anyway, a frown full of indignation curling his mouth down. “Just that...she can teach you stuff I can’t?” His tone softens, as do his features, until he’s just twisting his lips and staring at the ground. Now it’s my turn to scrunch my brows and tilt my head at him.

“Of course she can, everyone’s experiences are different.” I reach forward and tilt his chin up until he’s looking at me. “Why does that matter?” Because it’s clearly more, he hadn’t been this bothered by PJ. He hadn’t been, had he?

“I know you said you wanted to stay, but…” Phil starts. And doesn’t actually finish.

“I did, and I do,” I emphasize, hoping to get the rest of that sentence. Does he think I’ll want to leave just because someone else has more to teach me? “This may come as a surprise,” I wait for him to lock eyes with me, “but I actually really like you, you know.” He huffs out a laugh that doesn’t sound all that convinced.

“I know, and I like you, but-”

“Phil, I’m wearing a bloody crop top because you asked,” I gesture at the shirt, which I’m actually finding quite comfortable. Not that I’m about to say that out loud. “I plan on staying around a while, if you still want me,” I tack on the last bit more from my own nerves than anything, but Phil’s face lights up in a way that says a lot more than actual words could.

“Dan, of course I want you,” he says anyway, leaning in and pressing a soft kiss to my lips. “All done with the clothes?” He asks the moment he pulls back, and I glance at the barely-touched pile of colorful shirts he’d brought earlier.

“Yeah, I think I’m set,” I give him a tight-lipped smile that makes him giggle, that silly tongue-biting thing he does and claims he doesn’t, the same one Mellix does. Is that part of having a familiar, we emulate each other unintentionally? I have half a second to wonder before Phil’s slipping out of the curtain, commanding me to get changed so we can head home.
Okay so maybe I had needed to hear him say it again, that he wants to stay and he’s not about to ditch me to beg Beatrice to tutor him. It still bothers me that she was the one to suggest the idea of siphoning off his energy, even though it is a really good one. And the music sounded so pretty...it’s not my fault I’ve never had enough spare energy to warrant doing something like that.

I wait on the sofa for Dan to finish changing, trying not to think of my lingering jealousy and failing miserably. I have to come up with something to teach Dan that’s super useful, too, I finally decide, and just in time, as he’s stepping back out from behind the curtain with the same shirt and jeans as when we’d arrived but carrying an armload of monochrome clothes and shifting on his feet.

“I hope this is alright? If it’s too much, I can always-”

“The red one?” I ask - okay, the whole ‘let me pick some stuff out for you’ was mostly a ploy to get him to wear this crop top, I’d passed it earlier and just had to see it on him. And it was a really really good decision on my part, I think. He pulls a few shirts aside to reveal the dark red fabric. “And the other outfit?” I wouldn’t have personally been pleased with all the black, but I suppose it’s his favorite color and he feels comfortable in it, so who am I to judge? But the ripped jeans, I’m almost tempted to ask him to buy several of those if it means I get to see him in them more often. The jacket as well. Wow, I apparently have a thing for punks and pain, that sounds like a really cheesy porno...

“Yes,” Dan nods, so I grin and gesture for him to head to the register. As soon as he deposits the clothes on the counter, Matt begins sorting through them, removing hangers and scanning everything before stuffing it into bags.

I glance over to find Dan chewing his lip, frown deepening with each new item that’s rung up. He starts bouncing on his toes once the total gets over two hundred pounds.

“Hey, you should go grab some pants too, probably,” I suggest, pointing to the section near the back. “Just run and get some while Matt finishes.” He huffs out a breath that says he’s not happy about it, except he does need underwear - wow, I feel like a mum, but it’s true!

I stare hard at the lessening pile of clothes, hoping Dan won’t come back til it’s almost all gone and packed away; he’d looked two seconds from freaking out, probably at the cost, but it hardly matters if it makes him happy. I can easily afford it.

“Alright,” Dan tosses down a handful of pants - all black, of course - and goes back to watching the price on the register steadily increase. He lifts a hand to his mouth, biting at his thumbnail. “Are you sure it’s not-”

“Dan,” I grab his shoulders and turn him to face me, more so he’ll stop looking at the cost. “I want you to stop stealing all my clothes,” maybe if talking about it as if it’s for me instead of him will make him back down. Then I lean in closer, right beside his ear. “Besides, I want to see you in those clothes, especially the red shirt,” I whisper, “and then I want to watch you take it off.” The way his breath hitches says he might just be distracted enough for me to get away with paying before he can try to protest again.

Matt rattles off a total I don’t pay attention to and I hand over my card. Dan must still be lost in his head, because I have to nudge him to get his help carrying the three bags of clothes. That I told him
to get, so I guess I can’t complain. I’m suddenly tempted to ask him to transport them all back
home for us, but I think I’d rather he practice with stuff I didn’t just spend a whole load of money
on. Not for the first time, I’m wondering why I didn’t think to keep a few transport spells on hand.

Just as Dan’s pushing out the door, I pause and swirl around - which is actually quite a hard thing
to do with two bags full to the brim with clothes.

“Matt!” I call out, though he could probably hear me from here. “I don’t suppose James is looking
for anyone to help out around here?” I can’t believe I’d nearly forgotten this quest of Dan’s to get a
job, even though it’s more for his peace of mind than mine.

“Sorry, Phil, I’ll check and let you know, but I don’t think so,” he frowns, but I grin and thank him
anyway.

Dan waits til I’ve joined him outside to let out a groan.

“I don’t suppose you know of anywhere else that might be hiring?” He frowns down at the
pavement, then glances over at the bags I’m carrying. “Jeez, Phil, you can’t- I mean, that’s my shit,
I should be carrying it,” he pulls one from my hand before I can protest, but I swing the other out of
his way just in time.

“Dan, I really don’t mind,” I hope my voice comes out mostly light, but I can feel the tension
underneath it. I don’t exactly want to suggest it, but...if it’ll make Dan happy... “I can’t think of
anywhere else that’s as witch-friendly, and Javier refuses to hire anybody,” I’d been victim to an
hour-long story about the one and only time he’d ever brought on another employee; suffice to say,
it hadn’t worked out well. “But you could always find somewhere that maybe isn’t, uh, quite as
tolerant?” It feels like sandpaper sliding up my throat to say the words, but if he’s insistent-

“No, Phil, not a fucking chance, I can’t believe you’d even- I mean, I’m a witch, how would that- I
guess they wouldn’t have to know, but still, there’s no fucking-”

“Okay, okay,” I slow to a stop on the pavement. “I’m not sure, maybe we just have to wait a bit?”
Or maybe forever? I have plenty of money, you don’t have to work, let me provide for you. It’s a
silly urge, to say - and feel - those things, especially because it wouldn’t be too hard to guess Dan’s
reaction. He exhales a heavy breath but nods, then takes a few slow steps on toward the edge of
town.

“Flour!” He shouts, and I nearly trip over the foot I’d picked up to follow him, just catching myself
at the last second. “You said you needed flour, we totally forgot!” He’s backtracking now,
grabbing my free hand with his - I notice he’s got both bags hanging from the other - and dragging
me off down the street.

I don’t even realize where we’ve stopped until, well, we’ve stopped; a very black door stares back
at me, accompanied by a wave of frustration and annoyance.

“You said Bea had flour, right?” Dan frowns, I assume noticing a look on my face, so I try to fix it
into something neutral.

“She does,” I try not to grumble the words, because Dan’s pushing through the door and inside and
I think I’ve already had more than enough of ‘Bea’ than I can handle for one day but here we are
again, I guess.

“Bea?” Dan calls into the dark space - or maybe it just feels dark, like I’m projecting the darkness
in my head onto it somehow. I take a few hesitant steps behind him. Okay, definitely darker than
“Dan?” The annoying voice lilts out from the storage room, followed by the woman herself. Followed by another woman who I’m pretty sure I’ve never seen before. “Oh! Hello you two,” Beatrice’s face lights up in a nervous grin, one that’s mirrored more calmly by her companion. “I did say come back soon, I didn’t really expect it to be quite this soon.” She smooths at her shirt, though it doesn’t look in any need of smoothing.

“Right, we need some flour as well.” Dan smiles back at her, but his eyes keep flicking back to the other woman - or I suppose they aren’t necessarily a woman, that’s presumptive of me, but they’ve got dark dreadlocked hair pulled back with a ribbon a the base of their neck, and they’re sporting a dress that drapes across their shoulders and down past where I can see with the counter blocking my sight.

“Sure, yes, of course, this way,” Beatrice nearly jumps out from behind the corner and rushes back toward the herbs, or rather to the nearby shelf where she keeps some of the summoning ingredients. Is she...flustered? I’ve never seen her anything aside from cool and elegant, even if it’s usually in an annoying way.

“Oh!” Beatrice exclaims as she hands Dan a package of flour, then gestures toward the person who’d followed her out from the back. “Melody, by the way, my- uh,” Melody glances back at Beatrice and gives a small smile.

“Her girlfriend, thanks Bea,” she laughs, and it’s got that same musical tone under it; my brows lift to look over at Beatrice. Who’s blushing. “Bit dark in here, babe, do you want to-” she breaks off and points at the ceiling. A moment later, the lights flicker on, and Beatrice gives us a sheepish grin.

“Sorry, forgot about, uh, that…” When I finally feel able to blink, or do anything other than attempt to process whatever’s happening here, I glance at Dan, who’s got his lips pursed like he’s trying very hard not to burst out into laughter right now.

He manages to keep it together, though, and makes his way back to the register. I join him a moment later, giving Melody a polite nod.

“Sure you didn’t forget anything else?” Beatrice tilts her head at me once she’s stood behind the register, falling perfectly back into her condescending I’m-better-than-you mode. Until Melody slides up next to her and lays a hand on her shoulder.

“Actually, I think they did. Dan, you need a job?” Her voice reminds me of molasses for some reason, thick and sweet and probably something you’d find in a cookie. Which is why it takes me a second to actually register what she’s said.

“How did you-” Dan blurts out before I have the chance, but my eyes go wide as I glance between him and Melody.

“Mel, I told you not to do that!” Bea smacks Melody’s shoulder. “She can, uh-”

“Read minds?” I supply, because what else could it be? PJ’s the only seer he knows of, so it wouldn’t be that, surely. The woman bows, her grin looking as smug as Beatrice’s usually does but somehow softer.

“Only when it’s important.” She says it like it’s an assurance, though I’m still frowning at the invasion of privacy. “And he wasn’t going to ask,” she points at Dan, “and you hadn’t even thought
of it,” then at me. My lips twist. *Dan had wanted to ask?*

“Actually, yeah, I do,” Dan interjects, apparently not as bothered by this as I am. “Need a job, I mean.” He glances over at me, almost like he’s *apologizing*.

“Perfect, Bea needs some help.” She pats Beatrice’s shoulder. “I’ll let you sort out the details,” she winks at me - *why me?* - before popping out of existence, and I’m left wondering if she knows a certain seer who has a fondness for being cryptic and transporting himself everywhere.

It’s not til the silence has stretched out long enough to make my ears feel funny that I focus on the situation at hand; both Beatrice and Dan are staring at me, and my eyes widen.

“Sorry, what?” It feels like a question’s been asked, though I don’t actually recall hearing anything.

“Well I assume you’re not pleased with this,” Beatrice crosses her arms, and wind swirls up around her, rustling her cloak and setting her hair to floating behind her again; it’s only now that I realize she *hadn’t* been doing that when we arrived, but I’m too busy worrying about the implications of Dan working here to properly care.

“I don’t have to, I mean, I’m sure—” Dan starts, and all my resolve melts - it would be silly of me to try to dictate what he can do, that’s really unfair and *controlling* in a way that I’d never want to act towards Dan.  

“Dan.” I wait until he’s closed his mouth. Beatrice leans on the counter, and I notice the edge of a smirk. *Melody’s abilities would be really useful right now, I bet;* I’d love to know what snarky thing she’s got in her head. *Except this isn’t about her! It’s about Dan, and about him being happy.* I try to decide the best way to say that without coming off rude or...unintentionally possessive.

“If you want to work here, and if Beatrice wants your help,” I glance sideways at her, as does Dan, and her eyes widen just a bit before she nods. “Then you should. I’m not your keeper,” I add for good measure, both because Dan should know and because I want to make it clear to Beatrice that it’s *not like that*, and she’d better stop acting like it is.

Dan drops his gaze and his face goes through at least twelve different emotions, including something that makes him frown for far longer than I really like, before he looks up again.

“Part time?” He glances between us both, and I’m not really sure what I expected him to say, but that wasn’t it. Since I have no clue how to respond, I turn to Beatrice, who’s still leaning on the counter, examining her nails as they flit through various colors.

“Probably less, actually,” she comments distractedly, and I can’t decide if I’m glad Dan would be spending more time with me or annoyed that she’s not giving him much actual work. *Except Dan looks pleased when I turn to him, so I let myself be a little excited. I suppose this isn’t the worst possible thing that could’ve happened.*

“Just come down whenever you feel like it,” she holds her hand up, pausing to stare at whatever color she’s chosen for her nails, “and I’ll give you stuff to do.” Now she drops her hand, and I notice various shades of *pink*, which seems so out of character for her. *Or maybe I just don’t know what her character actually is.* I roll that thought around in my head for a bit.

“Perfect!” I glance over to find Dan practically bouncing on his toes, bags dangling from his hand and sort of swinging as he grins at her. Then he turns to *me*, that grin somehow brightening even more, and I have to smile because he just looks so damn *happy*, how could I be anything but happy for him?
"Uh, yeah," I agree, though I'm not quite sure what I'm agreeing to, they're just both staring at me and I feel like I have to agree. Or say something.

"The flour?" Dan asks after a moment, when it's clear I don't have anything else to say. Beatrice just slides it across the counter.

"No cost, but bring me some cookies or whatever it is you plan on baking." She shrugs when I furrow my brows at her, because how would she- "Oh, please, Phil," she laughs, and I try not to grimace. "You? Summoning anything? Not likely."

I'm tempted to say something, and equally tempted to storm out of the shop, but Dan takes a step forward and grabs the flour.

"He's perfectly capable of doing whatever-"

"Dan, dear," Beatrice tuts as she tilts her head, and this is the edge-of-a-knife tension I was expecting when we first arrived at the shop earlier; I take a step forward, ready to literally put myself between them if need be.

"I have no doubt Phil's perfectly capable of whatever he sets his mind to, he just doesn't set his mind to anything occult." She crosses her arms over her chest, giving him the most placating smile I think I've ever seen on her. Usually it's much more...condescending.

"I- oh," Dan blinks a couple times, shifts the bag of flour in his hand. Then his eyes flick to me, wide like he's waiting for my reaction. Which never actually comes, because I'm still reeling; Beatrice thinks I can accomplish whatever I set my mind to? Why would she say that? It's not like she's ever seen my witchcraft, and she's got no reason to be nice, not when she's usually so-

"If that'll be all, dears, I'll see you again soon. Dan," she waves her hand, and a red ribbon floats out toward him; actually, it looks suspiciously similar to the one she'd tied around his wrist earlier, but I'm only just noticing those seem to have all disappeared at some point. How'd I miss that?

"Just send some energy to that whenever you plan on stopping by," she nods at the ribbon as it winds around his wrist again, glowing for a moment before settling in a loose bow. "I'll have some things for you to take care of."

"Sure," he smiles at her, looking immensely pleased as he joins me and we head out the door. I'm still trying to decide if we just stepped out of a dream or not when an icy drop of water lands on my head.

"Phil," Dan's voice comes out as a whine, and I turn, finally breaking out of my haze, to find him squinting up at the sky - or, rather, the lack thereof: dark clouds the color of half the stuff we bought Dan have blocked out the sun. I only get a brief glimpse before another raindrop hits me square in the forehead and makes me drop my gaze back to Dan.

Who's clearly displeased with this turn of events, eyes locked behind me on the door of the shop we just left. I know we're meant to be on decent terms - or something like that - but I think I've had it up to my ears with Beatrice for today, and I'd really rather not...

"This way," I point in the direction of a side street, one that leads out of town but people rarely actually use, as an idea blossoms in my head. Hah! Now I can teach him something useful!
Dan

I cannot believe that, on top of all the other nonsense that's happened today, the sky's just gone and decided to fucking rain.

I mean, first the incident- well, okay, first the interesting wake-up call, but I'd hardly classify that as a bad thing. But then the incident in the diner with that prejudiced asshole, then two places that weren't hiring, and Phil clearly hating Beatrice which means I'm meant to also dislike her, except I kind of really like her, then the mind-reader, Melody - actually, that was pretty cool, but in a creepy invasive sort of way, like with PJ - and now it's fucking raining.

Oh, and sure, I've got a bag of flour in my hand and a whole bunch of clothes that'll definitely be ruined if they get wet, but Phil wants to drag us off down some alleyway instead of just going back inside because he hates this other witch who happens to be pretty cool.

Okay, I'm not trying to be malicious, it's just...not only has she given me some ideas for an outlet for my energy, but she's giving me a job, sort of, and even when I'd thought she was being rude - she did have that tone - she ended up being unnecessarily kind?

But apparently that's not enough, as Phil's already disappeared around the corner, and more icy pellets of rain have decided to invade my hair and clothes and I'll be damned if they ruin my new shit before I've had a chance to even wear it. I sprint off after Phil, catching up after a moment and desperately wishing for an umbrella or even a bloody raincoat or-

"I can't just materialize an umbrella, can I?" I grumble, eyes locked on the ground to avoid any water getting in them; I have a feeling the answer's a solid 'no', but I can dream, can't I?

"Actually," I suck in a breath at his word, hovering in the air around us in spite of the rain battering everything else to the ground. "Well, okay, not exactly," he amends, and I smirk at my shoes as we walk. "But you can sort of...like, create one? With wind?" I peek over to find his hand in the air, arching over his head, but I can't tell if it's to protect his face from the rain or to give me a visual example of the point he's trying to make.

"So, what, just-" I break off, trying to ignore the layer of chill settling on my skin and focus on the heat in my chest - it expands the moment I tap into it, and I'm already feeling warmer, but that wasn't the goal.

Wind whips around me, wild and uncertain at first, and I realize it's got more to do with how uncertain I'm feeling because, as always, my bloody emotions get to play a part in everything I do with my witchcraft. I grimace at the ground, trying to force some control, but it only ends up feeling like I've stuck myself in a tiny tornado, wind tugging at the bags in my hand and sending drops of water up and into my eyes.

Then a hand lands on my shoulder, soft and warm and Phil's, and everything calms almost immediately. Right, Phil thinks I can do this, so I can definitely do this. I pause - Phil stops beside me - so I can squeeze my eyes shut and focus, damn it. I imagine an umbrella sort of shape over both our heads, like a pocket of wind to pull the rain aside.

I blow out a shaky breath when a few seconds pass and water's stopped hitting my scalp, soaking through the fabric of my shirt, dripping down my arms. Then I allow myself a quick peek over at Phil, who's staring up above us, a bright grin on his face. Like, a really bright grin.
"Did I..." I trail off when I finally lift my head to critique my own work; of course, I couldn't just create a little umbrella for us. No, instead, I had to part the damn clouds over our heads, and a ray of sunlight shines down on us like it's mocking me. "Of course," I groan aloud.

Then Phil nearly tackles me, and I end up on a single foot, one leg in the air in a sad attempt at keeping my balance, but he's got an arm wrapped awkwardly around me and his lips find my cheek and he's sort of giggling in the soft way I know means he's probably biting his tongue and I let myself stumble back just enough to see it.

"That was amazing, Dan, I hope you realize how amazing that is?" He's still beaming like I put the damn sun in the sky. Which, for all intents and purposes, I guess I sort of did just now. A smile creeps up my cheeks in spite of my sour mood at my own lack of...is it a lack of control? I'd technically done what I tried to do, just on a much bigger scale...

"Thanks," I manage to say after too long has passed and I realize I really ought to saysomething. Phil called it amazing, called me amazing. My cheeks ache, but I can't stop grinning, not with the way he's staring at me, eyes wide and bright and looking a lot like the clear patch of sky above us. "Should we, uh," I tilt my head in the direction of the street, hoping he catches my drift about heading home.

Home. I huff out a breath as Phil turns, so I don't think he notices, but when had I decided his house was home? It is, it absolutely is and I can't even pretend to deny it, because I feel safe and cared for and...it's home.

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We walk mostly in silence, the clouds above us shifting not-so-subtly to keep us dry, and I'm finding that it's almost effortless. Which is something I don't think I've ever been able to say about anything in my life before now. If I focus, I can sort of feel the drain on my energy, but I barely have to hold the thought of that invisible umbrella in the corner of my mind to keep the witchcraft working, and it's actually almost pleasant to know I'm doing something useful instead of worrying about accidentally losing control.

Once we're at the house, the rain lets up completely, and I sort of just tell my energy it can stop doing what it's doing now. The clouds drift back together slowly, and I watch them until Phil calls my name by the door.

"Come on, I want to make pancakes!" He shouts from the porch, and I'm hit with it again: that rush of peace and happiness and normaley, things I want so badly and never imagined I'd have. Never dreamed I'd have, especially not with another person.

My feet finally remember how to move, and they climb the same wooden stairs I'd tripped and fallen on the first time I arrived. I make a point of stepping very carefully up them and over the other tripping hazard, the threshold of the door, before letting my bags drop to my feet inside with a squishy crinkle from the settling plastic. Really, that's it? They felt so much heavier than they sounded...

The flour, at least, makes a much more satisfying thump when I set it on the counter, and Phil's already digging through the fridge and pulling out the eggs and milk. The door closes behind us, and I almost have a minor heart attack before remembering where we are.

"Thanks, Susan," I offer, because she can hear, right? Just not see. Oh god, does that mean we have to like...be quiet? I'm suddenly terrified at the prospect, because I am not a quiet person.
"Dan," I glance over to find Phil watching me, eyes drifting down my body in a way that should not be legal before coming back up to meet my gaze. "Think you can control yourself long enough to eat, or..." he licks his lips and fuck maybe it's worth losing control sometimes, making my emotions known, if it means he gets like this around me.

But I'm hungry as well, enough that I suck in whatever heat I'd been projecting and channel a bit of my energy into a soft piano piece I was taught how to play once but never really got the hang of. It always sounded so much better in my head, anyway.

"Is this alright?" I check, because it's technically wasteful, and I had sort of just used a bunch of energy on the walk home, so I could probably get by without finding another outlet for my witchcraft, but it's also just...nice. Like having background music playing without having to actually find headphones or set up a speaker. But I don't want to do it if it's bothering Phil. I wonder if there's a way to do it so only I can hear it? Although then wouldn't that just be like hearing it in my head? I exhale. Problems for later.

"It's really pretty, Dan," Phil's look softens into a smile and he turns back to the ingredients, then pulls open a cabinet and takes out a large mixing bowl.

"Can I help with anything?" I offer, because I hate just standing around doing nothing and I really feel like he should have that figured out by now. He twists his lips and pauses, then looks back at me.

"Yes," he crosses his arms and frowns at me, "put your clothes away!" He looks every bit the mum he's clearly trying to pretend to be, and I cough out an unexpected laugh before bowing my head and nodding solemnly.

"Yes, mum, I'll go- uh," I pause, glancing up. "Put them where, though?" It's not like he's got a spare closet for me to use. Now he frowns properly, brows scrunched in confusion.

"In the wardrobe? And dresser? Wherever they fit?" He tilts his head, waiting for my reaction. Which isn't even really a reaction because I'm absolutely paralyzed. I think even the music's stopped, lingering on a single note. "Dan?" Phil finally says, after clearly too much time has passed, but he wants me to just...move into his space? Share a dresser and a wardrobe and a room and a bed and-

"Yeah, okay," I manage to get the words out past the lump in my throat because fuck I refuse to have Phil see me crying over something so simple and silly. Over something I'm fucking elated about, but what if he thinks I'm upset? Or that I don't want this?

I grab the bags I'd left and pick his up on the way to the stairs, the music resuming around me in a stuttered staccato rhythm that sounds frantic and light and matches the racing of my heart perfectly.

I don't think I exhale until I've locked myself in the bedroom - the bedroom, the one Phil wants me to share, to occupy in the same way he does, like we're equals and partners and fuck this is a lot right now.

I flop down on the bed, burying my face in the duvet to absorb the stupid happy tears that keep leaking from my eyes. Without Phil watching me, observing my every reaction, I can feel my breathing return to normal, my heart slow down a bit, and the music around me echoes my body, turning calm and almost sleepy.

But I'm not sleeping, I don't have time, I don't want to, because Phil told me to put my clothes away in his room - in the room, because it's the only one so naturally we'll just share it. I suck in a breath
that’s probably full of fuzz and push myself up off the bed.

_OKay, let’s do this._ The music around me turns oddly determined, a _crescendoing piece_ that I can’t name but I know I’ve heard or maybe _just felt_ before.

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I don’t return downstairs until I’ve put everything away and had a damn good freak out session that ended with very loud music and only a little bit of fire - to be fair, there’s something really powerful about seeing my own things right next to Phil’s, in a dresser drawer like they _belong_ there. Like _I_ belong here. With Phil.

My hand pauses on the railing. _Stop, I already panicked about this, I’m good now, I’m accepting it, I can just be happy._ The sizzling of something on the hob drags my feet forward and down the stairs, and I think my stomach actually _rumbles_ by the time I reach the bottom.

Phil’s already got a stack of pancakes sat beside him on the counter, steaming and warm and smelling like, well, _pancakes._ _Jesus christ, it’s been ages since I’ve had proper pancakes._

“Anything else I can do?” I offer as soon as I’m closer. If he weren’t at the stove, I’d be tempted to wrap my arms around his waist and rest my head on his shoulder. That’s exactly the kind of stupid, soppy, romantic thing I would _never_ have imagined myself doing and now I’m thoroughly disappointed that I _can’t._

“Oh!” Phil startles when I approach, even though I’ve no doubt he could hear the soft music from the stairs. It’s much calmer now, more like a _series of runs and gentle melodies_ than the frenetic, overwhelmed pieces that had wormed their way out through my witchcraft earlier. “Actually, could you grab some stuff to put on the pancakes? They’re almost done,” he glances briefly over his shoulder, but says most of the words to the pan he’s intently focused on.

I hum an agreement, then pull open the fridge. Unlike at PJ’s, the only living things that greet me are bowls full of fruit, and I grab the berries and a couple lemons. Just as the door’s swinging shut, I notice a can of whipped cream, so I take that out as well, and everything finds a place on the counter.

“Sugar?” I ask, and Phil glances up from the pan, wide-eyed like he’s totally forgotten I’m here again. Then he points at a cupboard above me, and I open it to find a small package of icing sugar along with a load of other baking-type necessities; honey, cinnamon, and the sugar all earn a spot in the ever-growing row of possible toppings. Just as I’m about to close the door, I notice a half-empty jar of peanut butter hidden in the very back, and _sure, why the hell not?_ I set it beside the sugar, then turn to find Phil facing me, pancakes in hand and brows arched up his forehead as he stares at the array of choices.

“What? You said to get some stuff for-”

“It looks delicious, Dan,” Phil says, voice just this side of laughter, and I give myself one second to frown at him before snatching the plate from his hand and _and what?_ Now I’ve just got a plate full of pancakes and no plan, but Phil’s grin has softened into a gentle smile, then he’s turned to grab another plate.

“Mind if I have a few?” He jokes, nudging my arm before stealing half the pancakes for himself. I roll my eyes.

“Well, I _did_ do all the hard work, but I _suppose_ you can have some,” I nudge him back, then he hip
checks me out of the way of the toppings and I just let him because I’m grinning and fucking 
*happy* so I don’t know that I really mind.
Phil

Whatever Dan’s got going on in his head, it’s turned light and almost floaty, if the music around us is anything to go by. I can’t help but smiling as I layer my pancakes with peanut butter and strawberries, the way my mum used to make them for me when I was little. Peej always thought it was a weird combo, which was saying quite a lot coming from the guy who would insist pancakes tasted best with just a hint of demonic energy mixed in.

I don’t really mean to, but I end up watching Dan as he slices a lemon and squeezes it over his pancakes, then sprinkles a dusting of icing sugar on top. He does all this with just his witchcraft, and I know it’s not exactly shocking by now that he’s able to do it, and it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve been around someone who can just...do witchcraft without any real effort, but something about the fact that it’s Dan has me entranced.

“What?” He asks when he turns to find me just staring, and I blink as a blush crawls up my cheeks. “Was I, like, warm? Or-”

“No, no, I’m, uh- I just like-” I fumble for words, my eyes begging me to stare at the ground but totally unable to leave Dan at the same time. He’s got his brows scrunched, head tilted a bit.

“Like what, watching me?” He huffs out a laugh and brushes past me, but that’s exactly it. I just like watching, knowing that I’m near him. I follow him to the lounge on autopilot, sitting on the floor opposite him at the coffee table - I’d actually thought to go outside, but he looks content and I don’t really want to suggest we move.

We eat in a comfortable kind of almost-silence, forks clinking against plates and miscellaneous chewing sounds and a few soft piano notes but no actual talking, and it’s unexpectedly pleasant.

Before Dan - and I say before in my head like it’s some momentus divide, like I should label time as ‘before Dan’ and ‘with Dan’ (and steadfastly refuse to consider the ‘after Dan’ period for now) - if there was any stretch of silence, I had to fill it. Sometimes it was with TV, sometimes with absent chatter with Mellix, sometimes I’d set up a mirror and call PJ; but I couldn’t do silence, it just felt too empty. Like something was missing.

Apparently, it was. Dan.

Because now, sitting across from him and chewing on a way-too-large bite of my pancakes with the peanut butter definitely making everything stick to the roof of my mouth, I’m actually enjoying the silence. It feels full and bright and yeah, maybe there’s music and sounds and it’s not actually dead quiet, but the emptiness has completely evaporated. Can emptiness evaporate? Would it be more that it’s stuffed, instead?

And then I’ve lost the analogy anyway because Dan’s squinting at me and I watch him swallow his bite and I try to do the same.

“You’re doing it again.” He says it like it’s the most regular thing in the world, like ‘oh yeah, Phil’s at it again, doing whatever it is he always does’, like we’ve been around each other for ages and ages and ages and he just knows me.

“Doing what?” I finally manage, even though it comes out sticky and I definitely need to get myself a glass of water. I stand, expecting that to be the moment ending, but it doesn’t feel that way - it feels like a continuation of a usual night at home, just relaxing and having some dinner.
For the first time in...maybe ever, my house feels like a home.

It’s not that I’ve ever been uncomfortable in my house, or even lonely; I’ve always had Mellix and Susan herself, but having Dan here makes it feel complete. The last piece of a puzzle fitting into place. I can’t stop grinning as I fill a glass at the sink.

“Nevermind,” Dan grumbles behind me, and my smile turns to a smirk as I turn around.

“Oh, I say,” I say, letting the silence drift back in around us. Whatever melody Dan’s got in his head, it turns pleasant and calm and a little lethargic, like he’s not inclined to make the moment anything more than it already is.

I settle back onto the floor across from him, now properly equipped to handle the sticky mess of the rest of my pancakes. Dan’s still eating as well, chewing a large bite and watching his plate like it’s the most interesting thing in the world. Because he isn’t looking, I let myself watch him, just appreciate every line of his cheekbones and jaw and the way his lips purse between bites, like he’s trying to decide which bit to eat next; somehow, I’ve fallen into this place in my head where every little motion he makes absolutely fascinates me.

Even when his brows furrow, I allow the silence to continue, too intrigued by the wrinkles that form on his forehead to think to be concerned. Until the space around us warms, and I realize the music’s stopped, and my head finally suggests I ought to maybe say something, because Dan’s clearly distressed.

“You okay?” I ask, once I’ve swallowed my current bite. I think I’d been chewing it for a while, though I can’t quite remember. Dan glances up, eyes widening, and it only takes a moment for the air to return to a normal temperature.

“Sorry, just lost in my head,” he mumbles, already focused back on his pancakes and stabbing at them with his fork. The music doesn’t resume, though.

“Dan.” I say it softly, and he lifts his head.

“I promise, it’s nothing.” His lips curl up in a half smile that doesn’t reach his eyes. I set my fork down, frowning, because what if he’s having second thoughts? Here I am, making some sappy comments to myself about how I’ve found the missing puzzle piece in my life, and he’s probably thinking he doesn’t even want to be here, or maybe that he ought to leave soon and find someone better. Or maybe I scared him off, with the whole...thing earlier...

“Dan, if you don’t want…” I’m not even sure what to say, though, because it would hurt way too much to even suggest out loud that he doesn’t want me, for whatever reason. I let the silence hang in the air, and it definitely starts to feel like the kind I used to hate. Dan twists his lips, looks back down at his plate, then up at me again.

“Are you sure it’s alright that I’ll be working with Bea? You didn’t seem to like her much.” The words tumble out like he’d been waiting for a chance to say them but wasn’t sure how, and they trigger a pang in my chest. That’s what he’s worried about? Sure, I’m not pleased, but suddenly all my fears flip on their head. He cares what I think.

“Dan,” I wait until he’s met my gaze so I can make a point of focusing on him. “I promise, it’s okay. And!” I sort of shout, but I do want to make sure he knows. “Even if I wasn’t, it’s still your decision.” Dan frowns at that, though, which is the exact opposite of how I wanted him to react.

“I don’t want to, like, go against-” he breaks off mid-sentence, lets his eyes drift down to the coffee
table. His fork hasn’t left his hand, and he taps it absently on the plate.

“Against what, ‘my wishes’?” I finish the expression, which sounds strange to say aloud, and frown at him. “I’m not your mum, Dan, I won’t tell you what to do. But I do want you to be happy.” Which is true. And I really hope happiness for him includes staying here with me, being with me, but it’s okay if it includes working at a shop with someone I’m not the biggest fan of.

For several seconds, the air around us flashes between hot and cool, but I don’t mention it; Dan’s clearly focused on whatever’s in his head, and I don’t want to distract him. After a while, he settles, face smoothing into something more relaxed, if still a bit nervous.

“Yeah?” He says it like he’s not sure he deserves it, being happy, and I have to resist the urge to fuck, why? I don’t have to resist any urge, not this kind anyway.

I scoot around the end of the coffee table - Dan watches, a little crease forming between his brows - until I’m beside him, then I pull him into my chest. He lets out a sort of breathy laugh, and I’m grinning into his hair, and it’s so nice and my heart feels light and full at the same time.

“Yeah, of course.” I mumble even though I hope my actions spoke enough for me. He huffs out a breath that I could probably interpret a lot of different ways if he didn’t go and wrap his arms around my back and lean further into this extremely awkward hug thing.

Neither of us moves for a minute, but Dan pulls back first, and I let him. There’s another beat of silence while he just watches me, a soft smile on his lips, before he turns back to his plate and shoves the last bit of pancake in his mouth.

Then he’s standing, plate in hand as he heads toward the kitchen.

“Finished?” I ask even though it’s obvious. I only realize my eyebrows have arched up my forehead when he turns around.

“What?” He asks, setting the plate down with a clink. “Why do you keep doing that?” His voice goes soft at the end as he turns away.

“M not doing anything, not sure what you’re on about.” I scrunch my brows when he peeks back over his shoulder to squint at me. Then he rolls his eyes and looks away again, but I don’t miss the way his cheeks turn pink.

“Wait, what is it I’m doing?” I try to squish my lips together once I’ve asked, because otherwise I won’t be able to keep a sort of straight face. Then I glance over at my plate, mercifully still containing some pancakes, and quickly shove a bite in my mouth. And just in time, as Dan fully turns around to cross his arms at me. I chew and hope I look appropriately confused.

Dan just stares for a moment, eyes narrowing slightly, before he looks to the side and huffs out a breath.

“Fine, fine, let’s just...move on, or whatever.” He grumbles, waving his hand in the air. Then he’s focused on the bag I left on the counter, the one from Beatrice’s shop earlier. Now I let my face do whatever it wants, and it settles on something between surprise and eagerness. Hopefully not too much, though.

“Move on...” I repeat just as Dan’s opening the bag, and his hands freeze on the plastic; at first, I’d assumed he meant something, but now I’m not so sure. Except then he’s pulling the bag off the counter, and I could swear the temperature just increased a bit. Or maybe that’s just me.
But Dan’s smirking at me as he heads toward the stairs, and wasn’t he just *blushing* a minute ago because I was staring at him too much?

“Was hoping to see if any of those fireproofing spells worked,” Dan says as he passes, then pauses at the base of the stairs. “I mean, unless you don’t—” he’s mid-shrug when I stand, and I probably look like I’m hunting him or something the way I rush toward the stairs, but he just smirks again before taking the steps two at a time and narrowly avoiding my catching up to him.

“Oh, so you *do* want?” Dan calls from the landing at the top as I climb, smirk still curling his features into something teasing, and I end up stood right in front of him for half a second before he steps back and into the bedroom.

Except then the door slams in my face, and I’m left in the hallway frowning and even more confused than I’d pretended to be a few minutes ago.

“Dan?”
My heart’s racing, and it’s only about forty percent to do with running up the stairs like that.

The way Phil looked at me, like he couldn’t wait to literally devour me whole... _fuck_, I’d been two seconds from burning the house to the ground from that alone. And if that’s any indication for how well I’m staying in control, we definitely need to get these spells in place sooner rather than later.

Also, maybe it wasn’t my best idea to slam the door in Phil’s face, but I couldn’t think of another way to keep us apart long enough to _calm the fuck down_.

“Just, like, five seconds.” I sort of shout through the wood. Then I’m slumped heavily against it, trying to get _anything_ in my body to act normally. I’m so focused on that, actually, that I nearly jump out of my skin when a soft knock sounds on the other side of the door.

“Dan?” Phil says again, but it sounds softer and less confused than it’d been a minute ago. I take a deep breath, pleased to find my lungs expand and contract as they’re expected to. It’s always tough to tell the temperature around me, but my core, it seems, has decided to behave for now; when I lean away from the wood, there aren’t any scorch marks, so I count it as a win. Until I notice my hand shaking as I reach for the doorknob. I pull it back.

“Yeah, come in.” I’m trying to project my voice loudly enough, but it comes out hoarse and croaky, probably far too quiet for Phil to even hear. I’m just clearing my throat when the doorknob turns, when a crack appears and Phil appears in that crack.

“You okay?” His tone is softer than mine was, but clearly on purpose. He doesn’t try open the door all the way, just enough that he can peek through, lips twisted like he’s trying not to frown.

“I’m good, I promise.” I can feel the heat creeping up to my cheeks - we’d been...it had been a _moment_, him chasing me like that, and I wanted it. Really _really_ wanted it. Minus the risk of burning the bed to ashes, at least. “Just needed to cool down for a second,” I amend, letting my eyes drift to the ground; even though we have - or _will_ have - some form of protection in place, embarrassment still tingles under my skin at my own lack of control.

“Thought we might need this?” Phil sticks the black notebook through the opening, widening it a bit. _Oh, yeah, that might be useful..._ “If you still, uh, want to-” His hand drops along with his lips, uncertainty thick in his tone.

“I _do_, I really fucking do,” I laugh through the words, more from nerves than humor, then pull the door open the rest of the way. It’s silly and maybe a little dumb, but I can’t help feeling this is _different_, different from this morning and from PJ’s and-

“Okay,” Phil’s grinning, though, and I sort of forget what I’d been thinking about. _Worried? Was I worried? How could I be?_ Not with Phil nearly bouncing on his toes as he steps into the room, eyes flicking over me once, then twice, and _fuck_.

“We need those spells like _right now,_” I snatch the book from his hand before he can argue, flipping through the pages for the little indicators of the spells PJ recommended. When a warm presence appears at my shoulder, I slow my page-flipping, expecting Phil to help.

Instead, he somehow decides it’s a _fantastic_ idea to press a kiss to my neck, and I suck in a breath, fingers pausing on the book, and did I already look at this page or- _no, wait, hemlock, yeah I just saw this one..._ I try to focus, but my fingers fumble with the relatively simple task I’ve assigned
them, and Phil’s apparently doing his damndest to short-circuit my brain. Or maybe make me set the notebook on fire, I have no fucking clue.

“Phil,” I manage to breathe his name, hoping he interprets it as a warning, that he’s very much not helping right now, but it only serves to make my mission even more challenging; Phil’s hands find my sides, sliding down until he’s caught the edge of my shirt, then his fingers drift up and across my skin, taking the fabric with him, and- “Phil, fuck, if you don’t-” I don’t get another word out, because he’s nipping gently at my neck now, and whatever I’d been thinking to say comes out as a low, shuddering breath.

“Which spell?” Phil asks against my skin, and it sends a wave of warmth out to my fingertips. I have to use literally every functioning brain cell just to draw it back in, to prevent anything disastrous from happening to the one resource we have to allow us to do anything when we’re not drenched in water.

“If you’d let me focus…” I grumble, but my body has other ideas, and I end up leaning back into him, tilting my head just the slightest, a silent request for more. When Phil chuckles, his breath tickles my skin, but he doesn’t distract me any further. Instead, his chin settles on my shoulder, and I give him one hopefully-annoyed glance before bringing my attention back to the notebook. Remarkably, it’s still undamaged, and I flip through a few more pages before landing on one PJ’s starred.

“Will this work?” I ask, shocked my voice comes out somewhat even. Phil shifts forward, and I look over to find him squinting down at the page, so I hold it up a bit closer. His chest presses into my back, and I have to resist my temptation to lean too far into him. Spell first, I remind my brain. And heart. And aching cock, already half hard in my pants at literally just the prospect of whatever comes after this.

“Yeah, I need-” he breaks off, stepping away, and I try not to frown at the loss. That’s silly, he’s not going anywhere. “Be right back!” Okay, he is, but not far, I reason with my urge to follow him, which is a bit clingy and not at all necessary. True to his word, he returns a moment later, holding a small sachet already filled with some dried something or other.

“Okay!” Phil announces, unusually chipper given our recent circumstances. Or maybe because of our recent circumstances. A thrill runs through my skin at the idea that he wants this as much as I do, that he’s just as eager. I mean, I guess I know, but the little reminders…they’re reassuring. Exhilarating. “Just add the mistletoe,” he points at the bag I don’t recall dropping, and I bend down and fumble with it for a moment before pulling out the bundle of mistletoe. “Just a bit, like a handful, that should be fine,” Phil offers a soft smile at my confusion.

Once the dark green has joined the rest of the herbs in the sachet - and I give myself a mental note to ask later what’s in there, since I’m meant to be learning this stuff, just not right now - Phil ties a small ribbon, sealing it shut, and slips it under the mattress. I watch as he digs the small chunk of jade from the bag, then puts it under the bed on the other side. Then he’s back at my side, finger hovering over the barely-legible writing in the notebook.

“Okay, now just a- actually,” he pauses, glancing up at me. “It would make a lot of sense for you to do this bit.” Then he’s dragging me by the wrist over to the headboard. “Here, see this symbol?” He points it out in the book, a sort of trident-head thing, then he indicates a spot on the side of the headboard. “Right here.”

I stare at it, then back at Phil.

“Got a pen, or?” I lift my brows, but he grins and shakes his head.
“Burn it there!” And of course, he says it like it’s the fucking coolest idea in the book, which it very literally and figuratively isn’t.

“I’m- burn it? You’re not serious,” I let my jaw drop a bit - but only a bit - when he nods, then steps aside and tugs me to the spot he’d been stood in.

Okay, don’t burn everything, just a tiny little…in my head, I imagine I’m holding a pen, letting a tiny spark of white-hot heat concentrate at the tip. Then, as carefully as I can manage, I start with the simplest part of the symbol: a vertical line. Surely I can’t fuck that up.

In spite of my hand shaking just the slightest bit, I manage to draw it pretty evenly, and instead of thinking too much about it, I add the trident and let the heat dissipate from my imaginary writing utensil. A brand stares back at me, still smoking, and I almost forget what the whole purpose of that exercise was until I’m flat on my back on the bed, notebook gone who knows where and Phil crawling on top of me, his lips hovering just an inch from mine.

“That’s it?” I manage around the bubble of excitement in my chest, threatening to burst and send a wave of uncomfortable warmth around the room. At least I’ve had a minute to cool off again. Otherwise I’m sure that bubble would’ve burst by now. Exploded, probably.

“That’s it,” Phil nods, mouth curling in a grin before he dips his head and captures my lips with his, and I end up smiling for about two seconds before his hands have found my hips; this time, I don’t hesitate to arch my back, to allow him to pull the hem of my shirt up and over my head. We only break apart for a moment, just long enough for the fabric to pass, then he’s pressing soft, slow kisses to my jaw, my neck; my fingers trace his sides absently - honestly, I’m too lost in him to really think of anything right now, let alone what to do with my hands.

My hands…does he want me to…I recall this morning, when he’d asked, when I’d trailed red marks across his skin. Sent him over the edge that way. I can feel the heat in my chest, begging to be released, itching to light my skin on fire, but I have no idea what he wants.

“Dan,” Phil’s voice forces me to refocus, and I realize he’s stopped - how had I missed that? - and settled with his elbows on either side of my head. “What’s wrong?” I hate that he has to ask, that something in my face or the way I’m acting says something was wrong.

“There is literally nothing wrong about this.” I say it as much for my sake as his, if only because I’m not sure what he expects of me. His brows furrow just a bit, and I chew at my lip - should I bring it up? It’s not that I have a problem with it, especially since it makes my need for control a little less urgent, but…he’d been so uncomfortable discussing it earlier. Maybe he doesn’t want-

“It’s okay if you would rather not…uhm…” Phil interrupts my thoughts, shifting back so he’s no longer pressed against my chest. His eyes drift to the crumpled duvet beside us.

“Can we talk about earlier? You didn’t exactly…seem okay with what happened?” I’m not entirely a fan of the fact that we’re putting everything on pause, but I feel like this is a conversation that needs to happen properly. “I mean, are you- like do you want-”

Phil rolls off me, and I turn my head to follow his movement as he buries his face in the pillows beside me.

“I don’t know,” he mumbles, voice muffled by the fabric. “Maybe a little?” This comes out high and squeaky and unsure, then he peeks out, cheeks tinted the same red I’d turned his skin this morning.
“I can do a little,” I give him a soft smile, hoping to set him at ease - his words from earlier come back, that he didn’t know about this particular kink, and I let warmth seep into my fingertips. Okay, not too much. I desperately hope my control is decent enough to handle this; the last thing I need is to accidentally overwhelm Phil. Or hurt him. Or scare him. Or-

Can I just bloody focus on right now, thanks? I chastise my brain for getting so off topic and reach out to trace my hand down Phil’s arm.

“Is this okay?” Just go slow, communicate, it’s no different from any other time, I try to tell myself. Except it is, in a lot of ways I don’t even want to begin to unpack right now. But the most important is that it’s Phil, and being with him feels different. Like more. He sucks in a breath when my fingers touch his skin but doesn’t move away, doesn’t ask me to stop.

Then I’m the one left unable to breathe, because he’s suddenly back on top of me, pressed against every inch of my body, and it’s the best kind of suffocation. I expect him to lean in, continue where we left off earlier, his lips leaving trails of heat along my skin that have nothing to do with my witchcraft, but it’s his hips that move instead, grinding into mine and making me bite my lip against a moan. My hand - the one I’ve managed to keep at a normal temperature - finds the hem of his shirt and tugs at it; without my even asking properly, he’s dragging it off and over his head, and I let my fingers trail up his back in the wake of the fabric.

I have to assume whatever temperature my hands are - and the heat’s spread to both now - is alright, or maybe really fucking good with how he throws his shirt aside, with the way his eyes drift shut for a moment before opening to stare down at me, with the way that ravenous look has returned. Then his lips find mine and he’s sucking and biting at them and I end up the one shifting my hips up into his, a silent plea for more friction, more of his mouth and tongue and more of him and just more.

His hands find themselves at my waist again, this time sliding between us; at first, I’m pissed because he moves away, because that’s not at all what I wanted, but his lips give mine absolutely no break to say this, and then his fingers fumble with the button on my jeans and I hum into his mouth - it’s the closest I can get to properly begging, and the closest my ego will allow.

Phil pulls away fully, then, and I hum again at the loss. Except he apparently needed to focus on my jeans, as a moment later, they’re undone and he’s sliding them down my thighs; cool air hits my skin for half a second before he’s back on top of me, another layer of clothes tossed aside somewhere I can’t be bothered to take note of.

“Wait wait wait,” I mumble against his lips, pushing back at his shoulders. I’m vaguely aware my hands haven’t gotten any less warm, but Phil doesn’t seem to mind, too busy looking down at me with a small frown.

“Did I do-”

“No, just- now I’m the only one half naked,” I grumble, shoving at him again. “Your turn.” He leans back, climbs off the bed to stand and undo his own jeans. An idea hits me just then, so I scramble off the edge of the mattress and drop to my knees in front of him; even though I’m nowhere near his face, I can hear the breath he sucks in, and I can absolutely see his fingers still on the hem of his jeans.

When my hands move to replace his, I brush against him briefly, and he flinches away. Okay, a little less heat, then. I try to pull a bit of my energy back into my chest, but it’s hard to tell if I’ve done it properly or not. Somehow, my fingers aren’t shaking - neither from excitement nor nerves - and I slide them under the waistband of both his jeans and pants before pulling them slowly down
to his ankles.

The moment his cock springs free, though, I make a point of letting out a breath across his length - it twitches, and it takes every ounce of willpower I have not to take him in my mouth right there and-

“Dan.” Phil’s voice, low and almost-warning, pulls me from my fantasizing long enough to lean back and look up. He’s staring down at me, and fuck if this isn’t the most erotic view I’ve had maybe ever. But not right now, right now I want him to fuck me into the mattress and I want it to fucking last.

It’s not til I rock back onto my heels, intent on standing, that I notice the red marks at Phil’s ankles. Ones that definitely hadn’t been there earlier, that are absolutely a product of the witchcraft I’m still struggling to control. Oh.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t-” I barely make it to my feet before Phil’s hands find my waist and push me back onto the bed, and the single layer of clothing between us fries my brain completely; I don’t even get time to properly react, though, because then he’s sliding my own pants off and there’s nothing aside from bare, hot skin on skin. A noise escapes my throat that I’m not at all proud of, but Phil’s grinning into my lips and it hardly seems to matter.
I can’t even decide what to focus on: Dan’s skin pressed against mine, flushed and pink and just a little too hot, or his hands trailing absently across my back, leaving fire in their wake that goes straight to my cock, or maybe the soft noises he’s making as I rock into him, desperate for friction but barely finding enough relief.

“Phil, please,” Dan whines against my mouth, and I still my hips long enough to focus, to pull back just a bit, to take a steadying - and very deep - breath. Wide brown eyes stare up at me, small puffs of air brush against my lips, and I’m half a second from asking ‘what’. “Please just fuck me already.”

And then a bubble of nervous laughter gets caught in my throat, and I have to swallow thickly to keep it from coming out - now is not the time, not at all. Instead, I scramble off him, hand shaking a little as I fumble with my bedside drawer and finally manage to pull it open. By the time I’m back in front of Dan, bottle of lube in hand, he’s already spread his legs, hips arched up just slightly off the bed.

For a moment, I let myself stare, because the sight of Dan laid out like this, it’s-

“Phil,” he whines again, hand drifting down to stroke his own cock lazily; I suck in a breath and pop the cap on the lube, and I’m half a second from squirting some on my fingers when Dan sits up on his elbows, lips twisted and eyes focused on my hand.

“Wait, wait, hold on, actually,” he glances up at me, then points at the bottle. “Can I?” If possible, his cheeks flush an even deeper shade of pink, so I decide not to ask. If he wants to talk about it, we can. I pass him the bottle, then shift to sit on my heels as he collapses back onto the bed, focused on the lube he squirts into his hand.

He barely spends more than a second coating his fingers before he’s reaching down, eyes flicking up to catch mine briefly before they drift shut, and he bites his lip as he slides a finger in. My lungs stop working, I’m sure, because I suddenly can’t breathe; all I can manage to do is stare at the slow motion of Dan’s hand as he stretches himself, the way the muscles in his legs go tense and tremble just slightly.

The room fills with a warmth I know he’s the cause of, accompanied by softest noises that fall from his lips with every thrust. By the time he’s added a second finger, I realize I’m stroking myself just to take the edge off - the way he’s put himself on display for me has me itching to lunge forward and-

“Phil,” Dan’s voice comes out breathy and it takes me a full three seconds to drag my gaze up to meet his - there’s a lot I want to keep watching. Heavily lidded eyes stare back at me, dark and full of the same feeling in my chest that’s practically begging me to crawl on top of him, to replace his fingers and turn his heavy breaths into the proper sounds I’ve heard him make before.

Dan’s free hand reaches out toward where I’m sat on the bed, and that’s all the invitation I need to clamber forward and situate myself between his legs and- fuck, his fingers trace hot lines down my sides that I know will leave marks; I shudder and squeeze my eyes shut until I’m able to properly breathe. When I blink them open again, Dan’s staring up at me, brows furrowed just slightly.

“I’m good,” I promise, “but I’d be better if…” I break off and glance between us, the tiny amount of empty space suddenly feeling enormous. Dan’s hand - the one, I realize, he’d been using to
stretch himself - snakes up between us; I barely have time to notice it’s fully dry before he presses it to my chest, and that will definitely leave a mark - I suck in a breath as heat stings my skin, and my arms nearly give out where they’re holding me suspended over Dan.

“Shit,” Dan curses, and his hands pull away abruptly - I manage to lift my gaze enough to find him properly frowning at me, so I do the only thing my literally fried brain can think of: I let myself sort of collapse on top of him in just the right way so my lips crash into his. He’s still way too warm, but nowhere near as searing as his hands had been; the feeling has me rocking into his hips again, right back where we were not five minutes ago.

Dan hums in what I have to assume is surprise before slightly-cooler hands find my waist and—wait, is he pushing me away? I try not to let it sting - and it doesn’t, not more than his hands do, because he’s sucking in a deep breath and exhaling it so slowly it barely reaches my lips not two inches from his.

“Phil,” he says my name almost like he’s about to scold a child, and I wonder if this is another thing for him, denying - what, denying pleasure? “I told you five minutes ago to fuck me already, can we get to that bit now? Please?” He somehow manages to say all these words at once, and they come out mostly even; given the way he’s still got his eyes squeezed shut, I’m actually surprised. And impressed - I don’t think my brain has capacity for that much coherent thought right now.

But Dan’s asked, and I want to give him whatever he wants, especially this. In moments, I’ve managed to locate the lube and coat my cock generously, then I’m lining myself up, and-

“Condom?” He asks, and of course I forgot to explain it.

“There’s- it’s actually a spell, I already-” but Dan’s eyes have gone wide, then he coughs out a short laugh that breaks up every bit of tension.

“Of course there’s a spell. Witchcraft, it’s like bloody apps, ‘there’s a spell for that!’” He mumbles the last part, voice losing most of the humor and turning nervous and soft. His gaze drifts to the side of us, so I lean on an elbow and - careful to keep us a little separate - reach forward to tilt his chin toward me.

“Are you sure? I just want-” I start, but Dan cuts me off with another laugh.

“Yeah, I’m- I’m sure,” he finally says, locking eyes with me for a very brief and very intense moment, his lips falling from a sarcastic grin into a soft smile. “Now please don’t make me ask you again?” And the lightness is back, returning in the form of a smirk and a way-too-hot finger poking my side, making me jump and nearly knee him somewhere very unpleasant.

“Alright, alright,” I chuckle, glad for the reassurance - yet again - that he really wants this. Wants me. I let my free hand slide down his chest, smirking at the way his dick twitches as I brush past it, before finally reaching his entrance. It takes me all of a moment to line myself up, but my nerves make me glance back up, a final desire to check just to be sure.

Dan’s staring at me in a way that makes me feel watched - not weirdly, though, just like he’s captivated. Which seems so silly I almost forget where we are, what we’re doing. What I’m meant to be doing right now; I sink into him slowly, then I’m the one watching as his eyes squeeze shut, as he sucks in a breath he doesn’t exhale until I’ve bottomed out.

I try to hold myself still as his warm breath tickles my lips; the warmth spreads, then, until it’s surrounding us entirely, but it doesn’t seem like the kind from before, the kind that might actually set something on fire. Dan’s eyes open.
“Okay, you can move,” his words sound tight, and I can’t help but think they quite match the rest of him right now, which is a horrible pun to be making, so I let my hips shift slightly, slowly, and my focus changes completely. Dan’s hands have found my sides, and his fingers dig in the moment I thrust forward again. Then I’m pulling back, trying to be careful and not too-

“Christ, Phil, I said fuck me,” Dan rolls his eyes, dropping his head back and letting his arms fall to the bed. “I’m not gonna break, jesus.” He quirks a brow at me, and that’s all the invitation I need; I sink into him, exhaling a shuddering breath at the same time he sucks one in, and I don’t bother letting either of us recover as I pick up the pace. His hands find my back, nails little pinpricks that set my skin on fire and make me desperate to get him closer.

In moments, the heat around us turns properly hot, like standing too close to an open flame, but Dan’s heavy breaths turn into low moans and curses; my name slips off his tongue, once, twice, then every other breath - I can feel the coil in my stomach tightening, and I slide a hand between us to get Dan to the same place. Although, judging by the way his skin sets mine to sweating, he’s not far behind.

Then he’s squirming under me, his words turning into gasps of ‘wait, wait, wait’, and I slow to a stop inside him.

“Something wrong?” I can hear how out of breath I sound, my voice low and gravelly, but Dan’s already shoving me back until I’ve pulled out completely; he huffs out something I don’t hear, and I hum in question, face scrunching up in confusion.

“I said just, let me adjust, then- here,” he grumbles, keeping his eyes pointedly anywhere but at me. He’s got a leg propped up, and he tilts his head at it. “Just, like, hold it up a bit,” his voice keeps that low, almost embarrassed tone - the same one it had earlier, I notice - so I do as I’m asked. It honestly looks like a bit of a stretch for him, but he settles back onto the mattress and nods at me. “Go on then.” His eyes glance up briefly and meet mine.

We’re having a conversation about this later, I decide. He shouldn’t feel uncomfortable asking for what he wants. I want to give him anything he wants. I want to give him everything.

I sink back into him slowly, taking my time until Dan gives me a look that says he’s absolutely not about to ask me again, so I’d better get on with it. The change in position lets me go deeper, lets me hit just the right spot: Dan arches back into the mattress, squeezing his eyes shut as a low sound escapes his throat. I waste no time pounding back into him, and after the third thrust, I’m realizing just how useful that fireproofing spell was.

Dan’s hands, fisting the sheets beside us, burst into flames that might sear my skin if he got any closer. I don’t ask him to, in spite of my temptation; I had my fun, and the marks to prove it, and I want to make it about him now.

He says my name again, lower and raspier than before, and I lean in to capture his lips - which turns out not to work as well as I’d hoped, because he’s gasping and panting and seems to be incapable of doing much else. I smirk, glad I can apparently affect him so much, and redirect my attention to his neck. Every thrust leaves him a moaning mess under me, and I slide my free hand between us to pull him closer to the edge - it’s not til I’ve nearly short-circuited my own brain that I decide I’m trying to do way too much at once; instead, I focus on timing my hand and my hips, letting my head fall to rest on Dan’s sweat-slicked shoulder.

“Phil, I’m-” I barely catch the words, they’re so lost in every other sound he makes, but he turns his head until he’s gasping hot breaths against my hair; I manage to make some sound I hope he
interprets as a ‘me too’ before he shudders beneath me, before hot cum covers both our chests and I’m hit with a wave of heat that threatens to set me on fire.

Then Dan’s whispering my name in my ear as he comes down, punctuated with ‘fuck’ every so often, and a too-warm finger trails down my chest; it’s overwhelming, exactly what I need, and then I’m falling over the edge myself, back bowed as I thrust into him and ride out my own orgasm.

The first things I notice, once my brain has returned to coherence, are the soft things: the tingle of Dan’s finger as it traces lines absently across my side, the feeling of his breath against my ear, the way his chest expands against mine.

The second thing I notice, unfortunately, is the pain. Which I really should’ve expected, but it doesn’t make it feel any better; I wince as I pull out and lift myself off Dan, every inch of swollen, hot skin aching at the movement.

“Wait,” Dan says, and I momentarily forget literally everything, my entire head filling with just this one image: Dan, with chapped red and swollen lips, a light sheen of sweat across every inch of skin, a pink flush that goes from his cheeks down to his chest and probably lower, if I could be bothered to look, and brown eyes that I would definitely say are sparkling, if eyes could actually do that. I exhale a slow breath.

“Hold on, let me fix everything first,” Dan continues, and his gaze drops to my chest. His hand follows a moment later, tracing each of the red marks he finds; as he does, they disappear, and a cool wave of relief follows the tips of his fingers. Not for the first time - nor, I hope, the last - I’m shocked into silence by his witchcraft, by the sheer amount of energy and skill he possesses.

“That’s all I can see,” he says after a moment, “but I know I left...more…” he trails off with a half-frown, and I realize I’ve just been staring, watching the way his expression shifts as he works, subtle changes like the crease between his brows or his eyes squinting just a bit, or his lip curling up at the corner, or down.

“Right, my back,” I vaguely remember; then the memory makes itself quite apparent in the form of a stinging soreness as I try to turn. Instead of doing it properly, I sort of just flop down on the bed beside him, which he apparently finds quite funny; I can’t be bothered, but he’s chuckling as he traces across my back, healing the marks he’d left. I allow myself a tiny smile, though, into the duvet - he doesn’t seem worried, the way he’d been before, about hurting me. Good.

I turn my head just enough that I can watch him, and I can’t help the way my grin spreads. That just happened. That actually just happened. I sort of want to start giggling, but that would be weird, right? Instead, I stick with the smile and just let the bubble in my chest expand to fill everything. Dan glances at me briefly, but his look of concentration turns into a sheepish smile, lips pressed together like he’s trying not to let it get out of control and turn into a proper grin.
Dan

That actually just happened, it actually- and fuck it was really good. Like, I guess I’d expected it to be, given our previous...activities, but fuck. Fortunately, I barely have to focus to heal the lines I’d left on his skin, dark and red and looking immensely painful. Except he’s just grinning at me, so maybe they aren’t that bad?

It’s not like he didn’t have plenty of opportunities to stop me...or maybe he just felt weird asking. Communication, communication is good. I had to tell myself that at least four times, that I need to just be comfortable asking for what I want. It turned out okay, though, didn’t it? Actually, it had turned out really fucking good, if I’m being fully honest.

“Was that- I mean, are you okay?” I decide to say after a moment. If not, I need to know for next time. My heart leaps into my throat at the prospect of a ‘next time’. Surely there will be a next time, right? Fear follows my heart, and I have to swallow as I trace over a particularly bad burn I’d left on Phil’s back. He shifts under my hand, exhales.

“Obviously a bit sore now,” he says, but the grin doesn’t leave his face. “But it was good, it was-” his eyes squeeze shut, shoulders rolling slightly under my palm; his skin smooths out and returns to normal, the burn disappearing. He exhales a breath. “It was really good.” Then his expression shifts, lips twisting. “It was good for you?”

I cough out a laugh. Was it good for me? I’m thoroughly tempted to say something sarcastic, to tell him no, it was terrible, couldn’t he tell? Did my literally catching on fire give that away? But worry creases his brow as he stares from the pillow, and maybe now’s not the best time for that.

“Fuck, it was really good. You couldn’t tell?” I can’t help the bit of teasing that slips into my tone, but Phil just chuckles and I end up doing the same; it’s not til Phil’s just watching me, the same way he’d done earlier, that I realize I’ve just been sort of propped up on an elbow with my hand laid flat on his back for no real reason - I’ve finished healing all those burns. “Uhm,” I clear my throat, still smiling, and lay back on the bed. The ceiling doesn’t stare back at me, so I take a moment to try to calm my flushed cheeks.

Sure, I wanted to be honest, but the way Phil looked at me - keeps looking at me - makes me feel stripped bare. Even though I’m literally naked. A shiver crawls up my skin, now that I’m aware of the lack of coverage.

And then I’m warm again, because Phil’s scooted over beside me, curling against my side and draping an arm over my chest. Vaguely, I’m aware of the drying, sticky mess we’re still stuck in, but exhaustion and an overwhelming internal sense of comfort beg me to ignore it for now.

“There’s a spell for everything,” I say absently, letting my eyes drift shut. Phil’s chin nuzzles into my neck, settling there, and I almost forget what I’d planned on asking; soft, warm breaths hit my skin in a slow rhythm, tempting me to just drift off like this. “Cleaning?” I force my tongue to work. “Can we do that? With witchcraft?” I vaguely suppose I could give it a shot, probably something like the cleansing spell I’d set up - when was that, yesterday? I’m not sure.

Phil’s head shifts beside me for several seconds before I realize he’s nodding. I nudge him with my elbow.

“Well either do it or tell me how, you lump,” I chuckle through the words, a smile curling my lip just slightly.
“Just, like, think about being clean. Feel it.” Phil mumbles into my neck, and the stupid adage he seems so fond of using makes me wish my eyes were open just so I could properly roll them. “I don’t know, I’ve never actually done it before.” Now my eyes do open, because is he getting defensive? Surely I just misheard the tone; my sleepy brain struggles to replay his words.

“What was that?” I elbow him again, more gently this time. His only response is to pull me closer against him. “Phil,” I try, shifting until I’m facing him and definitely not wincing at the stinging soreness in my ass. Just because it’s been a while since the last time... I decide to hold off on healing that particular ache for now. It’s sort of hot to have that reminder that everything that just happened had, well, actually happened.

“I’m not that skilled a witch, okay?” Phil finally blurts out, eyes going wide for a moment before they squeeze shut and he exhales a heavy breath, and what?

“I mean,” I pause, struggling to come up with any response to that. My brain kindly requests that I go back to thinking about my sore ass instead. “Sure, you haven’t got a thousand years of experience like PJ, but what does it matter?” I try - he hasn’t, has he? To be fair, he’s never said - but that seems to be a terrible choice. Phil just groans and pulls away from me, rolling onto his back to stare at the ceiling.

“It’s not only Peej, though, I’m just not...” he sighs, letting his eyes close. His hands drift up, dragging at his face. “What happens when you get better than me? I mean, you already are, but when I don’t have anything else to teach you.” The last bit isn’t even a question, like he’s put a lot of thought into this and he’s just accepted that it’ll happen, that I’ll eventually have nothing left to learn from him. Like there’s a silent ‘and then’ hovering at the end of his sentence.

“Okay,” I start slowly, watching his expression; suddenly, it hits me - the ‘and then’, that’s me leaving. Just...moving on. I roll to face the ceiling as well. “Remember what I said the other night?” The mattress shifts beside me, and I turn my head to find Phil watching. “I want to stay.” I put as much seriousness into the statement as I can manage, locking eyes with Phil. He holds my gaze for a moment before blinking, rolling until he’s face-down in the pillow.

“Yeah, you say that now,” he grumbles. I poke his shoulder. “And I’ll keep bloody saying it til you believe it,” I lean over and press a kiss to his bare skin, punctuating it with a soft ‘I’m staying’; it earns me a huff of laughter, muffled by the fabric, so I do it again and again until I have him properly giggling and finally turning over to shove me off.

“Alright, alright, I get it, I’m stuck with you,” he laughs, and my cheeks hurt from smiling too hard, but he’s grinning as well, so I count it as a solid victory in spite of the pain. Then Phil’s face squishes into something I’m not really sure how to name. “Want to try a hand at cleaning us up, then?” He glances down at his own chest and I do the same, and oh okay, that’s why he looked like that. Discomfort makes me twist my lips in a frown.

“Cleansing?” I ask, remembering my idea from earlier, and Phil glances back up, brows arched up his forehead.

“Actually, yeah, that’s a great idea!” I’m exceptionally pleased by how excited he sounds, both because we’ve apparently moved past this nonsense about me leaving and because it seems I’ve come up with a good plan. I let my eyes drift shut, tapping into my energy.

Unfortunately, I’m having a tough time focusing just on the mess, as my mind keeps drifting to the cause of that mess, Phil pounding into me, sucking and biting at my neck and-
“Dan.” Phil’s voice interrupts my thoughts, and I immediately pull back whatever heat I’d obviously been projecting into the air around us. When I open my eyes, though, Phil’s chest is clear of any residue and a quick glance down confirms mine is as well. I don’t have to check to feel that the cum that’d been leaking out of me has been cleaned up as well. Wonder how quick we could get to replacing it...even spent, my cock twitches in interest.

“We aren’t going for round two.” Phil laughs, and I’m apparently not as well in control as I thought I’d been. Oh, or I’m literally naked, so it’s not like Phil couldn’t see that...I fall back onto the mattress, trying my best not to think about what round two would be like. Which is exactly how I end up thinking exclusively about it, until Phil flops down beside me and curls himself into a ball, back facing me and head beside mine on the pillow.

“I’m tired, Dan, come on,” he mumbles, and his words trigger a wave of exhaustion much like the post-orgasm haze I’d been in earlier. I turn to wrap my arm around him, pulling him against my chest, and I’m pleasantly surprised that my brain complies with Phil’s request and tells my eyes to drift shut, tells my lungs and heart to slow their pace until I’m right on the edge of sleep, breathing in the sweaty scent of Phil’s hair and begging my impending dreams to mimic this exact moment.

I wake to soft light, soft breathing, soft skin pressed against mine, and I sort of just feel soft. Like I’m surrounded by softness. I don’t want to get up, not yet.

Phil shifts in my arms and I let him, watching as he turns around to face me.

“Morning,” he mumbles, voice thick with sleep and eyes still closed. A smile lifts my cheeks.

“Morning.” It feels like it isn’t enough, though, so I press a kiss to his forehead. He snuggles in closer to me, until we’re pretty much completely pressed against each other. My smile turns into a soft chuckle.

“Warm?” He says it like a question, and my half-awake brain tries its best to decipher his meaning; apparently, it takes a bit too long, because Phil’s face scrunches up. “Can you make it warm?” He clarifies, and I blink twice before it properly registers.

Then I let a small bit of heat from my core escape through my skin, just until Phil’s face relaxes in a soft smile. For a while, we just lay there, and I think I drift in and out of a hazy dreamless sleep; neither of us moves, not until there’s a sound at the shut door - which I do not remember closing, and oh god what if Susan heard us last night? I stare at the ceiling for a moment, sending a silent apology and request that next time she...what, plug her ears? I’m not even sure.

Then there’s that sound again, almost like snuffling, and I’m halfway to sitting up when I realize Phil and I are both still very naked. Phil grumbles beside me as I pull the duvet up and over us.

“Susan, who’s at the-” I’m cut off by the door swinging wide, revealing a very large wolf that wastes no time bounding across the room and onto the bed. Which is far too small for the three of us, and he ends up stepping on my legs as he tries to settle on Phil.

“Mellix, Mellix,” Phil groans, shoving him off to the side whilst simultaneously scooting over toward me, making me shift until I’m nearly at the edge of the mattress trying to make room for us all. The oversized furball finally settles with his head on one pillow, tail thumping at the very foot of the bed, and Phil and I have been sequestered to the other half, but I’m not exactly complaining about the closeness.
I lean against the headboard, still sort of sat up from earlier, but Phil’s quickly dropped his head down on my chest and he makes a small contented hum that vibrates my skin.

“Five more minutes?” He asks, and I huff out a laugh that definitely shakes him, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Instead of properly responding, I run a hand through his hair, just because it’s there; I need something to distract me, now that I’m fully awake and Phil clearly isn’t.

I spend an indeterminate amount of time in that position, just focusing on the way Phil’s breath tickles my skin and the way his hair feels between my fingers, until my neck aches and Mellix is finally bored enough to hop down from the bed; Phil wakes with a start and a gasp before sitting up properly.

“That was longer than five minutes, wasn’t it?” He asks, lips pressed into a sort of sheepish smile. Then they’re pressed against mine in a brief, chaste kiss before he pulls back. “Sorry, breakfast?” I barely have time to register that anything’s happening - it’s such a shock from the quiet, motionless silence I’d been sat in a moment ago - before he’s pulling fresh pants from a drawer and slipping them on. Red marks circle his ankles.

“Wait! Wait, before you-” I point when he turns, and he grimaces at the skin we’d missed healing last night. Then he plops down on the bed with his feet near my face and I brush my hand over the warm skin; it cools and turns a shade to match the pale cream color of the rest of his legs, then he’s rolling off the mattress and returning to the drawer.

“Thanks, and here!” He tosses a pair of pants at me, one of the black ones I’d bought yesterday. That he’d bought for me, actually. I make a mental note that I want to do some work for Bea today, if she needs help - the sooner I can get to paying Phil back for all this stuff, the better.

“Yeah,” I mumble when my stomach growls, a reminder that Phil’s asked a question, and I’m actually quite hungry. I suppose that makes sense, given how much energy I’d used last night. Both physical and nonphysical. I slide off the bed and pull on the pants, hoping to distract myself from any wayward thoughts. I have a goal for today, I want to work a bit, earn some money, I need to stay focused. I can worry about letting Phil distract me later.

“Alright, hurry up, I’ll get something started.” I realize belatedly that he’s already fully clothed and heading out the door, Mellix close behind, so I skirt the bed and pull open one of the dresser drawers to follow suit.

Again, I’m hit with a wave of emotion at the piles of clothes - both mine and Phil’s - staring back at me. I’m staying. I’d said it so many times last night, until Phil had given up his concerns, but it still feels fresh and new and unreal. A thing I’d never even have considered in my previous life.

Before I can work myself up into the state I’d been in whilst putting my clothes away last night, I pull out a pair of jeans and the first black shirt my fingers land on - it’s a button down, I realize as it unfolds, but maybe that’s a good call for my first day of proper work.

Once I’m decked out in head-to-toe black, I make my way into the hall and down the stairs; Mellix barks at me through the sliding glass door, startling me and nearly sending me over the railing, so I frown at the wolf before taking a few cautious steps toward him. He looks relatively unmenacing at the moment, tongue lolling out the side of his mouth and breaths fogging up the glass, so I approach and Susan slides the door open for me.

Mellix steps back, tilting his head at me before loping off across the grass toward where Phil’s stood in front of the fire pit. I can hear sizzling and smell something hearty cooking even from here, so I follow the wolf as I make my way over.
Phil

Mellix’s bark makes me turn, and I give him a silent reminder not to mess with Dan as the two make their way over. Dan’s a vision in black, and I’m suddenly really glad I didn’t make any comments about the massive amount of monochrome clothing he decided to buy - I don’t recall seeing this particular shirt, but I’m pretty sure it’ll stick in my memory for quite a while now, with the way it stretches across his chest and stands out against his skin. The collar’s buttoned up to his neck, but pink marks peek out from under the fabric and I have to press my lips into a line to hide my smirk.

“Bacon and sausage?” He quirks a brow at the enormous griddle I’ve spread over the flame, bacon and sausage - and hash browns, peppers, and onions - sizzling; I’ve not had a good reason to make this in a while, since it’s a bit much for just me, but with how much energy Dan used yesterday, I’ll take the excuse.

“It’s a sort of breakfast bake?” I offer, poking at the hash browns with a spatula. Everything’s nearly ready, so I hand the utensil off to a confused Dan and set to cracking eggs into the pot on the other side of the fire.

“A breakfast-” his brows furrow. “Okay, sure, fine, do you need help?” He offers, mimicking my movement to keep the hash browns crisping evenly.

“Just, yeah, keep doing that,” I nod at him, “and make sure nothing burns.” I crack the last of the eggs into the pot, then stick my hand out for the spatula. Dan hands it over, and I poke at the yolks until they’re broken up and mixed around; the eggs get a splash of milk, then I stare at the griddle for a solid ten seconds, trying to decide the best way to go about this.

“Do you need any help?” Dan prompts again, and I look up to find his brow quirked at me once again, arms crossed over his chest. Briefly, I forget what I’d been trying to do as flashes of those arms from last night pop into my head. “Phil?” Dan leans forward, tilting his head at me, and heat rushes to my cheeks.

“Actually!” I turn back to the griddle - really, I can’t keep my mind off him for long enough to make breakfast?

“...If you could lift this and just sort of dump everything into the pot?” I point, and Dan blinks at me.

“Yeah, with my massive bicep- oh,” he breaks off mid-sentence, understanding laced through his tone. Then the griddle drifts up near the pot, floating on invisible tethers, and each of the ingredients slides off and into the eggy mixture with a series of plops.

“Okay, now we wait!” I announce - this is the boring part, where I’ll stir every so often and let it solidify into a sort of quiche-like thing. Except a wave of heat sends me stumbling back, away from the fire pit, and Dan brushes past me as he takes my place.

“Yeah, I’m hungry, so…” he trails off, and I situate myself behind him to watch as he works. It only ends up taking a few minutes to properly cook with the intensity of the heat Dan’s creating, then the air cools and the fire in the pit winks out and Dan turns to face me. “Got any plates?” He’s just grinning, looking immensely pleased with himself, and I huff out a laugh before heading over to the table - the only free space I’d had left to set things on.

When I return, Dan’s poking the spatula into the pot, digging out some of the bake; he balances it precariously, then he’s tilted it just a bit too much and I barely stick a plate out in time to catch it
before it falls.

“Oohoohoo,” Dan chuckles, eyes wide and lips curling in a grin as he laughs, “nice catch.” They’re the only words he says for quite a while, lapsing into silence as he spoons out some more food, then we’re both heading back to the table. Like last night, the clinking of forks on our plates is the only real sound; Dan’s evidently ravenous, the way he shovels the egg bake into his mouth, and it’s not long before he’s up for seconds.

When he returns, I end up watching him quite a lot, just like last night - he doesn’t seem to notice, though, so I take my time eating and just let myself absorb his appearance; I feel sort of like a plant in sunlight, like just being in his presence fulfills some basic need I didn’t realize I had.

Halfway into his second helping, he finally slows and glances up at me. I follow the lines of his throat as he swallows, and my gaze drifts down to the marks I’d left at the base of his neck.

“Wha-”

“Yeah, I’m staring, no, I won’t stop.” I answer before he can even properly ask, and his eyes go wide; I smirk as a pink flush crawls up his cheeks, as he scoops up some egg and shoves it in his mouth.

“Why?” He mumbles around the food, though he doesn’t look up, and I do my best to control myself, I really do, but I’m quite enjoying this flustered Dan.

“I like seeing you marked up like that, because of me.” I try to keep my tone even, but it definitely dips low; my own words make my cock twitch with interest - it’s true, and an almost visceral need coils in my stomach, begging me to drag him upstairs and leave a few more marks, ones that he can’t cover so easily.

I watch him closely for any change in his behavior, curious if he’s as affected as I am; apparently, I don’t have to watch that closely, though, because he sucks in a breath and his hand flies up to his collar and his eyes go wide and I’m not sure he’s even trying to hide his reaction.

A few light, fluttery piano notes stutter in to fill the space around us, but Dan keeps his eyes on his plate, lowers his hand, scoops up a shaky bite of egg.

“Oh,” he directs this toward the food; we lapse back into the silence, then, aside from the nervous melody that says even more than Dan’s reaction had, and I smirk to myself as I take another bite. It only lasts a few more seconds, though, then he’s dropped his fork to his plate and I look up from mine at the unexpected clink. The music stalls, softens.

“I’m gonna work at Bea’s for a bit today?” It’s a statement, but he says it like a question, and I’m half a second away from telling him he doesn’t have to ask- “I’m working at Bea’s,” he corrects his tone, and I exhale the words I’d been about to speak - a reminder that I don’t own him - in a breath instead. I nod.

“Okay, uh,” then I’m the one left silent, because what am I supposed to say? Surely it’d be weird of me to follow him around all day, I don’t want to just...suggest I accompany him to the shop. Except I sort of do, although it’s Beatrice’s shop, and I’m not entirely sure I’m up for dealing with her for- “How long did you plan on working for?” I ask instead.

“Oh, I hadn’t- uh, however long she needs me, I guess?” Dan offers with a shrug, fork back in hand as he pokes absently at the last bits of egg on his plate. He skewers a sausage and sort of walks it around, clearly avoiding looking up.
“Right,” I nod, though I’m not sure what I’m nodding for. “Did you, uh, maybe want me to walk you…there?” I end the question lamely, but it seems safe enough - I won’t just hang around the shop, but I can check in on Javier and surely there are other things I can take care of in town or the forest I’ve been neglecting to do lately, right? Except nothing actually comes to mind, and I wonder if my life had really been that uneventful before Dan or if everything’s turned such a pale, dull grey when set in comparison to Dan that it just feels that way.

“Oh, you don’t have to- I’m sure I can find it, it was the second- wait, no,” he mumbles to himself, brows furrowed as he thinks, and the music turns soft and contemplative. “The third street? After the diner, which was…” He huffs out a breath at the same time I chuckle.

“It’s no trouble, Dan. Besides,” I wait until he’s looked up to smile and continue, “I want to spend time with you.” Somehow, he seems mildly surprised by this, leaning back in his chair a bit.

“Even if exercise is involved?” He asks like it’s a joke, but I can hear the undercurrent of doubt in his voice that says this is still very much a serious question.

“Especially if there’s exercise involved.” I smirk at him and try - really, I try very hard - to wink, but it probably looks awful because when have I ever seriously winked at someone? Honestly, I should’ve just left it, but then Dan’s sputtering out a laugh and his foot kicks my shin in a way that doesn’t really hurt so I think I’ve probably said the right thing. Or something close.

“Shut up,” Dan finally mumbles, tone low and clearly flustered; I’m suddenly wishing I could be this witty all the time, but I feel like that had been a super lucky one-off I won’t likely be able to top anytime soon. I could top him sometime soon, and the words are on the tip of my tongue before I realize that a joke with myself won’t really be that funny to him.

By the time I’ve figured this out and clamped my mouth shut to prevent the embarrassment of saying something Dan wouldn’t even understand, he’s already stood, plate in hand, and gesturing toward the house.

“Right, I’m gonna go clean this up, then we can go? Oh! And I need to let Bea know,” he says the last part more to himself as his feet lead him toward the door, then Susan’s sliding it open and I’m left outside alone - well, alone apart from Mellix, whose tail thumps against the leg of my chair. I’m not exactly sure how our bond works, I’ve never gotten much clarity on that from PJ, but I’m suddenly very glad he doesn’t have unrestricted access to my thoughts - emotions are one thing, but actual precise thoughts? That could get quite weird, I imagine.

Or maybe what’s weirder is I’ve never really worried about it before - everyone I’d liked prior to Dan, everyone I’d been with, they never really stuck around, or I never wanted them to. It wasn’t something I had to give much thought to.

A wet tongue scrapes the side of my arm, and I glance over to find Mellix sat up, head tilted at me. “Yeah, yeah, I know,” I grumble. I don’t know, actually, but it sort of just feels like what I’m meant to say, so I say it.

“Are you coming, or?” Dan’s voice makes me turn, and I find him with his head stuck out the half-opened sliding door. Even from here, I can see one dark brow arched up his forehead.

“Yeah, coming!” I rush to grab my plate and hurry back inside, Mellix close at my heels - I feel like maybe I could use some time in the forest outside town, just being around nature for a while, and I could keep an eye out for some fresh herbs as well, now that it’s rained a bit. I let Mellix know the plan; a bit of company - and extra protection - in the form of a giant wolf certainly
couldn’t hurt.

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“You really don’t have to walk me all the way to the door,” Dan says, and I can hear the eye-roll in his tone without even glancing over; my eyes are glued to the black door we’re slowly approaching, and I can’t decide if I should be bothered by the weird possessive urge in my chest that demands I stay beside Dan until the last possible second.

“I don’t mind, besides, I should just pop in and...say hi...” Even I know it sounds like a stretch, but Dan doesn’t protest, and it’s only a few moments before we’re pushing through the door and into the familiarly occult-styled shop. Dan walks right up to the counter, though there’s nobody there, and calls out Beatrice’s name.

I can’t help but frown as I realize just how well he fits here: decked out in a solid black outfit, grinning like he’s comfortable and maybe even thrilled, eyes bouncing from object to object, curiosity sparking at each new thing. I could never give him this.

But then, as if he’d forced it in my head at just the right moment, I remember last night: the soft kisses pressed to my skin, the promises that he’d stay, that he’s staying, that it’s an active choice he’s making. A part of me wishes he’d come over, remind me again on a low breath in my ear. I realize I’m being a bit clingy, but the reassurance would be nice right about now.

“Dan!” Beatrice’s voice rings out from behind the closed door of the back room, then she’s bursting in with a flourish only she could manage to make so dark and dramatic: her hair’s styled long today, flowing behind her in perfect straight blonde lines that blend into deep hues of black and purple at the bottom. Her eyelids and lipstick match, and her dress - a long affair that clings in all the right places and flows out behind her a bit like a vampiric wedding dress - only serves to make the whole ensemble twice as ‘witchy’. Honestly, I don’t know how she manages to find so many different absurdly cliche pieces of clothing, but I almost feel obligated to commend her for it.

“And Phil! Hello dear, lovely to see you,” she says it like she means it, so I offer a forced smile and nod. Then my attention’s back on Dan, who’s turned to grin at me. “You can come back for him in a few hours, love, go on,” she waves a hand in dismissal, and I’m two seconds away from grumbling something not so nice under my breath.

But then Dan’s walking over, standing in front of me, breathing the same air, and I sort of forget to be annoyed.

“I’ll see you soon?” He says it like a question, as if there’s even the slightest chance I won’t come back for him; I nod possibly a bit too enthusiastically and grin so brightly I couldn’t hide it if I tried, then he’s pressing a quick and chaste kiss to my lips and stepping back. I take a mental picture of the blush on his cheeks and the soft smile on his lips in the moment before he turns back toward Beatrice.

Before my heart can convince my brain that I should hang around a bit longer - because that’d be weird, probably - I spin on a heel and push out the door and onto the street; the fresh air does my head good, and I suck in a deep breath before retracing my steps to the edge of town.
“How adorable,” Bea chuckles as the door shuts behind me; embarrassment that she’d just watched the intimacy of that moment - although it wasn’t more than a quick kiss - has my face flushing with heat.

“Oh yeah, and where’s Mel on this fine morning?” I quip back, and that has exactly the intended effect of making her purse her lips against a smile and dip her head.

“Right, so I just got a few shipments I’ll need some help with, they’re in the back,” she grumbles, pushing through the swinging door that I assume leads to the back room. I force my triumphant grin into a tight-lipped nod, given she could possibly make my life a living hell for the next few hours if she wanted to.

The back room, as it turns out, is exceptionally...uneventful, given how unique and intriguing everything else in the entire shop is. It’s quite literally just rows of shelving stacked with boxes, then another row of various fresh plants under a set of lamps. A sarcastic ‘that’s it?’ bubbles up in my throat, and I have to swallow it down; I really don’t think I ought to go about offending witches.

“Here,” Bea gestures at a stack of boxes on the ground piled up to my nose. “Start with unpacking, then run everything by me and I’ll help sort out where it goes.” She brushes past me and heads back to the front of the shop, and I blink a few times at the boxes - sealed tight with layers of packing tape - before following her out.

“Box cutters? Knife? Anything like that?” I ask as I shove the door open partway. Her fingers still on the keyboard of a laptop, then she lets out an exasperated sigh. Okay, maybe Phil was right to be a bit...wary of-

“Dear, you’re here to practice your witchcraft, no?” She turns and leans against the counter, quirking a perfectly shaped brow at me. Her arms cross over her chest, and I notice her nails swirl like miniature galaxies, deep blues and blacks and purples that match the rest of her ensemble. I wonder how…

“Yeah?” I finally answer, still a bit uncertain; then the meaning of her question hits me, and I duck my head with a soft ‘oh’ and let the door close before smacking myself in the head. Obviously I would just use some energy to do all this. It’s a witch’s shop after all, not like I have to hide anything.

After easily unpacking the first two boxes and stacking the smaller boxes they’d contained - really, more boxes - I decide to make a game out of it, a sort of tetris-like stacking of the little differently-shaped containers to see how high I can get them. I’m just adding a box to the very top row, right where it’d sit even with the top shelf, when the door behind me bursts open. Naturally, I end up knocking the entire tower over, spilling the various contents across the floor.

I stare, wide-eyed, at the catastrophic mix of candles, herbs, crystals, symbols, decks of cards...the whole lot scattered around the room in an explosion of rattling and clunking and thumps; after a solid ten seconds, the noise dies down, and a single piece of black chalk rolls up and bumps into my shoe. There’s a very slow, deep breath behind me, but I’m fairly certain that if I don’t turn around, I won’t have to deal with-

“Okay, Dan, clean this all up, then we’ll sort out where it all should go.” Bea’s voice comes out tight and clearly displeased, but I still can’t manage to turn around; the door makes a muffled
whump behind me. Heat aches in my chest - the witchcraft kind, I can tell - and I stare at the mess in front of me for a solid ten seconds before squeezing my eyes shut and exhaling.

“Okay,” I say aloud, though I’m sure Bea’s left, so it’s more for my own sake. “Big stuff first,” I decide, locating the mostly-full box of pillar candles - the few that abandoned ship are easy to return, and I pack them in and set the box by the door. The crystals follow, although there are two boxes of suspiciously similar-looking ones that I can’t be sure I’ve gotten right. I’ve no doubt Bea will let me know...

When it gets to the herbs, I’m completely at a loss - the bundles have shed tiny bits everywhere, and they all look exactly the same, tied bunches of pale green, most of them some stems with leaves, although there is a bunch of reddish-brown herbs that I’m able to sort out quickly.

But the two boxes left don’t look different, and I spend at least four minutes staring at them both; I’m half a second from deciding they just must be the same when I decide to bring a box a bit closer for inspection. At which point, I’m hit with an overwhelming scent of—yep, that’s coriander, damn. I nearly throw the box back across the room unintentionally, eyes watering at the intensity of having so much of the stuff right under my nose.

Wow, I’m an idiot. I lift the other box, pleased to find a much softer, more Italian-food scent that I can’t name but I’m sure I’d know if someone told me. The sorting goes much more quickly, then, each bundle drifting up under my nose for a moment before it gets tossed into its respective box.

The other larger items - including very aesthetically pleasing decks of tarot cards I sort of want but can’t imagine why I’d ever need - are much easier to put back, and then I’m just left surrounded by tiny bits of chalk. I try not to consider the broken pieces, the ones that’d shattered the moment they hit the ground. Of course, that had to be the topmost box, didn’t it? Hopefully Bea won’t be too upset.

Maybe I could ‘heal’ them, like I had with Phil’s candle? I bring a few half-pieces up in front of me, but none of them fit together, and after lifting a few more bits in the air that also don’t match up with anything, I sigh. Well, there goes my first paycheck, probably...

With a sigh, I lift all the pieces of chalk from the ground - which is actually quite a cool sight, and I wish I were in the mood to properly appreciate it, little lines of black hovering around me, suspended mid-air - and sort them into the final box.

“Bea?” I call, letting the chalk box float up behind me; probably best to just get this over with, in my experience, rip off the plaster. She’s still typing at the keyboard when I emerge, and I can feel my cheeks flushing before I’ve even properly said anything.

“Get it all picked up?” She asks over her shoulder, hair drifting with the slight turn of her head. I’m a bit awed by her constant use of energy in so many different ways - the current of air around her, the nails, the music when she laughs, and she makes it seem entirely effortless.

“I did, but…” I trail off, and she faces me properly. “The box of chalk, I couldn’t figure out how to fix the broken pieces.” I admit, and my gaze drifts to the floor by her feet. She coughs out a bitter laugh - accompanied by a few low notes - and I look up to see her vampire teeth glinting at me. I swallow thickly. Surely Phil wouldn’t have left me here if I were in some kind of danger? But he doesn’t know Bea that well, he said; I take a hesitant step back.

“Phil will be pissed,” she laughs again, and the sounds turn lighter and almost playful.

“I’m sorry, wait, Phil? What’s this got to do with-” She’s waving a hand in the air, though, eyes
squeezed shut as she nearly doubles over, practically cackling. Really, she looks every bit the stereotypical witch, and she sounds it as well.

“He- he needed-” she takes a few deep breaths, but her grin looks a bit less ferocious, so I allow myself a small exhale. “He needed black chalk, he said, weeks ago,” she says once she’s finally gained some composure. “But my supplier - makes the stuff himself, top quality - he’s been ill, the poor dear, only just been able to send me some.” She wipes a nonexistent tear from her eye. “And, oh god, I’ll give him broken chalk,” she laughs again, and I frown. “At no cost, of course,” Bea soberly tilts a head.

“Well that, I don’t know, rude?” I ask, quirking a brow. Before I can forget, I let the box settle on the counter beside me.

“Maybe,” she concedes, eyes drifting to the ceiling like she’s trying to decide. “But it’s not something he actually needs.” She shrugs, turning back to her laptop. “Just sort out the broken pieces set those aside to take back with you, and the rest can go over there.” She points without looking to the corner of the shop near the herbs, on the shelf laden with flour and various other ingredients and clearly labeled ‘Summoning’.

“What’s that mean?” I grumble, already headed over. Bea hums behind me, and I locate a small basket with a divider, half white chalk and half empty, and begin filling it with unbroken pieces.

“He doesn’t do anything occult, hun, I said so yesterday.” Her voice is accentuated with the occasional tap of her keyboard, a click of the mouse, and I vaguely wonder what she’s doing that requires her focus, that she needed help with unpacking and restocking.

“And that’s all it’s good for?” I ask, part curiosity and part because I feel obligated to defend Phil - although, would it be defense if I’m trying to claim he does occult things? And is all occult bad, the way Bea seems to be implying? I huff out a breath as I fill the chalk basket to the brim, then head back to the counter.

“It’s got some darker uses, as well,” she shrugs, still focused on the screen; I’m tempted to get closer, just to see what she’s so focused on, but she’s almost completely blocking it and I’d have to literally hover over her shoulder to actually catch a glimpse. “But he loves his plants, and his familiar, that’s about all he cares about.” She says it offhand, but my stomach clenches. Do I fit in there, now? Or am I somewhere in third place in his heart? If he didn’t know, he’s already first in mine. But I don’t have a familiar, so maybe that’s something I wouldn’t be able to understand.

“Have you got one?” I ask, and the box settles back on the counter; I’m sort of aware that I’m meant to be working, but she could probably yell at me to get to it if she wanted.

“Got one?” She mumbles absently, and there are a few frantic clicks before she leans heavily against the counter. “Well, I haven’t got those, but what do you mean?” Now she turns to face me, and I notice a very familiar Ebay logo just before she blocks the screen again. Bidding? Although I suppose if she’s got to keep strange things in stock, that’s one way to do it.

“A familiar, like Mellix?” I ask, and she frowns. “Phil’s - that’s his dog, uh, wolf thing?” I’m not technically sure, because he looks like a wolf, but he acts more dog-like than anything. Bea’s lips twist into a sardonic smirk, and she crosses her arms over her chest.

“Ages ago,” she nods, “a little coral snake called Bella.” Ages ago? I must make a face, because Bea lets out a sigh and her expression loses some of its intensity. “She was killed, they thought it would make me weaker, but that’s not-” she breaks off, glancing up, and her purple-blue eyes sparkle under a layer of tears. Oh. A part of me wants to say something comforting, but I’m not
even sure what to say - Phil said a familiar is something like a soulmate, I can’t even imagine what losing them must feel like.

“Dan,” Bea says, urgent and low, and my eyes go wide at the change in tone, my brain isn’t even sure what to make of it when she steps toward me. “Have you found your familiar yet?” After about three seconds of processing, I manage to shake my head, and her face breaks out into a bright grin that somehow makes her fangs look a bit less menacing. She actually does a few little claps as well, bouncing on her toes.

“Dan Dan Dan, once you find them, that connection, it uses energy!” Her hands land on my shoulders, shaking me a bit. “You’ll have control,” she punctuates the word with a squeeze before laughing, a high, hopeful musical tone laced through it. I have to blink twice before I manage to process what she’s said, before I’m able to blow out a low breath and let my eyes drift to the floor.

_ I could have a familiar, I could be in more control, I could_ - the possibilities feel endless, like this one thing would open a hundred doors, would _- god, everything with Phil would be so much easier._ I wouldn’t have to constantly worry about hurting him, unless he wants it, or worry about burning the house down or _anything, fuck._

“How?” I barely choke the word out past the hope lodged in my throat, and Bea whirls around. Except her grin dulls and she drops heavily to her feet - _had she been floating, and I didn’t realize?_ 

“Oh, hun,” her tone’s turned placating, a little pitying, and a toxic mixture of fear and disappointment swirls in my gut. “It’s not that easy, it- sometimes it takes a while,” then her smile turns a little sad, and silence settles uncomfortably around us. Bea shifts on her feet.

“Why don’t you go ahead and get the rest of the boxes, we can finish stocking, yeah?” Her tone feels like a verbal pat on the shoulder, a ‘it’ll be alright, dear’ that doesn’t do anything aside from make me feel worse - of course, I’ve been presented this wonderful opportunity to make my life better, _easier_, only to have it ripped from my grasp and thrown far into the indeterminate future.

“Yeah,” I mumble mostly to myself, then push through the door to the back room. I assume time passes, and Bea keeps up a stream of chatter about the various items we’re sorting and what they’re good for, and I file it all away in a little box in my head that gets tossed into a proverbial dumpster a moment later; I _know_ I should be paying attention, and I actually would love to learn something, but I can’t focus. Fortunately, levitating boxes and candles and other small items proves incredibly simple, even for my distracted brain.

It feels like only five minutes have passed, but Bea tells me we’re all done and why don’t I wait around for Phil, as he’s bound to be here sometime soon. I lean against the counter, eyes glazing over. _Phil, what will he think of all this? He didn’t seem to know much more about familiars than Bea does._ I’ll have to ask, maybe he has some ideas for how I can go about finding mine.

For the first time since the idea of me having a familiar was presented, I let myself fully and properly - without any untimely interruptions - consider what they might be.

“Is it always an animal?” I ask aloud, and Bea hums; I glance over to find her back at her computer, though she does pause and turn toward me, brows raised. “A familiar, is it always an animal? Could it be like, a bug or something? Or a plant? Or a _person_?” The thought hadn’t occurred to me, but what if that’s the case? _I think it’d be Phil, then, it’d have to be._ The concept of Phil as a familiar, as a _soulmate_, flashes in my mind for half a second before I dismiss it. _He doesn’t exactly make control any easier for me...fear lodges in its place, though, because what if someone else is my familiar? What would happen with Phil? I’m staying, I’d promised. I want to stay._ Maybe _I don’t want to find my familiar._
“Oh, yeah, always an animal, can’t be a person.” She rattles this off like it’s a fact pulled from a history textbook. The keyboard tapping resumes.

“Right, but like, what if it is a person? Technically people are animals, right?” Bea laughs, low and quick.

“It’s not a person, dear, that’s not how it works.” I blow out a breath, because I guess she knows more than me, but the fear still stings in my chest. Oh god, what if I don’t even go looking for my familiar, but they somehow find me, and it’s a person who’s my soulmate and then-

“But-”

“Dan,” Bea turns fully to face me, then rolls her eyes. “I can’t believe I’m doing this, he’s going to be pissed. He probably already is,” she grumbles, and I frown as she waves her arms at me, urging me to scoot out of the way. I follow her on instinct to the front of the shop where antique intricate mirrors sit out on display. Her fingers brush against one, and the surface ripples.

“Bea, nice of you to call,” the familiar voice comes through, echoing strangely in the shop. Surely not...but I move closer to Bea, until the mirror comes fully into view, along with the floppy curled brown hair and green eyes of PJ. Of course it’s PJ. “And Dan! What a lovely surprise,” he chuckles. “Not a surprise, of course, but lovely anyway!”

“Yeah, alright Peej, dear, can you please just tell Dan what he needs to hear already?” Bea frowns at the mirror, then over at me. “I’m sick of fielding this question, and he won’t believe me. Dan, Peej is-”

“I know, hey PJ,” I nod, hoping to come across polite - I’m not entirely sure where we stand, if we’re on good terms or not, but he seems happy enough to see me. “I didn’t realize you knew him?” I turn to fully face Bea, who just laughs.

“Everyone knows Peej. Or, rather, Peej knows everyone, don’t you?” She pokes at the silvered surface, making it ripple, and PJ scoffs.

“Yeah, alright, quit that.” He laughs, though, and Bea grins beside me. I turn my attention back to the mirror.

“So Bea said a familiar can’t be a person, but what if-”

“Dan.” PJ tilts his head in much the same way Bea tends to do, lips pursed in an almost-smile. “I won’t go into the specifics, but your familiar isn’t a person, that’s all that matters.” He gives us a mini-salute before the mirror flattens out and our reflection replaces his arched brow and smile.

“There you go,” Bea says matter-of-factly, just as the door to the shop bursts open and Phil pushes inside.

“Sorry I’m late!” He announces, eyes wide and- is he a bit out of breath? But his gaze lands on me immediately, and he rushes over and wraps me in a tight hug. “Sorry I’m late,” he breathes again, in my ear this time, and I don’t get even half a second to wonder what’s going on before his lips crash into mine and my brain briefly forgets how to function.
I can’t believe I’d let myself fall asleep in the forest - sure, Mellix was watching and keeping me safe, but I have no excuse for spending nearly six hours out under the trees; the only thing in my head the entire way back into town was how Dan must hate me for abandoning him like that - he’d expected me back probably three hours ago, and he must’ve thought I forgot all about him. Or that I didn’t want to come back.

“Phil, Phil, what’s- are you okay?” Dan finally says once I’ve pulled away enough for him to speak - or, rather, for me to breathe, I’m still sort of hyperventilating from rushing back here.

“I’m- yeah, I’m okay, I got stuck- no, I was out with all the plants and Mellix and I just, I fell asleep, and god I swear I didn’t mean to and I’m so sorry,” the words tumble from my mouth and run all over each other, but I hope I’m getting my point across, and Dan doesn’t look too upset. In fact, he looks more...confused? His brows have scrunched together and his lips tug down in an almost-frown.

“Late, are you-” he glances over at Beatrice, who’s pointedly tapping away at her laptop by the counter.

“Dan made a mess,” she says, clearly more for my sake than Dan’s, “so yes, dear, you’ve been here a bit longer than anticipated.” She never looks up from her computer.

“I didn’t- I mean, I was so distracted,” Dan blinks a few times, processing this new information. He didn’t even realize I was late...

“You came back,” he says, quietly enough that I’m sure it was meant only for me to hear. I nod, because of course I did. And because words stop working in my head - how could I ever properly express that I can’t imagine just leaving him? That sitting out in the forest was peaceful and lovely and pleasant and I missed it but not nearly as much as I missed him, that I drifted off to thoughts of his hand twined with mine and his breaths slow and soft against my ear, that it’s probably the most absurd thing ever, but even being away from him for that long felt wrong.

“Alright you two lovebirds, get a room. Actually, get the chalk and take this whole gooey love-fest back to your house,” Beatrice announces, and I press my lips into a line to hide my frown. Dan just chuckles.

“Wait, chalk?” I take a step back from Dan, whose gaze drifts down to his feet as he clears his throat. “Did that black chalk come in?” I look over to find Beatrice smirking.

“Dan can get it for you.” She says, and I watch Dan give me a sideways glance before walking over to a small box sat on the counter. He tucks it under his arm, then pauses at the counter by Beatrice.

“Told you, no cost, dear, go on. Use the ribbon when you want to come again, I’ve got plenty for you to do.” Her voice softens a bit when she speaks to him, and I’m not sure if my twinge of jealousy comes from the fact that she’s so nice to Dan or the fact that she’s so nice to Dan.

“Sorry, it’s, uh, a bit broken,” Dan keeps his tone low as we push through the door, and I frown; of course, Beatrice couldn’t just let me buy proper black chalk, she has to shove all the damaged
merchandise- I pause my internal rant when Dan sighs heavily, taking a few steps in the direction of the edge of town before he stops, turning to face me.

“It’s my fault, I was fucking around and broke a ton of it, and Bea said we- uh, you could have it, no cost. I’m sorry,” he tacks on at the end, glancing down at the box. My frustration immediately flips on its head.

“Why are you apologizing? You got me free chalk,” I chuckle, then - maybe in a burst of confidence or just a need to be connected to him - I grab his free hand in mine; it’s one of the things I’d thought about, while I was laying out under the sun, as close to photosynthesizing as a person could properly come. I wanted to hold his hand.

He doesn’t pull away, although I can’t imagine why I expected him to, and we set off.

Mellix joins us once we’ve left the town proper, loping alongside Dan. At first, I expect Dan to press into me, to get himself farther away from the wolf like he’s been doing this whole time, but he doesn’t, and the silence around us feels comfortable. Until a soft, uncertain melody floats through the air, and I find Dan glancing over at me. I’m half a second from asking what’s wrong when his lips part.

“Bea said finding my familiar could help me control my energy better.” The words rush out, like he’s been holding them on a breath and he’s finally given himself permission to exhale; admittedly, it takes me a minute to digest the words myself. Is that true? PJ had never mentioned it, but I’d had Mellix long before I met PJ, so maybe it just didn’t come up?

“Okay?” I feel like he’s going somewhere with it, but my brain still feels half-asleep from my impromptu nap and half-on-fire from the anxiety of being late.

“I want to find them.” He nods, like he’s finally coming to this decision himself, and of course that’s where he’d been going with it. “I want- I mean, would you help me? I don’t even know how, or where to- what?” Dan breaks off mid-sentence, lips tugged down into a frown, and I realize it’s because mine have done the same.

“Oh! I do, yeah, of course I’ll help.” I can hear the ‘but’ in my tone before I even say it, so I just skip over it. “I don’t know that I’ll be super helpful, I don’t know much about the bond myself…” I twist my lips at the way his face falls, the way he looks toward the ground as we walk.

“Oh, that’s, uh, do you know anyone who might know? PJ maybe?” I let my gaze drift to the lines of the trees we pass - I suppose PJ would know, but would he say anything? Not if it helped Dan find his familiar. Assuming he has one. I keep that thought to myself for now, though, I don’t want to make him give up all hope before he’s even tried. Or would that be worse, to have known it was a possibility this whole time and never mention it?

“Actually, he probably wouldn’t tell me anything useful,” Dan supplies in the wake of his own question, and I huff out a laugh in spite of the nervous direction my brain has taken. “I could always ask Bea?” He suggests, and I try not to grimace at that; instead, I press my lips into a line, offering only a brief hum in response. I’m sure I can find something helpful to tell him, can’t I? I suddenly feel completely useless, and that thorn of fear that Dan could very well find someone else to teach him-

No, I’m the one who’s meant to be teaching him! I can help, I’m sure of it.

“Actually!” I announce, still unsure of where this is going but hoping to find the words along the way. “I have, uh, some- oh, I do have a few books! From when I was still learning,” which is
absolutely true. I just have no idea if any of them has information on familiars. “We can take a look at those?” I offer, and I can tell before he responds that he’s thrilled: the notes around us turn positive and hopeful, crescendoing a bit too loud before he softens them.

“That would be great, actually, could we look when we get back?” His face lights up with the words and his steps quicken; his grip in my hand tightens, tugging me along, and all I can properly do is grin back at him and nod.

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Once we walk through the door, I barely have time to blink before Dan’s dropped the box on the counter and run halfway up the stairs.

“I assume in the locked room?” He calls down, and I follow after him.

“Yeah! Susan, it’s fine,” I mumble the last bit to the walls around me as I climb the steps two at a time. By the time I’ve made it to the storage room, I’m only slightly out of breath, and Dan’s managed to locate the small stack of witchcraft-related books PJ had insisted I own. Even though he’d regularly tell me that the books ‘didn’t get it quite right’. Briefly, I wonder if he somehow saw this far ahead, to the point where they might actually come in handy. Dan’s already pulling the first two from the pile, sticking one out at me as he reads the cover of the other.

“Here, you can start on this one, I’m not sure- ‘Magickal Plants and Their Uses’,” he reads off the title of the one he’s currently frowning at, “will be all that useful, but I’ll skim the contents section anyway.” He drops the book he’s held out for me, and I barely lean forward to catch it in time. Absently, I follow Dan over to the desk where he’s already plonked his book down and read over the cover of mine: ‘Witchcraft: The Basics, vol. 1’. I vaguely remember PJ laughing at the majority of the spells listed there, calling them formulaic and outdated, and ‘really, Phil, use a little creativity!’ And, truly, I had - looking back as I flip through the first few pages, I can see what PJ had been talking about.

Although the basic basics aren’t far off, just presented in a classic history-textbook-boring kind of way. Following Dan’s lead, I turn back to the table of contents, hoping for something to indicate a discussion around familiars.

“Okay, this one’s useless,” Dan grumbles beside me, heading back to the bookshelf. By the time he’s returned, I’ve flipped to a chapter titled ‘Animals and Witchcraft’ which I vaguely recall having more to do with placing spells on animals, but it’s the only thing that seemed relevant.

“What do you think,” Dan’s finger rests on a line of a page and I peek over to read it. “Could ‘Witches and their Familiars’ possibly be a useful section?” He huffs out a sarcastic laugh and I lean into his shoulder as he flips to the chapter; for several minutes, we both read in silence. Then Dan exhales slowly.

“Well that’s utterly useless,” he grumbles, and I frown as I try to skim the rest of the text - apparently he’s finished reading before I have; the best I can gather, familiars are drawn to a person’s purest energy and a witch and familiar usually find one another when the witch is most themself. It gives no recommendations for how to go about actually finding one’s familiar, though, and Dan leans heavily on the desk with another sigh.

“We have something, at least!” I try to sound more enthusiastic, flipping the page to the next in case there’s more information. And I’m met with a bright line of text reading ‘Protection Against Demonic Energy’, the next section of the book; Dan just gives me a quick glare before whirling
around. I watch him pull the last book from the shelf, one with detailed instructions on reading tarot - another *horrendously* inaccurate text, according to PJ. And I suppose he’d be the expert.

Dan flips the cover open anyway, skimming the table of contents with his lips pursed in a frown. After a long moment of staring at the definitely-not-helpful book, he looks up at me.

“You’re sure you don’t have *anything* else?” His tone comes out reluctantly hopeful, like he believes I wouldn’t hide anything from him - and I wouldn’t - but he’s desperately wishing I had anyway. I shake my head, hating the way his face falls as he slams the book shut and places it back on the shelf.

“It’s- that’s, that’s fine, I’ll, uh, we can-” he mumbles to himself as he walks back over to me, gaze locked on the desk. He lets his fingers trail along the edge of the one moderately helpful book, and I’m paying such close attention to the slow movement that I almost miss the splash of a tear falling onto the page. Dan wipes at it quickly, but then he’s sniffling as well, and I pull him into a tight hug before he can protest.

“Dan,” I’m about to try to offer some kind of consolation, to tell him it’s alright and we’ll figure it out, that we can call PJ tomorrow and go back to Beatrice’s shop and ask her, and it’ll all be okay, but he stiffens in my grip, and I’m suddenly not sure if I should say any of that at all.
Dan

Of course I’m fucking crying. Phil has to see me crying. Just because I can’t have my way, like some spoiled brat. Because I might have to wait to find my familiar and actually learn to control my energy on my own. Because I can’t get the easy way out.

Phil’s arms squeeze tighter around me as I run through the lines of text in my head: when a witch is most themself, that’d been very clear and reiterated several times. Surely it has to mean something? I’d rushed through the two pages, desperately hoping for some clear indication for how to find a familiar. A step-by-step list of directions, maybe.

I freeze in Phil’s grip, in spite of his warmth, and pull away; I barely allow myself a brief glance at his furrowed brows and lips curled down in concern before I’m back to the book on the desk, wiping at the wayward tears that had slipped down my cheeks.

“I’m good, I’m fine,” I tell Phil - I’m not sure it’s true, but maybe if I just read through the passages again, I’ll uncover some hidden meaning. Maybe a spell I hadn’t recognized as such, or a cleverly-concealed tip. That’s something witches do, right? I start at the beginning paragraph, frowning as the words pour into my eyes in exactly the same way they had before.

Vaguely, I recognize that Phil’s shifted to my side, hip pressed against mine and shoulder brushing my arm as he bends down to scan the page with me. The touch is a distraction, though, tugging my thoughts elsewhere, and I lean away.

“Did you think of something?” Phil asks, and there’s a forced lightness to his tone that I can’t stand. He’s trying to help, I was fucking sobbing, of course he wants to comfort me. I exhale slowly, as close to a sigh as my still-tight throat will allow.

“I thought maybe I missed something, I read it so fast the first time, but…” I wave a hand at the book, frustratingly devoid of any useful information, then glance up at Phil. Who’s got his lips pressed into a line, eyes wide. “There’s not a secret witch code I should know about, is there?” I ask on a whim, more joking than serious. But if there is... I let my gaze drift back to the text again, unfocusing on purpose and tapping into my energy.

But the blur of words in front of me doesn’t light up in a special pattern, letters don’t float from the page and rearrange themselves in a conveniently helpful manner, and heat pools in my chest at the sudden loss of hope. Again. I’m tempted to let it out, to just fucking burn, but I can’t. I fucking can’t.

Vaguely, I’m aware Phil’s said something, probably answered the question I asked a moment ago, but that suddenly seems entirely irrelevant. Everything in me cools to arctic temperatures, all traces of emotion draining from my body.

“Can we just sleep?” My voice sounds distant and disconnected, but I can’t tell if it actually is or if I’m just not hearing it properly. I think Phil agrees, or says something that gives him cause to rest his hand on my back and guide me gently from the room.

In a blur of moments I have no reason to recall, we’re in the bedroom and I’m sat on the bed, fully clothed but already curling up under the duvet.

“Dan,” Phil’s hand on my shoulder, shaking me just slightly, forces my brain to start paying attention. I turn to the source of the annoyance, though I know I’m not all that bothered by Phil
himself. He tilts his head at me, twists his lips in the way that says he’s *pity*ing me, and *god* okay maybe I am annoyed, I don’t want his *pity*.

“I’m making you some dinner first, okay? Please stay awake a bit longer, just so you can eat something?” And then I exhale every objection I’d had on the tip of my tongue because he *cares*. He just cares. He wants me to eat. Belatedly, I realize I haven’t had much all day. My stomach growls as though it’s just noticing this as well.

Although I want nothing more than to crawl under the covers and wallow, I nod and lean back against the headboard, watching Phil as he turns and leaves the room. Obscure thoughts float in and out as I stare at the wall across from me: *Phil’s never coming back, Phil loves me, Phil has Mellix and plants, he doesn’t need me, I love Phil, what if I never get control of myself around Phil, would he leave me then?* I know they all come from a place of nonsense and irrational feelings, but they drift through my head all the same. I lose track of what I’ve thought myself and what feels like it’s come from this insecure, childish version of me.

“How’s it going?” Phil’s voice is soft when he comes back, and I get to quiet at least one of those silly thoughts. My gaze drops to the bowl in his hand, piled high with what looks to be rice of some kind. A distinctly soy-saucy smell makes its way to my nose, and between that and the subsequent noise my stomach makes, I sort of feel halfway back to reality.

It seems Phil’s made fried rice, and I dig into it the moment I have a spoon in hand - I’d normally eat with chopsticks, and I don’t know if Phil has them or not, but I’m actually quite grateful for the literal shovel that allows me to devour the food in a matter of minutes.

Phil stays silent the whole time, perched on the edge of the bed; it’s not til I’ve shoved the last bite in my mouth that I properly glance up to find him watching me with a soft, barely-there smile.


“Sort of,” I supply into the silence, a compromise between how I’d felt before and after inhaling the fried rice. *That Phil made for me, fucking hell.* “Thank you, by the way.” I can feel warmth crawling up my cheeks at my shitty manners.

“Okay, and it was no problem,” he says, and that’s it, no further pressure, no ‘are you sure’ or ‘tell me about it’ or anything. He holds a hand out for the bowl still sat in my lap and I pass it to him on autopilot.

My frazzled brain expects him to stand, to head back downstairs, to leave me again. A twisted, bitter piece of my heart wants him to leave, wants to give my negativity a home to properly wallow in. But I don’t want him to leave again. Maybe ever, although that’s a bit unrealistic. *Just don’t leave right now.*

And he doesn’t. I don’t know if he has some witchy way of knowing what’s in my head - I imagine not, with how he reacted to Mel’s ability - but he doesn’t leave, just sets the bowl on the bedside table and pulls up a corner of the duvet and slides under. He’s just as fully clothed as I am, but he shifts down until he’s laying on one pillow and pats the space beside him. It takes all of half a second to convince my refueled body to move down and occupy that space, to press myself against him and let his arms wrap around me and I sort of don’t know what to do with my head because it’s squashed against his shoulder, but if suffocating in Phil’s arms is the way I go, then so be it.
Except Phil’s shifting a bit, then I’m laying properly on his shoulder, and it’s comfortable and warm and cozy and I let my eyes drift shut. I could get used to this. I desperately, desperately hope it’s something I’m allowed to get used to. ‘Phil said he wants me to stay’ wars with ‘but what if he doesn’t’ in my head, and I try to ground myself in reality by way of squirming in Phil’s arms. He huffs out a breath against my hair, and I look up to find his lips curled up in a smirk.

“What?” I ask, torn between taking a challenging tone and wanting to dip my head, to avoid his gaze. I end up locking eyes with him, but a flush heats my cheeks. Instead of responding, Phil just shakes his head, lips falling into a genuine smile just before they’re pressed against my forehead. I debate arguing it - really, I do - but I ultimately decide I’d much rather just exist in the comfort of his presence for a while instead.

Until existing turns into thinking and thinking turns into worrying and worrying turns into convincing myself I’ll never find my familiar, that I’ll never get control of my witchcraft, that Phil will eventually stop wanting me, that-

“What?” I mumble into the fabric of Phil’s shirt, desperate to stay grounded in the moment, desperate to avoid drifting away in my own head. Phil’s hands move down my back, then up, a soothing, slow motion, calming and rhythmic and not at all what I had in mind. “No, Phil, distract me,” I hope I get my point across because I sure as fuck feel heat rushing to my cheeks now.

Phil’s hands pause as he lets out a soft ‘oh’, and I momentarily debate curling into a ball and imploding. But only momentarily, because then his hands trail down to the hem of my shirt, slipping under the fabric to trace across my skin. I glance up to find Phil watching me, eyes half lidded and flicking between meeting my gaze and staring at my lips.

I waste exactly no time surging forward, capturing his mouth with mine and obliterating my thoughts for the time being. He lets out a humming of surprise that quickly dissolves into a soft breath against my lips as we pull apart; it’s only a brief break, though, then he’s biting my lower lip and his hands slide high on my waist, up to my chest, and fuck it’s far too warm under the duvet.

In a smooth move I’m stupendously proud of, I shove the covers off us and simultaneously straddle Phil’s hips, pushing him down against the mattress below me. If he’s surprised, he only looks it for a moment - wide eyes and an equally wide mouth - then he’s rushing through undoing the buttons of my shirt and shoving it back off my shoulders, grabbing at the back of my neck, bringing me closer.

Before I get anywhere near his lips, he rocks his hips up into mine, and I end up arched over and hissing at the unexpected jolt of pleasure, panting against his shoulder. His fully clothed shoulder, I notice, and I manage to convince my body to sit up, intent on pulling it off him.

Sitting up, I realize a moment too late, was possibly not the best move - or maybe it was, with how Phil’s still moving against me, and I bite my lip against a moan; an urge hits me suddenly, and I have to lift my hips away from Phil’s for a second just to come down off the high of the fantasy.

“Shirt,” I manage, and Phil sits up against me, chest far too close, lips far too close, but then they’re gone as he tugs his shirt over his head. And then they’re back, distracting and tempting and what was I wanting to do again? Phil’s hips rock up into me, slow and deliberate and delicious and fuck. My brain goes fuzzy as he wraps his arms around my back, holds me close and low as he keeps up the movement, accents it with lips and teeth and tongue all across my neck, my shoulder.

“Dan,” Phil’s voice comes out low and gravelly, but there’s something else, something- oh. The heat in my chest has expanded, threatening to manifest in some less-than-pleasant ways like it had last night - although Phil didn’t seem too opposed to it at the time. But if he’s asking me to reign it
...I try not to let my concerns get to my head and ruin the moment, instead focusing on drawing
the heat back into my chest. Phil’s hips slow under me, and I fight back a whine. I really
really need to get my fucking witchcraft under control. I hate this limitation, this moment where we have
to stop and breathe even though neither of us wants to.

I inhale as Phil’s lips leave my neck, naively hoping he’ll notice I’ve cooled down and come back,
but he’s pulled away fully and I squeeze my eyes shut before blinking them open.

To find a wicked grin on his face. A moment later, he’s shifting me off him and tugging at his
jeans, and I barely have to think before doing the same. Everything feels rushed, more so than last
night, but not in any way I’m opposed to. Clearly not in any way Phil’s opposed to, either; I suck in
a breath as his cock springs free, my fingers stilling on the buttons of my own jeans.

My exhale is shaky and just on the edge of a moan as Phil strokes himself, eyes drifting shut as he
leans against the pillow behind him. It takes me a solid thirty seconds - and Phil finally opening
his eyes to glance at me - to realize I’m still half dressed, and I can’t very well go about doing what
I’ve set my mind to with two layers of fabric clinging to me.

They quickly disappear, lost somewhere in the mess of sheets, and I swallow thickly as I take in the
sight of Phil under me, watching me. Hard and throbbing because of me. Fuck, the things I want to
do to him. With him. Vaguely, I’m aware of the heat coiling in my stomach, mixing with the
sensation in my chest that says I’m probably far too hot to touch right now; I drop my head back,
staring at the ceiling as I try desperately to focus on my energy, on containing it and keeping it
contained.

Once I’m fairly certain I’m safe to touch - Phil hasn’t exactly asked for anything like that yet, and I
don’t want to assume - I lean over him and press a soft, warm kiss to his lips. One he immediately
deepens, but I pull back.

“Lube?” I assume it’s back in the bedside drawer, so I’m already reaching for it when Phil answers.

“Bed- yeah,” his voice comes out hoarse and wrecked already and fuck the sound goes straight to
my cock, twitching where it’s pressed between my stomach and the mattress as I search for the
bottle.

Once I’ve got it in hand, I turn to find Phil very pointedly staring at my ass, which sends a rush of
heat to my cheeks and to pretty much everywhere else. I normally don’t let...well, anyone that I can
recall stretch me open. I like to be in control. But...

“Do you want to, uh...” I trail off, holding the lube up as the flush on my face deepens. Why is this
weird to ask? It shouldn’t be, I chide my own thoughts - just because it’s weird for me doesn’t
mean it’s weird for him. I need to stop making it weird. “I mean, only if you want, I can do it
myself, if...” but Phil’s already reaching for the bottle, so I shift back and wait, nerves spiraling in
my chest and demanding I take my words back, suck them from the air and swallow them down
and pretend I never offered.

Except, as I watch Phil squeeze the lube out on his hand, I start imagining the feeling of him
opening me up, of rocking into his fingers and letting him do what he wants, letting him be the one
in control; I’m suddenly desperate for it.

Before he can even ask, I crawl my way back over to him just as he’s setting the bottle aside. When
he turns to me, his eyes drag across my body, and my position gives me a perfect view of his chest,
the way his breathing speeds up. His cock twitches against his stomach, and a very horny and
impatient part of me wants to forego all the requisite preparation and just sink down on him, just
deal with the pain and the burn and the stretch, but Phil’s hand slides between us, under me, and everything flies out the window in a single second.

Then it’s all nerves again, and I can feel myself tensing up, gaze drifting away from Phil’s - an irrational embarrassment mixes with the fear from lack of control, and I flinch and almost pull away at the gentle pressure at my entrance. I don’t know what Phil’s face looks like, but he pauses, and his free hand slides up my chest to the back of my neck and he sort of forces me to look back down at him.

“Hey, are you okay?” His voice has lost all the deep husky tone from earlier, but it’s still low and soft and his eyes are wide and he’s got his lips twisted in concern and how could I ever imagine he’d do something I wouldn’t want? He’s been nothing but caring and careful and kind literally since the moment I met him, why would this be any different? I exhale a breath, letting my eyes drift shut as I tell my body to relax, that I want this - because I do, I really fucking do.

“Yeah,” I breathe the word and nod, letting the weight of Phil’s hand on my neck pull me further down to him, until I can press my lips to his and focus on the familiar slide of his mouth against mine.
Phil

When Dan tenses above me, actually flinches away, I tilt his head down to look at me. If he’s not okay with this, I don’t want to pressure him. It seems a strange thing not to be okay with, given everything we did just last night, but he had requested to stretch himself, maybe it’s something he’s just not comfortable with.

“Hey, are you okay?” I hold his gaze until his eyes close, but he exhales slowly and nods.

“Yeah,” and then his lips have found mine and it’s soft at first but he wastes no time deepening it, adding tongue and teeth and heavy breaths against my mouth, and I almost forget myself again. Until Dan presses himself against my finger. I go slowly, testing his reaction, but it’s nowhere near the way he’d acted a moment ago. He shudders above me as I slide in past the tight ring of muscle, but his lips barely pause on mine.

As I go a bit deeper, though, he lets out a soft whine against my mouth; I freeze immediately, eyes flying open to find Dan frowning, brows scrunched together.

“Well don’t fucking stop,” he grumbles, pushing himself back a bit against my finger as he rolls his eyes. “And you can- I mean, I’m, I’m good, with like- you can add another,” he finally stutters out, cheeks turning bright red as he glances anywhere but at me; it takes me a few seconds of blinking to realize what he’s asking for. Then my concerns fly out the window - it’s like last night, he’s just embarrassed to request I do things the way he wants.

Slowly, carefully, I slide another finger in, giving him a moment to get used to it - a moment he takes to push against me, to force my fingers deeper, and I watch completely fascinated as he bites his lip, arches his head back and squeezes his eyes shut. If that’s any sign, I may as well get on with it, although I’m still a bit frozen by the way he looks above me, flushed and needy.

“Phil,” he whines again, and I realize it’s the same sound he made earlier, a sound of desperation and not pain or discomfort. I keep my pace slow, clearly too slow for what he wants with the way he refuses to quit rocking back against my fingers, then he’s bowed his head by my ear and he’s whispering ‘more’ in a way that makes me suck in a breath, makes my cock twitch between us.

It’s all the wrong angles, but he’s relentless as he rides my fingers and slides our cocks together in a delicious friction and god it gets me way too close to the edge; it leaves him panting and moaning into my shoulder, quite literally heating up the space around us to a sweltering temperature. His skin burns against me, hot but not to the point of pain, and I don’t ask him to go there right now - there’s nothing wrong with normal, or at least as normal as it can get between us.

Then Dan’s motions slow, he shifts so his hand fits between us and grabs at my wrist, and I let him pull my fingers away. He seems to want to stay in control, hovering over me and positioning himself, so I let him - my cock throbs in his hand, desperate for the warmth and slightest bit of friction he’s providing just by holding me there.

“Did you- I mean, like before, the- is it a protection spell?” Dan’s voice comes out hoarse and wrecked, matching the breathy sounds he’d been making in my ear just a minute ago. I nod.

“Yesterday, but it’ll- it lasts.” I clarify - the one I did should be good for at least a few more days. Dan’s brows scrunch for a moment, but he nods once I explain, then he’s lowering himself until I’m pressed against his entrance.
This time, there’s absolutely no hesitation, and he sinks down, hands braced against my chest and digging in as his skin heats even further. It’s only a few more seconds til he’s stopped, til I’m buried inside him, and I hold myself still against the urge to thrust up into him, to repeat everything we’d done just a bit earlier, only with a lot less clothing in between us.

In spite of my attempts not to move, I can feel my cock twitch just from the warm wetness of Dan clenching as he tries to get used to the stretch, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut, to block out the view of him sat on my lap like this, cursing under his breath and trembling and mine.

The thought comes from nowhere and everywhere at once - the idea of him being mine, not in an ownership sort of way, more in a ‘belong to each other’ kind. Assuming he sees me the same way. The twinge of doubt in my chest gets quickly masked by the coil tightening low in my stomach when Dan finally moves, lifts himself and lowers back down slowly.

I’m honestly a bit caught off guard, his slow movements don’t at all match his earlier desperation, or yesterday’s demands for me to fuck him already. My hands slide up his thighs, muscles shifting under his skin as he picks up pace - it’s still unexpectedly careful, though.

“Dan?” I breathe out, and his eyes fly open; he freezes, sunk completely down on me, and his hands release their death grip on my chest. After a moment, the air around us cools. “No, it wasn’t-” his brows furrow, then, lips tugging down.

“Did- is something wrong?” He asks, shifting slightly, like he’s a second away from pulling off me. Which is not at all what I wanted.

“No, I thought- I was gonna ask you that,” I huff out a laugh, expecting that to be the end of it, but his frown only deepens and he sits up fully. We both suck in a breath at the change, though, and Dan takes longer to recover; when he exhales, it’s a sigh full of uncertainty.

“I don’t know, I just thought- I like this, or I used to, but it feels…” then he mumbles something under his breath, something I don’t hear, and turns to stare pointedly at the bedsheets beside me.

“It feels what? Not comfortable? I can-” I start, but he shakes his head sharply.

“No, it’s- it’s stupid, forget it,” he mumbles, then he’s pressed his lips into a line in a way that carves a dimple in his cheek, one I adore but not like this.

“Dan.” I grab his hand, still hovering over my chest. “It’s not. You can tell me, okay?” It feels impossible to walk the line between encouraging and pressuring - I don’t want to end up coming off as the latter - but Dan glances over at me, actually makes eye contact briefly, then he drops his head back to stare at the ceiling. Which I decide to take as a good sign.

“I don’t feel, like, close,” he says after a long moment, and my brows arch up my forehead. Then I shift under him, not to try anything but just as a subtle reminder. He huffs out a laugh. Okay, maybe not so subtle…

“Yeah, I know,” he looks back down, lips twisting like he’s not sure what to say next. “I don’t know, it didn’t matter before, I guess, but I just- I want you closer?” He says it like a question, and his chest sort of caves in; mine does too, when realization hits. Closer.

“Come here,” I sit up at the same time the words leave my mouth, though, and we end up chest to chest, the cooled sweat on his skin making me shiver. I don’t even think before I’ve got an arm wrapped around his back, holding him still, while the other hand finds the nape of his neck to draw him into a slow kiss.
He hums against my lips before melting against me; everything about the moment is soft, gentle, careful - I’d say chaste, except I’m still buried in Dan so that seems a bit of a stretch. A second later, he seems to remember the same thing, and he’s shifting slightly, lifting himself a bit before sinking back down. His lips tighten against mine and he pulls away briefly, breath warm against my mouth.

“Much better,” he says, voice low and content, before he surges back in, and then it’s the teeth and tongue and panting against my mouth I expected, lifting himself as much as he’s able with the angle - and really, it’s not the best angle for either of us.

“Wait, wait,” I say, sliding my hands down to hold his hips still as they try to rock against me again. “Here,” I lift him until he gets the message, though he frowns as he pulls off me completely, actually whining at the loss. Admittedly, I miss it as well, and I’m quick to stack a pillow against the headboard and guide him over to it.

He gets the idea as soon as I sit up on my knees, climbing onto my lap until he’s positioned over my cock again, and I don’t have to ask before he’s sunk down; he lets out a shuddering breath as he leans against the headboard, legs wrapping my waist in a silent demand I get closer. Closer, that’s all he wanted. I press into him until everything from our chests down is in full contact, until he’s shifting his hips against me and I start to move, gentle in exactly the way I’m coming to find gets him so riled up.

I’m not at all surprised when his hand fists the hair at the back of my neck, gripping tightly and pulling my lips to his - he stops me just short, though.

“I swear to god, if you make me ask you, I will handcuff you to the bed and force you to watch while I get off without you,” he growls the threat low in his throat, eyes narrowed at me and lips curled up in a smirk that says he’s dead serious and he’d enjoy torturing me like that. I file that away for another time.

For now, I return his smirk and drop my hands to his ass, lifting him and rocking back at the same time. I set a fast pace, never quite pulling out entirely but managing to go deeper than before; the angle must work well for Dan, if the way he hisses a low ‘fuck’ and tugs at my hair is anything to go by.

A wave of heat follows, rolling across my skin before it’s sucked back and the air turns- well, a slightly lower temperature, although not by much.

“Right-” he breaks off in a moan as I sink into him again, head dropping to lean his forehead heavily against me. “Right there,” he manages after a moment, then he’s shuddering with each thrust and his hand slides between us, stroking his own cock - I sort of want to be the one doing that, but I’m quite occupied holding him up.

I think he’s trying to help, his legs straining and squirming around my waist and toes pressing dips into the bed behind me, but it’s not doing much aside from tell me just how gone he is - as if I couldn’t tell from the whining curses against my neck. I’ve decided I absolutely love how vocal he is, how needy and obvious.

I’m not - have never been - like that, but something about the way he says my name, low and breathy and desperate, the way the warmth keeps flashing around us, the way his hand stutters on his own cock, they make me want to be.

“Fuck, Dan, you feel so good,” I manage to whisper, the single thread running through every scattered thought in my head. The moment I say it, though, his eyes open - go wide - before he’s
dropped his head to my shoulder, breaths hot against my skin and twice as fast as they were a moment ago.

“Again,” lips move on my shoulder, and my stomach tightens at the sound, at the idea of giving him what he wants. At the idea that he wants this, that he wants me. It takes me a solid three seconds to organize my thoughts - the fact that he’s still a moaning mess around me doesn’t help in the slightest.

“God, I want every inch of you, I want-” I break off as he shifts his position just slightly and my mind goes entirely blank for a solid second, lost behind a wave of pleasure. “God, I wanted this for so long,” I start again, once I can actually speak, “and it’s so much better than-” I stop mid-sentence, suddenly extremely aware of the words falling from my lips - is that too much? I don’t want to scare him, but-

“Fuck, Phil,” apparently it’s not, as he’s suddenly clenching around me, shuddering as he comes over our chests; a white-hot hand grips the back of my neck, and the unexpected spark of pain goes straight to my cock, until I’m fucking into him erratically and riding out my own high alongside him.

After a few long moments, we’re both breathing heavily into each other’s shoulders, chests warm and heaving against each other. Dan’s cooled down, enough that he just feels slightly too hot to the touch, but it’s nowhere near unbearable. On a whim, I press soft kisses to his collarbone, up his neck and to the spot between his jaw and ear.

Somehow, this must be hilarious, as his fast breaths turn hard, and he’s chuckling into my neck.

“How is it,” he says, tone full of lightness, “you always manage to do exactly what I want?” He shakes his head, mostly just rubbing his cheek into my shoulder, but it’s a close, intimate feeling anyway. Also, we haven’t pulled apart yet, although Dan doesn’t seem at all inclined to move. His hand - the one previously stroking himself - has drifted down to rest at my hip, curled around it just enough to be possessive.

“You asked,” I giggle into his skin, pressing another kiss there before pulling back - it’s true, he’s clearly been shy about asking, but it hasn’t stopped him. I expect him to laugh as well, but he only breathes a soft ‘oh’ and lets himself fall still. It’s warm, close, and only slightly uncomfortable.

“We should probably,” I shift under him, my cock already softening inside him, and he groans against me before sitting up properly and slowly lifting himself.
Dan

I can already feel myself aching at the loss of Phil inside me, and I’ve only just pulled myself off. I end up falling back against the headboard, though I keep my legs steadfastly wrapped around him. I don’t want him to leave.

“No, no,” I wave a hand in dismissal, though, hoping to mask my sudden desperation to keep him close. Close. Somehow, I’d thought riding him would feel the way it did with everyone else - it put me in control, it let me call the shots - for the most part - but it just felt...separate. Disconnected.

Absently, I let my energy escape - as it’d been so desperate to do for the entirety of the past however long - and remove the drying stickiness from both of us. He understood, though. I barely had to admit how I felt, and then it was totally different, it was close and intimate and exactly what I needed.

Because I asked. Which is something I’d never had any trouble with until now, until Phil. Until I didn’t want everything to just be about me.

“You’re thinking,” Phil says, and his hands drift up from where they’d been resting on my thighs to slide up my arms, a gentle, careful movement. His eyes follow, only briefly glancing up to catch mine. Then I let my gaze drop, except Phil’s still fully naked and that’s a rather distracting view, so I look to the side instead.

“I am,” I say cautiously, not quite sure if I’m ready for whatever revelation my thoughts rest on the cusp of. A hand finds my cheek, cupping it, and I turn back to Phil without being asked.

“Is it bad thinking?” His question comes out gentle, the same way he’s looking at me, full of concern but no weight, no pressure.

“I don’t think so?” I answer, except it sounds more like his question than an actual answer. Apparently, though, that’s good enough to smooth out the crease between his brows, to tug his lip up into the slightest smile. Mine match the movement. I think it was good thinking, wasn’t it?

Nothing feels painful or tight in my chest, just hot and witchcraft-y, and maybe a little lighter than a minute ago.

Phil leans in, then, and his lips press against mine in a soft kiss; neither of us deepens it, and I realize just how spent I am when a wave of exhaustion crashes into my brain as if summoned by the simple act of letting my eyes drift shut. When Phil pulls back, I don’t bother opening them, instead laying back against the pillow and using my hands to feel my way up to his chest, then his shoulders.

“Sleep,” I mumble, tugging him closer, and he laughs as he falls into me. Warm breaths brush against my chest, hair tickles my chin, and I think I could actually genuinely fall asleep like this if not for the slightly awkward angle against the headboard that has me slumped and hunched over.

“Here, lay down,” Phil says, and I swear he can read my mind. Not that I could be bothered to care right now. Maybe he can help me sort it out later. I consider, though the thought is more haze than an actual thought at this point. Phil pulls at my hips, and I let him guide me lower, until we’re both resting on a single pillow with him wrapped around me.

Although, as if brought into focus simply by the idea of getting my head sorted out, everything
sharpens, turns more solid, until I’m examining and turning over each of my thoughts and trying to decide where it fits, what I want to do with it. My eyes stay closed, but I shift against Phil in the hopes of grounding myself. I’m tired, I try to explain to my brain, we can deal with this later.

But things keep asserting themselves, demanding to be sorted and placed into containers and understood. I shift again - I really can’t ask Phil to distract me a second time. I don’t know if I could handle a round two right now, despite how tempting the idea sounds.

Instead, I focus on taking deep breaths, on timing them with the ones hitting the back of my neck. I focus on the feeling of arms around me, of skin against skin and warmth and comfort and belonging. The last thing I remember is that: finally fucking feeling like I belong somewhere. Here. With Phil.

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I wake up cold and my eyes fly open, my brain ready to convince myself that it was all an elaborate dream, every single thing, and I’m actually laying in the middle of the forest after a long, miserable night exposed to the elements. The way my stomach growls, it wouldn’t be much of a stretch.

Except I’m not outside, I’m in a room I recognize, in our bed -our bed; the thought, coupled with the fact that those are the words my mind chose to use, makes me bury my face in the pillow, unable to stop grinning.

It’s not til I roll over, finally schooling my features into something I hope looks normal and not obnoxiously giddy, that my heart drops in my chest: the bed beside me is empty. Phil’s left. He’s left me, he’s gone and he doesn’t want me here and he doesn’t want me at all and this is his nice way of saying it because he’s just too nice, I should’ve known, and-

“Dan?” There’s a soft voice at the door, a balm for my unexpectedly frazzled nerves. Phil pushes inside, a plate full of pancakes in hand.

“Dinner and breakfast in bed? You’ll spoil me,” I warn him, voice thick with humor in the hopes it’ll mask the layer of neediness and fear I’m trying to dissolve. If he notices, though, he doesn’t bring it up, just smiles and offers me one of two forks in his opposite hand.

“I like spoiling you,” he says with a shrug, like it’s nothing, like it didn’t just send my heart soaring. ‘You asked’, he said last night with the same nonchalance - like all I had to do, all I have to do, is say what I want and he’ll give it to me. It’s a weird feeling, one that I can’t quite get settled in my chest, but it makes me grin anyway.

Instead of responding - because what would I even say? - I take a fork and poke at a pancake; he’s doused them in syrup and I cut into them easily, pulling away a bite and shoving it into my mouth to prevent any stupid words from coming out. And there are lots of those, boiling under the surface, but I haven’t given them any proper thought and I don’t want to say the wrong ones and scare him off.

So we sit in silence for a bit, both eating from the same syrupy disaster of a plate Phil’s now set in his lap, and I let the race of sugar through my bloodstream replace my thoughts for the time being. I feel like I’m doing a lot of ‘forget about it for now’ lately, but I toss that concern in the pile and try to convince my head to just enjoy the damn pancakes with my damn- well, whatever Phil and I are. ‘Boyfriends’ sounds like a high school fling, ‘lovers’ like a secret affair, ‘partners’ like a word reserved for fifty years from now.
Maybe he can just be ‘mine’, and we’ll leave it at that. Assuming that’s what he wants, at least. *Nope, that goes in the ‘later’ pile.* I stab at the pancakes with enough force to rock the plate, and syrup pools and drips over the edge and onto the duvet.

“*Fuck,* sorry, I didn’t—” I drop my head back and groan at the ceiling, then look down to find Phil just smiling at me, a bit like he’s about to start laughing. Then he tilts his head, glancing pointedly at the syrup seeping in and discoloring the bright green of the covers.

“Well? Are you gonna fix it?” He lifts his brows, then, and I do the same before I realize he’s suggesting I clean it up with my witchcraft. I’m still apparently pretty shit at remembering I have it when it isn’t actively inconveniencing me.

Along the same vein as the other *cleaning* I’ve done lately, I manage to quickly clear the mess, then Phil’s back to the pancakes like it hadn’t even happened. *I wonder when it’ll feel like that for me, when it’ll get old, seeing witchcraft at work.* It hasn’t yet, I don’t think. But I imagine it’s a bit different for Phil, if he’s had it his entire life.

“When did you know?” I blurt out, thoughts spilling over into words my lips don’t manage to stop in time. Phil looks up from the plate, mouth full of pancake that he takes a moment to chew and swallow. His eyes stay wide, though, and I’m pretty sure he hasn’t blinked since I asked.

“Know?” His voice comes out high and squeaky, and I suddenly wonder if that’s an offensive question - there’s so much I don’t understand, literally an entire *world* of things I have no idea about, and I wince at the idea I may have offended him like I had by using the word ‘magic’.

“Sorry, is that, like, not an okay question? I was just curious, but it’s not- I mean, I don’t want to—”

“Know what?” His tone shifts a bit, lower and more inquisitive, and he tilts his head. *Oh, he just didn’t understand. I suppose I was a bit vague…*

“That you were a witch?” I supply, and his lips part slightly, then he’s nodding and smiling, exhaling a breath. I take that as a good sign, that I didn’t completely fuck up, and shove more pancake in my mouth. Syrup drips on my chin, and I wipe at it before I can embarrass myself even further.

“I was probably...eight? When I really knew?” Phil twists his lips, gaze drifting. “Like, there were some things I didn’t understand were witchcraft when I was even younger, but looking back...” he tilts his head, and I swallow my bite quickly.

“What things?” I manage to catch him just as he opens his mouth to say something else, to continue the story, I assume, but now I’m curious for *my* sake - what if the things he noticed happened to me too? He looks at me and blinks.

“Well, I guess it wasn’t *super* strange, but like, I always had plants around, and they always grew even when I didn’t quite know what I was doing, and sometimes they’d talk to me, and—” Phil stops, and I realize my eyes have gone wide. “Not like, *talk* talk, just...it’s hard to explain, but I sort of understood them?” My disbelief must show on my face because he frowns for a moment.

“No, never mind,” I wave a hand. Plants definitely never talked to me. *But my witchcraft isn’t plant-related, like his.* “Anything else?” I ask, and Phil’s lips part. Then they close, then curl up in a sort of smile—but-not-exactly. It takes me a moment to recognize *pity* in his look.

“It’s different for every witch,” he rushes to add - I think my frown has made it quite apparent how I feel about his *pity.* “But it’s usually something you didn’t consciously think about, like the pot of
water exploding.” The moment he suggests it, my cheeks flush with heat. I am very aware of what was on my mind when that happened, and I suppose we’ve technically gone well past that at this point, but embarrassment colors the memory all the same.

“The building.” I remember suddenly, exhaling a heavy sigh and squeezing my eyes shut. Phil makes a noise, something curious; when I look, though, he’s got a forkful of pancake halfway in his mouth, so it’s hard to tell what he’s thinking. I opt to explain anyway. It feels like it’s only fair, he should know. Some of it, anyway. He doesn’t need to know it all. “The people, I told you I broke them out? Because they were innocent?” He nods. “It was my fault they got thrown in jail, I think, I just didn’t know it. I sort of... setabuildingonfire.” I rush the words out in a single string I know sounds mumbly and unclear and way too fast.

“You set a building on fire?” Phil asks, eyes wide, and I can’t tell if it’s for clarification or because he’s concerned for his safety - which would be fair, actually - or maybe he just doesn’t believe me. In any case, I keep my gaze trained on the slowly disappearing pile of food in Phil’s lap.
Dan set a building on fire.

At least twenty different emotions wage war in my head, concern and fear and worry - I can’t imagine how that must be affecting him, knowing he’s the cause of something frightening and devastating like that - but also pity and understanding, or at least sympathy. My energy never manifested itself in a harmful way; I guess I never really considered how terrifying it must feel to have so much power wrapped up inside you, begging to get out. Finding escape in the form of something so wild and uncontrollable and dangerous. I only ever saw how great it must be to have so much energy at his disposal.

“Are you okay?” I ask after a moment of silence, when he doesn’t respond, when his eyes stay fixed on the plate in front of us. He must not have expected that question, the way he looks up with scrunched brows and a slight frown.

“I’m- of course, I mean, do I look like I got hurt- oh.” He breathes the word out as I tilt my head. “I don’t know.” He says finally, lips twisting into something unsure, uneasy.

“You didn’t know then, either.” I supply, watching him stab at the pancakes. He rips a bite away and shoves it in his mouth, gaze pointedly fixed on his fork. I wait for him to chew and swallow.

“Nobody got hurt.” He says, more to the food than to me. His voice stays low, careful, like he’s not sure how I’ll react. Or like he’s expecting that was my concern; in a way, it was, but it’s in the past. Even if people had been hurt - not that I’d ever wish that on anyone - he didn’t know, he had no way of knowing or controlling what happened.

“It’s not your fault.” I reach a hand out to grab his free one, the one tapping fingers on his knee over the duvet. They still the moment I make contact, and I realize his skin is just a bit too warm. I squeeze his hand anyway.

“It was, though, I just didn’t-” he lifts his head to meet my gaze.

“It wasn’t. Would you do it now, if you could?” I ask, already aware of his answer.

“Of course not!” His head whips up, and it’s just as sensational and dramatic as I expected it to be. “How could you even think-” he’s trying to tug his hand from mine, betrayal etched into his face in creases between his brows and at the edges of his lips.

“I don’t,” I clarify, “but that’s the point. You wouldn’t, now that you know.” I hold him tighter, until he stops his attempts to pull back and exhales a heavy sigh; finally, his features relax into something solemn and maybe a little annoyed, based on the way he twists his lips.

“Fine, okay,” he says, then he’s back to the pancakes. I turn his hand in mine so I can hold it properly, and I’m pleased when his mouth curls up in the tiniest smile before he takes another bite from the almost-empty plate.

“Do you want me to go make more?” I ask, pointing at the food with my fork - I’m full, but he still seems ravenous.

“No!” He blurts out, head whipping up and hand gripping mine just a bit tighter. “Uh, no, I’m fine,” he mumbles, tone turning soft as a blush of pink crawls up his cheeks. As if to emphasize his point, he sets his fork down with a clink.
“Okay.” I’m not sure what to do now that we’re both finished, though, since it’s clear he doesn’t want me to leave - a thrill runs through my chest at that, *he doesn’t want me to leave*, and it pushes its way to my face in the form of a smile I can’t fight back. We sort of just stare at each other for a bit, until Dan dips his head to stare at our hands.

“So-”

“Phil!” Dan shouts at the same moment I’m about to ask what he’d like to do today - he whips his head up with wide eyes, and I’d swear there’s a spark hiding behind them, although his skin stays a mostly-neutral warm temperature. I try to keep my grin to a minimum, but his mouth hangs half open and he sucks in a breath and it’s really adorable so I’m not sure I succeed.

“What, Dan?” I watch as his lips begin to curl up in a smile as well, then drop drastically; he seems to deflate, and I wish I had some ability to read inside his head, to understand what he’s thinking, where his mind is traveling. I know my face falls a bit too, trying to match his emotions as best I can. Trying to be sympathetic, understanding.

“I think I figured it out,” he says it in a small voice, low and soft but undeniably certain. I blink a few times.

“Figured…” I prompt, and he peeks up at me through thick lashes. His lips purse, the dimple in his cheek accented for a moment before it disappears.

“I have to be alone.”

The breath whooshes out of my lungs as if he’d punched me in the stomach, hard and fast and leaving me a bit lightheaded. This is it, *I knew it was coming*, the bitter tiny corner of my brain says. My heart sinks down into the pit of my stomach, but if it’s what he needs, then-

“I have to go out there by myself, it’s the only way I’ll find them.” Dan continues, and confusion squirms in and replaces my disappointment, my doubt, my fear. Dan takes a slow, steady breath and slips his hand from mine, which does nothing to ease my worries, but his words leave about a million questions spinning around in my head.

“Find- find what?” I finally manage, once he’s scooted to the edge of the bed and stood - I’m only momentarily distracted by the sight of him completely naked, and I wonder if it’s something I’ll ever get used to. What happened to him not wanting me to leave?

Maybe he’s okay as long as he’s the one doing the leaving. My heart throbs a dull beat in my chest.

“My familiar, Phil,” Dan walks around the bed and to the dresser, pulling out black pants and jeans and slipping them on. As I watch, his hand hovers over the dark maroon crop top he’d bought - technically, I’d bought for him - before grabbing a plain black jumper and tugging it on over his head. I follow each movement, forgetting his words less than a second after he’s said them.

His hair emerges from the neckline of the sweater a fluffy mess, one I can’t take my eyes off of, and I’m tempted to stand, to walk over, to run my hands through the curls and- no, I’d rather drag him back to bed, have a lazy lie in and do absolutely nothing, so we can both be comfy while I play with his hair.

“I’ll wear it soon, I promise,” Dan says, eyes and voice soft, and his lips draw me from my moment of distraction; they’re curled up in a soft smile, the same dark pink color his skin had turned last night, flushed and warm and- *now is not the time.*
Then he’s turned around, heading out the door, and it’s not til I hear the echo of his footsteps on
the stairs that I manage to blink, to stand and throw on some clothes and follow him.

I don’t catch up til he’s outside, halfway through the garden and marching toward the line of trees.

“Dan, Dan?” I’m only slightly out of breath when I reach him, and he pauses when my hand lands
on his shoulder.

“No, Phil,” he shrugs it off, turns. Fixes me with a strangely hard gaze - it doesn’t look malicious,
just...determined. He inhales, exhales, lets his expression relax. “I need to do this by myself, that’s
what the book said, I’ll find my familiar when I’m most myself,” he nods as he speaks, and I can’t
decide if it looks more like he’s trying to convince me or convince himself.

I let my hand fall, let him turn. Twist my lips as he walks away and toward the forest - if he’s
nervous, it doesn’t show, at least not in any way I’ve come to expect. Although it’s a bit hard to tell
from this far away, just from staring at the back of his head.

I watch until he’s disappeared, swallowed up by the browns and greens of the towering trees and
overgrown bushes. Then I watch for a bit longer, until a warm breath at my side reminds me that I
exist in the present, not just inside my head, following Dan down some path somewhere in the
dense undergrowth.

“Mellix,” I say aloud, though the way he leans his head into my shoulder says he already knows
how I feel. Of course he does.

Isn’t that what Dan’s looking for? Maybe...maybe I wasn’t enough.

Can’t be enough for him.

There’s a snort, the only warning before a slobbery warm tongue rasps across the side of my face
and I stumble away, more out of surprise than disgust or annoyance. The attack is accompanied by
a deep-seated feeling of humor, that same sort of sensation that preempts laughter.

“It’s not silly, you didn’t see how determined he was!” I answer, shoving at the muzzle that leans
in for another assault by tongue. “What if he finds his familiar and then he’s done with me?” I
voice the fear, though the last few words come out soft and uncertain; it suddenly feels more real,
more possible now that I’ve said it.

Mellix huffs out another hot breath against my hand before settling back on his haunches, giving
me the wolfish equivalent of a quirked brow. The only feeling I get from him this time is
contentment, the same kind I felt laying out in the grass yesterday, the kind I feel whenever we’re
just existing in each other’s presence. Contentment.

I roll that sensation around in my chest, in my head, until it clicks into place.

Contentment. Not the way I feel with Dan. Mellix feels like a limb, something that’s always been
there and exists as a part of me, inseparable and necessary and loved of course, but differently. Dan
feels like something else, like an unexpected gift that’s brought my entire life to another level of
happiness, of fulfillment. Something I appreciate so much more for the fact that nothing ties us the
way Mellix and I are connected, but he wants to be with me. I think.

There’s another snort, one I know all too well to mean I’m being absurd, and Mellix stands to lean
heavily against my side.

“Well you don’t know!” I argue, because it’s not like he can talk to Dan. Can you? I ask silently,
the question sounding silly even in my head, but I’m met with a blank emptiness. “Exactly,” I
affirm, “so how would you know?” I nudge him toward the house - if Dan comes back, he’s bound
to be hungry.

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The sun’s setting, casting the entire garden in shades of pink and gold and even a little purple, I think, if I squint at the edge of the shed. Or maybe I’ve just been staring for so long my eyes have forgotten what colors properly look like.

Dan hasn’t returned yet, and I’m starting to get worried.

A breath huffs beside me, Mellix curled up by my side as we sit in the same spot in the grass we haven’t moved from since I gave up on Dan returning in time for a late lunch. To the wolf’s point, I suppose I’ve been worried since the moment Dan disappeared into the forest.

But my worry doubles with every passing minute that he doesn’t return, with every inch the sun sinks closer and closer to the horizon, with every shade darker that the sky turns; if Dan doesn’t get back soon, it’ll be pitch black out - I trust him with his witchcraft, but nerves squirm in my gut at the idea he might have to use them, might have to defend himself against some of the nastier demon animals that creep out in search of energy to feed on.

“Should we go look for him?” I ask Mellix for the seventeenth time in the past- well, in however long it’s taken the sun to sink from a full circle down to a tiny sliver peeking over the tops of the trees. It’s still light enough to see by, but it won’t be long til I’ll be reliant on a spell to navigate through the depths of the forest. My fingers twist nervously in Mellix’s fur, though I make an effort not to pull too hard.

And, just like all sixteen times before, Mellix grunts under my hand and continues his slow, lazy breathing at my side. I let my gaze refocus on the edge of the garden, on all the spots I can see, hoping for the slightest rustle of leaves that isn’t the breeze or the smallest noise that isn’t a bird. Everything feels static to the point of discomfort.

“I’m gonna check the other side,” I inform the nearly-asleep wolf, who doesn’t do much aside from shift his paws, sprawled out beside him, when I stand. I follow the treeline around the side of the house, watching carefully for any signs of movement, listening for any sound that might be footsteps. I’m met with stillness, silence.

On a whim, I walk a ways down the trail into town, just in case Dan happened upon it and unintentionally took the opposite direction, but wrongness squirms in my gut as I get farther from the house. With a sigh, I stop, staring off at the spot the trail disappears around a curve, covered by growth and foliage.

Just then, a howl - a proper howl - echoes from behind me, from the house. Mellix? A spike of urgency hits me hard, coming directly from the wolf, and I’m turned on a heel and running back up the path before I have time to even consider what that means.
Why is this fucking forest so big?

I could swear I’ve been wandering for hours, but I never cross any similar-looking landmarks, I never see the same grove of trees or patch of unique flowers more than once. Not for the first time, I wonder if I can’t set up some kind of energy-fueled compass, although I’m not sure I’d be able to actually use it for navigational purposes. How many times in my life have I genuinely used a compass to find my way anywhere? I can’t even think of one.

But maybe that’s part of the process - getting lost, truly discovering myself, or some other spiritual nonsense that might apply to whatever the book had meant by being ‘most myself’. So I sort of just take whichever turns and paths - or not-exactly-paths - feel right, until I’ve lost all sense of where I am and which direction I’d need to go to find home again.

Home. My heart aches at the word, at the idea that I have a place I truly feel is a home. A smile crawls its way up my cheeks in spite of the layer of sweat sticking the jumper to my skin - really, that’d been a shit idea, but I wasn’t about to wear a crop top out to find my familiar. I mean, that definitely wouldn’t have been the ‘most myself’ style choice. Black and sweating my ass off seems much more appropriate.

Not that it seems to have mattered - I’ve not even encountered any other animals since I set out this morning, aside from a few birds high up in trees that flit away the moment I make too much noise crashing through the undergrowth.

The only useful thing I’ve managed so far is to heat my skin up to just-hot-enough temperatures to deter mosquitos, so the few bits of skin I’ve left exposed to the elements remain fortunately itch-free. For a while, I’d also tried my hand at floating some flames around in the hopes it might draw my familiar to me, but all that had accomplished was one very close call with a low-hanging branch that led to nearly burning the entire forest down.

Although, the sun’s nearly dipped below the treeline completely, and most of the forest drips in shadows; I’d been immensely proud of myself at containing my nerves throughout the day, but they creep back in as the light drains from my surroundings. It might be worth the risk of razing the entire countryside to the ground to keep safe from any demon animals.

As if conjured by the mere thought, noises prickle at my ears, ones I have no doubt come from the mouths of horrendous beasts hell-bent on devouring me; it’s that first night in the forest all over again, though the fear crawling up my spine has multiplied tenfold now that I’m properly aware of the actual dangers lurking just beyond my field of vision.

But I have my witchcraft this time. I tap into the heat in my chest, the core of fire begging to be released, and keep it balanced right at the edge of my fingertips as I move more slowly through the darkening trees. I can’t tell if the whooshing noises come from my lungs or my heart racing in my ears or from some external source, some demon thing breathing down the back of my neck, ready to clamp its jaws around me and tear me apart.

My pace picks up then, until I’m half-jogging through the undergrowth - I’m certain I can feel something at my heels, pacing, keeping its distance, no doubt to wear me out and run me into the ground. I can handle it, can’t I? Phil wouldn’t have let me go if he didn’t think I could protect myself, right?
Fear makes my foot stumble, catch on the edge of a poorly-placed tree root, and I do exactly as the
demon beast surely had been hoping, crashing hard to the ground in a mess of limbs at odd angles
and shoulders and elbows cracking on the packed dirt. I don’t have to look up to feel the presence
looming over me a moment later, but I do anyway, because if I’m meant to die, I should at least
know the thing that took me down.

I’m met with wide red eyes, bared yellowing teeth, and a hot, stinking breath that sets my stomach
roiling; I expect that to be the end for me, but the thing only sets a mangy paw on my chest - one
that looks far smaller than I honestly expected, and I only realize I’ve been allowing it to pin me
when my slight shift makes the dog-like beast growl and add the whole of its body weight to the
pressure holding me still.

But it’s hardly any pressure at all, and I wiggle just enough to test the situation further - my heart,
still hammering, has managed to calm enough that I can hear low growls echoing from outside my
field of vision. Which sets it to racing again, blocking everything out, and I feel the heat in my
chest aching to expand, to explode, to just get me the fuck out of here.

With the same level of desperation I’d had last night, I hold tight to my energy, willing it to stay
inside just a bit longer, just until-

More sets of red eyes pop into my field of vision, some in pairs, some in more grotesque numbers
that hint at features I’m exceptionally glad I can’t quite make out with the dying light. Just one
more second, I whisper to my energy, begging it to hold out until they’re too close, until I can smell
the rank mix of disgusting, rotting breaths of whatever demon animals think they’ve trapped me.
I’m not trapped, I’m not. I have my energy. I have witchcraft, I can-

Just then, the first demon dog whips its head back toward me, bared teeth snapping close enough to
my throat that I’m afraid I’ve waited too long - without another thought, I release my tight grip on
my energy, letting it burst into the world around me in a wave of flames.

For a moment - or maybe a minute, or maybe longer - my mind goes blank, a white-hot empty
canvas that blinds me completely.

Then it fills in slowly; I get the smell first, something sickly mixed with burning hair and the scent
of meat gone off, then mild waves of warmth lick my skin, almost a comfort, a balm for my
frazzled nerves and nose. Sight returns next, and I’m met with a picture in black: crisped husks
littered around where I’m sat, lines of black reaching out to the charred bark of trees. Black ash
drifts down around me like inverted snow, settling on my skin and-

Fuck...at least nothing’s on fire. Whatever had happened, whatever I’d done, my fire had burnt
everything and put itself out. Or maybe I’d done that, somehow, but I’m not exactly sure. Hard to
tell when there’s pretty much nothing left.

Including my clothes.

Which, to be completely fair, makes a lot of sense given the extent of the damage around me. It
looks like a bomb went off. In a way, it had. Although, in spite of the explosive release of energy, I
can still feel it bubbling under the surface, heightened along with my nerves and demanding an
outlet. It would be so easy to keep burning, just a little longer. To get rid of the corpses, maybe.

Then something heavy and warm lands on my shoulder, and I nearly fly across the clearing - well,
the area I’d cleared - to get away from it. Another demon thing, so soon? It’s not til I’ve whirled
around and fixed a hard gaze on my attacker that I realize it’s not an attacker at all.
“Phil?” I say, although I don’t hear myself say it. Oh. It seems my hearing has yet to recover. I can fix that, though, can’t I?

I let a bit of the energy out, focus as best I can on healing in spite of the way my erratic heart rate has everything shaking.

“...okay? What happened? Oh my god, did something-” Phil’s going on, but an overwhelming wave of relief washes over me at the comfort of hearing his voice, at the depth of his concern, the way it tugs his brows together and keeps his eyes wide.

Before the thought’s even properly formed, my muscles propel me back across the space I’d just made between us and I crash into his chest in a rush. Somehow, he manages to keep us both upright, though we rock precariously before he’s wrapped his arms around my back and pulled me close.

“Please tell me you’re alright,” his voice is a low whisper into my hair, which can’t be very nice to be near given the immense amount of ash dusting everything, but he’s there anyway, holding me against him.

“I’m- there was, like a pack,” I manage to get out, though my throat feels dry and scratchy and I sound like a chain smoker. I swallow thickly at the memory of the bright red eyes, the pale yellow teeth. Somehow, in the moment, adrenaline had taken over and I’d been clear, focused, in control. Now all the residual fear, every ounce of it I should’ve felt at the time, rushes into my chest and threatens to drown me. In an attempt to keep me above water, tears push their way to my eyes, leaking out and leaving cool trails down my cheeks. When I suck in a breath, it’s shuddered and uneven. It takes three tries to properly exhale it.

Phil doesn’t speak, just holds me still, fingers gripping tight against my bare skin.

“Why-” I break off with a cough into his shoulder, then swallow in the hopes to lubricate my throat. “Why do you always find me naked?” I grumble, and Phil exhales a breath that I think is meant to be a laugh but sounds a little too tense. His arms stay wrapped steadfastly around me, and I’m sort of glad for the support. I’m not sure my legs would hold me up right now.

“Come on,” Phil says, already brushing past my sad attempt at a joke, “let’s get you home.” He does pull away now, but not far, just enough that I can make out his eyes - a warm, comforting blue in place of the horrifying red living just outside the edges of my vision, flitting around the corners of my imagination. Wait. No.

“We can’t!” I protest, leaning back further, and Phil’s lips curl down in a frown. “I have to find my familiar, you have to go-” I can already see the argument before it leaves Phil’s lips. “If you don’t leave, I’ll never-”

“I’m not leaving you.” Phil’s voice comes out low and commanding, his brows knit together and lips pursed in the way that I can tell means there’s no way I’d win this fight. Not tonight, anyway.

“We can’t!” I protest, leaning back further, and Phil’s lips curl down in a frown. “I have to find my familiar, you have to go-” I can already see the argument before it leaves Phil’s lips. “If you don’t leave, I’ll never-”

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“Fine, but I don’t want to like…lose my progress?” I can’t help but feel silly saying it, making this whole endeavor sound like a video game, like I’m searching for a checkpoint or waiting for that save icon to pop up so I can shut the game down for the time being. That’s not how real life works. But I don’t want to just...repeat everything I already did, cover the ground I already traveled. Phil’s expression softens, though, and his gaze drifts off to the side.

I follow it, then wish I hadn’t: even though I’ve already seen it, it feels twice as gruesome knowing
Phil’s witness to the disaster scene as well. Why isn’t he terrified of me? His hands never leave my skin, not even as he contemplates my request. Although there’s technically nothing stopping me from staying out here, I’d rather not get in an argument with Phil over it.

“The clearing,” Phil says after a long moment, and my face must show my confusion pretty clearly. “Do you have much energy left?” His head tilts, and I watch his eyes flick behind me. Warmth crawls up my cheeks, a heat that has more to do with shame over my destruction than from the energy coiling in my core.

Instead of responding, I nod, letting my gaze drop to his chest. Where I’ve left black smudges, because of course I’ve tainted Phil with my mess.

As if oblivious to my thoughts - or maybe because of them, as if he could somehow hear - Phil’s hand slides down my back and encourages me in the direction he clearly came from.

“Think you’re up for some transporting?” His voice ends up lighter than before, gentle, and my energy jumps in my chest, excited to have a purpose.

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“Comfy enough, princess?” I ask, even though I’d been the one to suggest transporting the duvet out here - after we’d gotten the essentials covered, including new clothes and some food. I’ve at least got enough common sense not to try to argue for more alone time tonight to search for my familiar. I think I’ve had my fill of being alone for now.

“Wait,” Phil says, adjusting the duvet again, then tugging me down beside him. Once I’m nestled in his arms with his body curled around me, he exhales a slow breath against the back of my neck. “Okay, I am now,” he says, and it’s silly but my heart feels lighter. Because he can’t see my face at this angle, I let a wide grin curl my lips as I stare at the very distant treeline.

Apparently, the clearing we’d landed in when we’d flown - we have to do that again, and soon, I make the mental note - wasn’t too far from where Phil had found me. He’d also helped me set up some wards, and Mellix had joined us not long after, so I’m feeling considerably safer.

“You make me cheesy,” he says, but it comes out like an admission, soft and careful and on the edge of something more. “You make me want to be cheesy.” I’m not entirely sure what I expected—bullshit, I was expecting some grand admission of love. Even though it’s so fast, even though it’s too soon, even though I’m well aware things like this don’t happen to people like me. I don’t get this, I don’t deserve it.

“You won’t leave?” Phil said, and it seems like it comes from nowhere but he sounds too nervous for it to be an offhand comment. Maybe not love, but undoubtedly something. Which is only fair, I don’t know that I’m ready to call it love either.

But it is most definitely something: it’s sparks in my chest and white-hot passion and comfortable
warmth and magma and cooling embers and explosions and-

“Can I show you something?” I ask, the idea barely formed but there, present and needed and I suddenly can’t think of anything else to say, anything that would tell him this clearly.

“Of course,” Phil says, though I can hear the concern laced through his tone. As if what I’m about to do will be...negative. I hope he doesn’t see it that way.

I shift in his arms until I’m facing the sky, dark and dotted with stars when they’re bright enough to peek through the hazy layer of clouds. I nudge Phil until he’s looking up as well.

Then I let my energy loose.
The blueish purple of the sky above us turns into a backdrop for Dan’s energy, painting over it in lights and colors and sparks and soft glows - I almost wish it were static so I could capture it and look at it whenever I wanted, but it’s more beautiful for the fact that it’s changing, evolving, shifting between lines of red flame and exploding miniature fireworks and sparkling, winking spots that mimic the stars, cascading into waves of warm glowing light that mirror northern lights I’ve never seen in anything but pictures. I have no idea when Dan had the time to practice this, or even the idea to do something so needless but so beautiful, but I can’t stop staring.

It continues for maybe a minute, then I’m left with fading spots of light across my vision, a sad echo of the incredible display. Once I’m sure Dan’s finished, I turn toward him, and I know my mouth’s still hung open in awe. Before I can even form a proper thought, he’s letting his gaze drift down, focusing on the space between us.

“That’s how I feel.” He says it resolutely, firm but soft.

“How you feel?” I hate that I have to ask, but I want to understand. I want to know exactly what incredible feeling had prompted that. I want-

“Around you. With you.” He says, and his voice comes out even softer, if that’s possible. Me?

My brain wars with my heart, a litany of ‘of course that’s not possible’ against a steadfast chant of ‘he feels like that, I make him feel like that’. I manage to breathe, though I’m not entirely sure how, then I lift a slightly shaky hand to tilt his chin up.

“Really?” I ask once he’s locked eyes with me; wide, warm brown stares back, a perfect match for the mess of hair on his head. On a whim, maybe the same one from this morning, I let my fingers trail up the side of his cheek and card through his curls. He nods into my touch, and the simple movement sends my heart soaring.

“I’m not leaving.” He adds. I don’t know if I needed to hear it, not after seeing the fireworks display, but I smile at him anyway.

I don’t recall falling asleep, but waking up is a completely different story that involves what I’m certain is an earthquake until I open my eyes to find Dan staring back at me, hand still on my shoulder from where he’d been shaking me and a bright grin on his face that puts the sun to shame and carves a dimple in his cheek.

“Phil! Wake up!” He’s practically shouting, and it’s far too loud for however early it is, because everything has an orangey-pink tone to it, but it’s Dan asking. I shift up on an elbow, suppressing a yawn and offering what I hope is a sufficiently enthusiastic hum.

It’s not til Dan turns, looks over his shoulder, that I notice Mellix sat up with his wide yellow eyes crossed in an attempt to focus on the hawk settled on his head. My brows arch up my forehead, mostly from shock - a bird like that, Mellix might hunt for sport, but the thing seems completely relaxed, and Mellix looks nothing other than mildly confused.

“Dan, what’s-” I barely get the words out before the hawk whips its head round to focus on me, a brownish-yellow gaze that makes me freeze, makes me feel the need to hold incredibly still in case it’s intent on attacking. That beak looks menacing, and I don’t doubt the claws settled loosely on
Mellix’s head could rip into me with minimal effort.

“Phil,” Dan says, and I keep my head motionless as I shift my gaze back - he’s just grinning at me, leaned back on both elbows, glancing between me and the bird. The- oh.

“Is that…?” I trail off, voice soft both for reverence of the moment and so I don’t startle the hawk. Mellix, though, seems perfectly content to stare at the bird on his head - I don’t get the slightest sense of fear or annoyance from him through our bond.

“Darby,” Dan breathes out the name in a way that confirms everything I’d been wondering. I let my face mirror his, let my excitement show by way of a slow grin; I’m still a bit wary of the intense glare coming from the bird - from Darby but surely if it’s really Dan’s familiar, he wouldn’t let it hurt me, right?

“Darby,” I repeat the name, “he- she?”

“She.” I nod at the information.

“She’s lovely, did she just...show up?” I ask, trying not to flinch when the hawk spreads her wings just a bit, shakes them out behind her before folding them back in. Something seems to have distracted her, her gaze focused on the distant treeline.

“Landed on my chest this morning,” Dan laughs through the words, offering a fond look at the bird. Darby, for her part, must feel his attention - she turns back, then tilts her head for a moment before launching off Mellix’s head to land on the ground beside Dan. He reaches out, offering his hand for her, and she nuzzles into it briefly before hopping around behind the pillow. I try to turn to keep up, but a wing brushes the back of my head and it startles me; I flinch away unintentionally, which earns me a snort of laughter from Dan.

“She won’t like, hurt you,” he clarifies, as if I didn’t know.

“She just surprised me!” I argue, briefly aware of how the tables have turned. *Mellix wouldn’t hurt Dan, I have to trust Darby won’t hurt me, sharp beak and talons or not*. I hold still as Darby inches closer, arches her neck toward me, tilts her head to the side, back and forth a few times.

Unexpectedly, she pokes her beak into the side of my head before flapping and hopping back several feet, and Dan bursts out in a fit of laughter that leaves him curling into the duvet and against my chest.

“She’s-” he chuckles, trying to get the words out, “she, she was listening to Mellix, and-” he breaks off again, nearly wheezing into the space between us, “she was getting you back for what Mellix did when we first met.” He finally finishes, glancing up at me with a grin so big it leaves crinkles at the corners of his eyes; before I realize it, I’m right there with him, a bubble of laughter building up in my chest and forcing its way out my lips.

We both end up back on the pillow, giggling more or less at each other in fits and spurts - just when I think we’ve settled, Dan will start up again, sputtering out a laugh he’d clearly been trying to hold in, then we’re lost again for a minute or two. It’s not til Mellix towers over our heads that I remember we’re still very much out in the middle of the forest. *And we don’t have to be.*

“We should head home?” I ask once the laughter has died down again, once I’m fairly certain it won’t be bubbling up this time; there’s still that spark, though, hiding just behind Dan’s eyes, that speaks of...well, I’m not exactly sure. Maybe happiness, real genuine happiness, but that hurts my heart a bit, to think he wasn’t really happy with just me. That it took finding Darby to be happy.
But would I be truly happy without Mellix? I send a wave of love and gratitude down our bond. No, I wouldn’t be. Because he and Dan are two different parts of my life that make it worthwhile. And Darby is just a different piece of Dan’s life. I give a genuine grin when Dan nods, one that matches the bright smile on his lips.

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It’s not til we’re nearly back - I can just see Susan through the trees, if I stare really hard - that I finally let myself ask the question that’s been floating around my head all morning.

“How do you feel?” It comes out on a breath, and I’m not entirely sure why it’s a tough question to ask but I’ve never known someone who’s only just found their familiar. It hadn’t been a big deal for me, but I’d been a child, I don’t think I had the maturity to process how different it must’ve felt. And Dan had been so stressed about finding his, so surely he must be relieved? Or excited, if this morning has been anything to go by? First the wake-up call, then the fact that he’s been practically bouncing on his toes the whole way home, but he’s hardly said a word the entire time.

Dan slips his hand into mine, and it makes my steps slow, makes me turn; he’s grinning at me, but it’s a soft kind of grin, one full of contentment.

“I’m good, Phil, like really good.” He squeezes my hand, then I’m distracted as Mellix races past us. A gust of wind over my head startles me, and I crane my neck back just in time to see Darby swooping down, catching herself just short of the ground and gliding along, keeping pace with the wolf. They both reach the house well before us, heading around the side and back into the garden. Show her around? I suggest, and there’s a bright, excited feeling back down the bond.

Dan chuckles beside me, grip looser in mine now, and I turn to find him watching the spot where the familiars have disappeared around the back.

“Mellix is giving Darby the grand tour?” He tilts his head at me, brows arched up his forehead and disbelieving smirk on his lips. I nod, though I can feel my face scrunching up in confusion. “I just- I can hear her,” Dan shakes his head, dismissing my look, and my expression softens. This must all be so new, having that level of communication with a familiar is probably strange to get used to.

“I know it’s pretty different, but you’ll work things out with her,” I offer, trying to channel any of PJ’s teaching practices here. Not that he’d ever been particularly helpful when it came to familiars, given, well, Sophie. I let our hands fall apart as we reach the front steps, and the door drifts open for us.

“Thanks, Susan. And no,” Dan beats me to my usual expression of gratitude and plows right through the door and into his next thought. “It’s not that, I’m just- I don’t know, I didn’t know what it would feel like, but it’s...good?” He pauses in the middle of the lounge, like he’d thought maybe to sit on the sofa but changed his mind at the last second.

“It’s like…” he turns until he’s facing me, head tilted and lips pursed. Then his gaze drifts around the space, slowly, like he’s trying to take it all in. Again, the worst parts of my brain want to insist he’s committing the house to memory, that he’s taking a final look before he walks out the door - now that he has Darby - but fireworks flash behind my eyes, so I take a deep breath and exhale as I watch him.

Finally, after what feels like ages, his eyes stop their wandering and land on me; the intensity there - flickering flames that put his witchcraft to shame - makes me want to suck in that breath I’d just let out, makes me want to inhale every bit of fire he has to offer until it suffocates me. I’ve no idea where the feeling comes from, but it’s suddenly overwhelming me, dragging me a step forward,
then two, until I’m stood right in front of Dan.

This close, it’s hard to imagine I thought for even a second he’d be leaving me: the moment I’m in range, his hand drifts up, finds my chest and slides slowly toward my neck. His gaze follows, warm and heavy, and I can’t tell if it’s his witchcraft or just our body heat and the exercise of walking back here catching up with us.

I decide it must be the latter - really, an incredibly important thing for my mind to be focused on right now - when Dan’s hand finds the back of my neck, drawing me close; somewhere in my head, I register the fact that his fingers feel no more than slightly warm, but then his lips have found mine and that ends up overtaking every other thought in a matter of seconds.
The second I’m faced with explaining how I feel - that I feel complete, that I feel like I’ve found a home, that I feel connected and cared about and maybe even loved - it simultaneously feels silly and like far too much, too intimate, too significant to put into proper words.

So when Phil’s gaze turns just a little darker, just a little deeper, I run with it; these are the kind of words I can save for later, the kind that won’t be changing. They don’t have to be said now, not when they’re still so fresh.

I let the feeling of Phil pressed against me push them aside for now, shove them back into a corner of my mind where - for the time being - I’ve also sequestered my link with Darby. She doesn’t need a front row seat to this, and I think Mellix will keep her well distracted.

The whole familiar thing isn’t at all like what I expected - I can’t quite speak to Darby, but our thread of emotions seems to function a bit like a phone, where I can reach her and vice versa if we want. I’d spent the entire walk back testing that connection, learning the boundaries and the limits.

“Dan,” Phil breathes against my lips, hands sliding down my back so he can lean away just slightly, and it brings everything back into sharp focus - Phil’s eyes, wide and blue, watching me. Brows arched just slightly, a lighter color than his hair that’s been pushed back in a messy and kind of sweaty quiff on his forehead; I can’t blame him, especially given I’m probably no better - our walk back had been long and warm under the unexpectedly clear sky.

I stay silent for a moment, watching his expression, trying to decipher what exactly he’d been hinting- fuck. The thought comes as soon as I begin wondering, and I’m immediately checking my core for the inevitable layers of heat I’m releasing into the air around us.

Except…

“Phil, I’m not- it’s-” I can’t even form a coherent sentence because a grin spreads across my face and fuck, today is just a really fucking great day, isn’t it?

“You’re-” Phil breaks off as well, brows scrunching, but he must be on the same track as I am - a moment later, his eyes go wide, and the brightness in his smile rivals mine - hell, it rivals the damn sun. “You’re not- it’s not hot?” He says it like a question, even though it’s really more an observation, but I nod anyway; excitement bubbles up in my chest, threatening to spill out, but fuck, for once, my witchcraft seems to remain below the surface, calm and moderately cool.

“Bea was right,” Phil mutters under his breath, and I can’t tell if he’s pleased by that fact or bothered, but it doesn’t really matter.

“Bea was fucking right, Phil, and I am taking full fucking advantage.” Before he can get another word in, I grab his hand and drag him toward the stairs because there’s no way in hell we’re continuing this on a damn sofa. No, if we can go all fucking out, we damn well will.

“You’re- you’re in control?” Phil stumbles over the words as he trips up a step, but I pause long enough to let him catch himself, to offer a smirk over my shoulder when he glances up.

“My witchcraft? Absolutely. Everything else?” I leave that one open-ended, letting the silence fill with all the tantalizing possibilities as I push through the door and into the bedroom.

He doesn’t miss a beat; I’ve barely turned to face him, just a step away from the bed, when he’s
pushing me back and onto the duvet, his weight settling on my hips and pressing me into the mattress.

“Completely?” He asks, evidently still stuck on my witchcraft, but I just nod and reach up behind his neck to pull him down, threading my fingers through his hair as he rests his chest on mine, as our mouths slide together; and then my teeth clack against his because fuck I can’t stop grinning - my fucking witchcraft is staying under control.

Granted, it’s not like we’ve gone and really put it to the test, but…

I let my hands slide down across the planes of his back, searching for the hem of his shirt, but he disappears before I can find it - or, rather, his lips disappear. Well. They don’t disappear, but they’re suddenly gone from my mouth, trailing warmth down my throat, placing light kisses until they’re not so light, until they turn hot and wet and teeth nip at the skin there, followed by the soft swipe of Phil’s tongue and fuck my breaths come out hard and fast.

“Even when I do this?” Phil’s lips move against my skin, and I almost forget there was sort of a conversation going on. Which had been…right, my witchcraft. The witchcraft that still sits calmly below the surface, but it takes all of half a second to tap into it, to draw heat to the tip of my finger.

“Even when- yeah,” I exhale a shaky breath the moment his teeth find my neck again. “Yeah,” I manage to repeat, “totally under control.” Then I trail a too-hot finger against the skin just at the waistband of his jeans. “Unless you’d rather I wasn’t?” I offer, and he hums against my throat - I can’t quite tell if it’s a yes or no or something in between, and I’m about to ask when he shifts up until he’s hovering just over me, lips less than an inch away from mine.

“What do you want?” He asks, voice low and a little gravelly, and the tone goes straight to my cock - I’m sure he can tell, the way he’s pressed against me, but frankly I just want him right now, in whatever way.

Regardless, though, his words make me pause. What do I want? I want him, but I know that’s not what he meant. I wiggle under him, a little unsure - the last few times, I’d asked and gotten exactly what I wanted.

“What do you want?” I counter - he deserves to enjoy this as well, especially now we clearly don’t have to worry about my witchcraft getting in the way. I watch carefully as he tilts his head, and then- is he blushing? A dusting of pink colors his cheeks and his gaze drifts to the side, and I know the duvet isn’t so interesting it’s captured his attention this thoroughly.

A feeling surges up in my chest, one I can’t quite put a name to but that overwhelms me nonetheless, and I use the sudden burst of desire or need or energy or whatever to push Phil off me, to switch our positions and get him underneath me. To make him look, because I need him to hear this and properly understand.

“You can ask for anything.” I keep myself pressed against him, as close as I can be so he can still see me, can still watch my face and know how much I mean this. “You asked what I want, I want you to feel good. I want to make you feel good. As good as you make me feel,” and now I can feel warmth crawling up my cheeks because I just said that, and my voice came out low and maybe a little too needy, but I suppose he knows.

Except he’s just staring at me now, wide blue eyes unblinking as he inhales; his chest presses harder against mine for a moment, then warm breath hits my lips. I’m almost tempted to close the distance between us and pretend this conversation never happened, just let us get on with it and see where things go. Communication is important, but it always starts off awkward.
“You told me I can ask for anything,” I remind him, after he’s still not spoken. But he keeps twisting his lips, opening his mouth just the slightest, and I can tell there’s something. “Don’t act like the inverse isn’t true as well,” I smirk at the way he drops his head back; but he’s smiling, just a little, and I think I may have won this one. And my stomach swoops when he finally does open his mouth, when I can see he’s actually going to ask. Because fuck I really want to do something specifically for him.

“It’s- I mean, only if you want, but-” Phil stumbles through the first few words, then stops entirely; I settle myself on an elbow beside his head, quirking a brow - I’m hoping it comes across more as ‘I told you, ask for anything’ and not as genuinely annoyed. I just want the same lightness we’d had earlier, the same comfort.

“I want to know what you want,” I reassure him, aiming for a tone between serious and casual, “but we can talk about it another time if you’d rather?” The last thing I want to do is make him feel pressured to tell me.

Instead, I let my fingers slide down his sides, slide them just under his shirt and let them lay flat at his hips, his skin warm against my fingers for once. I let my gaze drag down from his mouth to his chest, taking my time to appreciate every feature along the way: the curve of his lips, the way they fit perfectly above the line of his jaw, the smooth skin of his neck, begging me to suck and bite at it, begging me to leave reminders of whatever direction tonight goes. I swipe my tongue across my lips, already thinking of all the ways I might elicit more words from him - the way he’d been talking the other night, fuck it’d gotten to me.

I’m so drawn in by memories and the prospect of what might be that I entirely forget I’ve asked Phil a question, so his low voice nearly makes me jump.

“Would you mind, like...if, if you were, uh, the one who-” my brows quirk up the moment I realize what he’s asking, and I blow out an amused breath against his lips.

“Phil, I would love to fuck you, if that’s what you’re asking.” Even just saying the words aloud sends a spark of heat straight to my cock, and my hips shift down of their own accord, apparently already imagining exactly how amazing that’d feel. Sure, most of my hookups I’ve wanted to bottom, but fuck if I don’t want everything with Phil.

“You- uh, I- yeah?” Phil’s voice comes out soft and a little surprised, and a smirk curls my lips; his brows have arched up his forehead, and his fingers tap out a nervous rhythm where they’d been resting on my back. “You- I mean, you want that?” I huff out a breath of laughter, then lean in close, right beside his ear.

“You have no idea.”
Phil

My breath hitches at his words in my ear, low and husky and full of promise, and my cock strains against my jeans - it's not like I've never bottomed before, but the way Dan had acted, it seemed like he just...wanted to, preferred it, and-

My mind goes completely blank then, when his lips move just under my ear to suck at the skin there; then his hips grind down into mine, a rough friction that isn't nearly enough for what I need, but I match his movements anyway. My hands slide up his sides, rucking up his shirt until I can dig my fingers into his back, keep him close against me.

A part of me wants to hang onto the nerves of asking for this, wants to wonder if Dan really wants it, if I'm being self-centered or selfish or inconsiderate, but he works his way down my neck to suck at the spot just at the edge of my shirt collar and I suck in a breath, far more focused on that than on whatever nonsense wants to run through my head right now.

Dan pulls back, then - not hard, but enough that I'm quick to let him go - and I watch his movement as he scoots down the bed, just until he's got clear access to the button on my jeans, until he can undo it and slowly peel them down my thighs, and I'm not entirely sure when it started but my breathing has gone fast to match my heart rate; my chest feels like it's got a cage full of butterflies begging to be let out.

He glances up, then, dark brown eyes peeking through even darker lashes, and I let my hands - the ones that never really left him, and I wonder for a moment if that's a bit possessive of me to not want to lose contact - slide up his neck and into the soft curls of his hair. He leans into the touch, eyes drifting shut just for a moment, and I'm reminded briefly of a cat. Until his lip curls up in a smirk and his fingers pull the waistband of my pants down to my knees and I'm almost a bit chilly in spite of the ambient warmth still radiating from us both. Although, there could be a bit more of that warmth...

"Could you- ah-" and then I'm hissing out a breath because Dan's tongue has found the end of my cock, swirling around the head and making me squirm beneath him. And then the wet warmth disappears a moment later, replaced by a much softer, more torturous warmth as Dan lets a breath out against the sensitive skin there.

"Could I?" He repeats, taunting laced through his tone and brows quirked up, and he tilts his head so his cheek rests right against my thigh; the image right there, of him so close, propped up between my legs like that with flushed cheeks and dark lips and a tongue that flicks out to lick them, it's almost too much - it's certainly enough to make me forget what exactly I'd wanted to ask to begin with.

There's a lull of silence as I really really try my best to remember, but Dan's just so damn distracting, running his fingers up the insides of my thigh, sending shivers across my skin and alternating between hungry-looking glances at my cock and even hungrier-looking ones back up at me. It's not til warmth starts to wind tight in my stomach that I realize he's not just tracing patterns on my skin, he's adding his witchcraft to them as well.

His fingers aren't painful, not really, but they're hot and the added sensation is more than enough to make my cock twitch against my stomach.

"Do that?" Dan practically whispers, his lips pressed lightly against the skin of my hip, but I can still see them curled up in a smile. Until I manage to shake my head, exhale a breath, and grab one
or two of my coherent thoughts and piece them together. Then he's tugged those lips down.

"No- I mean, that's, it's good, I just- could you just warm us up? More? And uh, I'd really like, uh..." I can't decide how to phrase it, that I want his fingers inside me already - I'm not usually needy, and certainly not the way he is, where he's so vocal about it, so this all feels a bit strange and uncomfortable. Not bad uncomfortable, just different, and I'm having trouble getting used to it. But I don't have to be used to it yet, we have time.

My eyes flick to the bedside drawer, where the bottle of lube awaits, and I must not be very subtle about it; in the span of two seconds, the air shifts around us and heats up just slightly, and then Dan's crawling over to tug the drawer open and rummage around inside. I twist my lips, unsure if the smile that's begging to be there comes from a place of nerves or of appreciation. Probably a little of both.

As soon as Dan's sat back between my legs, fingers poised to open the bottle, he stops dead in his tracks and stares hard at me - it's not the same bedroom-eyes stare he'd given two minutes ago, nor any kind of stare I think I've seen him give me before, it's something narrow and calculating, and maybe I'm just a little nervous because it sets my heart racing in all the wrong ways.

"Dan, are you-" I barely get the words out before my shirt disappears. Or, rather, it doesn't quite disappear altogether, but it definitely disappears from my body and pops back into existence over by the wardrobe. Then my jeans and pants follow suit a moment later, and I'm left fully naked on the bed under Dan, who's apparently a master of transporting things now. My eyebrows arch up my forehead and I think my mouth ends up wide open - I suppose it shouldn't be, I shouldn't be so surprised by his witchcraft by now, but I am. And frankly, I hope he continues to surprise me.

"Sorry, was that- I should've asked first, I didn't..." Dan's lips twist and he drops his gaze to my chest, then his words trail off as his eyes drift lower. A tiny little piece of my brain wants to squirm under his sudden stare, not to mention I'm completely naked and he's still fully dressed, but...

"Don't be, that was actually...kind of hot," I admit, which earns me a smirk as Dan glances back up. Then he's dragging his fingers down my chest, and those are definitely hot, and I can feel the pun coming before he even says it.

"Hotter than this?" He asks, and I sputter out a laugh and drop my head back to stare at the ceiling for a moment - because I actually might need a second to compose myself, or I'll be way too close to the edge before we even get anywhere. I can hear Dan giggling down by my legs, but his fingers pause and cool to a more regular temperature without my having to properly ask.

And then he's laid down on top of me, chest pressed against mine - and bare, it seems he had no problem discarding his own clothes in the few seconds I hadn't been watching - and his lips capture mine in a soft but undoubtedly hungry kiss.

We manage that for all of three seconds before my hips grind up into his, before his hands find my sides to hold me against him, before we're both panting and a little sweaty and way too hard to not be doing something about it.

"Are you- do you still want-" Dan sort of asks against my lips, and I manage a nod.

"But only if you do! We don't have to, it's totally fine-"

"Phil," Dan says in that voice, the one I'm coming to find is always accompanied by a tilted head, a quirked brow, a soft half-smile. "If you want to, I want to. And I'd at least like to try before making up my mind?" He says the last bit like a question, but I suppose he has a point - hard to say what
he'll like without trying. I certainly wouldn't have managed to guess what exactly I'd be into...

I nod and twist my lips into something that I hope doesn't show I'm too excited, because I don't want him to feel bad if he doesn't like it, or if- well, I don't want him to feel bad. I want whatever we do together to be good for us both, so if this isn't, that's okay. It's not like I wouldn't be more than happy sticking to everything else we've done so far.

"Okay," Dan nods as well, sitting back up and fumbling around the bed - I assume to search for the lube, though I hadn't even realized he'd discarded it. The pop of the cap once he's found it makes me suck in a breath, though it's more from anticipation than anything else, and I reach down to stroke my cock just to take the edge off.

Dan's eyes finally meet mine again once he's coated his fingers, and his eyebrows lift just a bit. "Yeah, go ahead," I nod again at his silent question, shifting my hips just slightly to give him better access; fear and excitement swirl in my stomach alongside my arousal - I'm not exactly flexible, or sexually active, and it's been a while since I bothered doing this myself, but I recall liking it quite a-

"Fuck," the word slips from my tongue before I can stop it, and that's my reaction from just from the single finger Dan slides in? It's warm and unexpected - even though I should've probably expected it - and I let my eyes drift shut, focusing on the slow, slick drag as he pumps his finger in and out. It's not exactly how I recall it feeling, but it has been a while, and I'm definitely not complaining.

For a moment, I lose myself in the sensation, then Dan adds another finger and the ache and stretch and fullness make me suck in a breath, make me fist my hands into the sheets beside me; it's all I can do to keep my hips still, because god do I want to fuck onto Dan's fingers, to feel him deeper inside me, but I also want to hold onto some measure of control.

And then - and again, I can't imagine why I didn't expect it - he curls those fingers during one slow thrust, and it sparks fireworks behind my eyelids. Coincidentally, they look quite similar to the ones he'd showed me last night, although these come with a low moan from the back of my throat and a soft exhale from Dan that sounds suspiciously like laughter.

I hold my breath for a moment, waiting for Dan to hit that spot again, but the next several times he seems to be purposely avoiding it, and I manage to squint my eyes open at him.

"You stopped," I note - although it admittedly comes out like more of a grumble, and Dan just smirks as he slides a third finger in; this time, the stretch makes me wince for a moment before it turns into the same sort of delicious burn as before - the same kind as Dan's witchcraft-hot fingers running over my skin - so I sort of forget what all I'd been bothered by to begin with.

There's a length of time I don't quite remember, then, because all I can think about is Dan inside me and how good that feels, how badly I want more, deeper and fuller and maybe a bit rougher, and I'm starting to see why Dan was always so bothered with me taking it slow and careful.

"Think you're ready," Dan says, his voice low and a bit distracted - it's not til his fingers slide out of me entirely, leave me clenching around nothing, that I whine a bit and look back down at him.

His lips have parted just slightly, dark and full, and I watch the bob of his throat as he swallows; his gaze drifts up slowly, raking over my skin in a way that I can practically feel, and I wonder if he hasn't put some witchcraft behind it to give that effect. But then it's gone because his eyes have locked with mine, and I can't decide if I want him to keep staring like that, with how it's got my heart racing, or if I want him to just hurry up and fuck me already.
He seems to decide on the latter, breaking the weighted stillness of the moment and reaching a hand over to where he'd tossed the lube. He coats his own cock, already leaking at the tip, and the movement of his hand slowly stroking himself is mesmerizing; it's only once he stops that I glance back up to find his brows quirked again, that silent question.

"Please," I manage to choke out, completely unaware until that exact moment how badly I need him inside me. His lips curl up in a grin.
Dan

He looks incredible like this, spread out beneath me and actually begging - it's not something I'd ever really imagined wanting, but the view is intoxicating: pale skin full of soft pink marks where I'd sucked a bit hard, where I'd left the slightest traces from witchcraft-warm fingertips, the slightly-too-fast rise and fall of Phil's chest, wide blue eyes full of anticipation, his cock twitching heavily against his stomach.

I'm starting to see the appeal of topping, at least in the case of Phil.

A twinge thrums in my chest at the thought, because would there be anyone aside from Phil? There has been, but I don't even like the concept of someone else. Especially not whilst lining myself up with his entrance, glancing up one last time to make sure he's alright, that he really wants this. God, even just the fucking slight pressure of my head against his ass is enough to make me bite back a moan, I can't even begin to imagine how it's going to feel inside him.

He'd been tight, too, like it's been a while tight, yet another reason for my final check; Phil, for his part, actually rolls his eyes at me before muttering that I ought to get on with it, and I push forward and sink into him slowly, careful to watch for any sign of obvious discomfort.

Although, would he be into that enough that it'd be hard to tell?

I slow my pace to something glacial, forcing my hips not to move until I'm absolutely sure Phil will cuss me out otherwise - we fall into a pattern where I shift forward just slightly, Phil sucks in a breath and holds it for a moment, then lets it out slowly. And then, when I refuse to take the implied signal that he's alright and I can move again - I'm being overly cautious, okay - he frowns at me and parts his lips like he's about to say something, and I take that opportunity to sink just a little deeper. Which shuts him up, he sucks in a breath, and the cycle repeats.

My lungs ache from holding my breath and my arms ache from holding myself up by the time I've bottomed out, but it's completely worth it, both for Phil's safety and the blissed-out look on his face after so many breathless gasps and sort-of-adorable pouts; I hadn't realized he'd be this into it, and a part of me wants to taunt that it only gets better from here, but I'm sort of short on words myself.

Honestly, I didn't expect I'd be this into it, either; Phil's tight and hot around me, clenching every so often and sending a spark of arousal straight to my core - I doubt we could've done this with my witchcraft out of control, given how I can barely think straight right now, let alone attempt to reign in my energy.

"You- ah, you can move, if you- if you want," Phil manages to get out, shifting under me, and I have to suck in a breath at the way he moves, at the slight drag, though I'm barely capable of handling just the feeling of him around me.

"I really fucking want, yeah," I exhale the words, too overwhelmed to think of a proper sarcastic comeback; I move slowly, both to properly appreciate the feeling of Phil and to watch his expression, to see that moment he bites his lip, leans back into the pillow he's resting on - I know that feeling, and I know how it feels with him, and fuck I'm sort of wishing there were two of him just so I could have both at once.

Alright, get your head - quite literally - out of your ass, you can think about the logistics of that another time.
Instead, I focus on another slow thrust, on working Phil up to a comfortable rhythm, and generally on trying to maintain any semblance of control - well, non-witchcraft control. My energy's still staying firmly in place, though my grip on my arousal is slipping and falling dangerously close to the edge. And it's far too early for that.

It's not til Phil starts rocking his hips back into me that I slow - and not to be a complete asshole either, just because, well, I know.

"Wait, wait, hold on," I use one hand to grip the sweat-sticky skin of his hip, holding him still. Which earns me wide eyes and a frown.

"Just cause I didn't know you liked it rough doesn't mean you have to tease- shhhh- shit," his muscles clench under my hand as I shift his leg up just slightly, as I push myself deeper in to shut him up.

And then I hold very, very still.

"If I wanted to be a tease," I keep my voice low, lean into him until my lips brush his ear. "I'd have you begging for me in a matter of minutes." I say as if I've had any experience with that kind of thing, as if one word from him wouldn't make me fall to my knees and do anything he asked. But it sounds quite sexy if I pretend I've got some control here, I think, so I stick with it.

I don't release my grip on his leg, and I do my best to keep his shoulders pinned with my other hand and my chest, then work my way from his neck down to his collarbone, nipping at the skin and laving over it with my tongue. Admittedly, I would really fucking like to move, but that would ruin the anticipation, and I'm quite enjoying the way Phil shivers under me. Because of me.

After a few very long moments full of hot breaths and tense, aching muscles, Phil's hands finally thread up into my hair, and he pulls me back up to his mouth with a soft tug.

"You said," he whispers against my lips, and it's taking every ounce of self control I have not to move my hips, not to pull back and thrust into him, find that exact spot I'd found before, the one I know will leave him panting and squirming and desperate. "Whatever I wanted," he captures my mouth with his, a sloppy, wet kiss that neither of us cares to refine because we're both clearly needy as fuck right now.

And, to be fair, he's entirely right - I did say that, or something like it, I can't even properly recall right now, but I smile against his lips and do exactly what he wants, thrusting hard and fast and relishing in the way he throws his head back, lets out a groan that sounds suspiciously like my name.

Really, that's all it takes, and then I'm pounding into him at a pace far too fast for either of us but I can't be bothered to go any slower; I know I'm likely chewing a hole in my lip trying to hold back the noises that want to force their way up my throat, but I'd much rather hear the breathy sounds Phil's making, low but loud in the relative silence of the room.

And then his hand finds the back of my neck again, tugging me down to him, and I can't decide if the angle is better or worse, but he's humming into my lips with each thrust, his fingers digging into my skin and holding me as close as physically possible, and I think there's probably not much that can compare to this.

Everywhere we're touching, my skin feels like it's caught fire - not in any concerning way, fortunately - and I end up panting and moaning into his mouth as the coil in my stomach tightens, as the feeling of Phil everywhere drags me right to the edge. I think Phil's saying something into
my lips, but I can't tell what it is and he doesn't seem to care; his hands wind up into my hair again, like he's searching for something to hold onto, and frankly I can't blame him - my fingers tighten in the pillowcase beside his head as my thrusts turn erratic and desperate. As if I wasn't already desperate to begin with.

"C-close," Phil manages to stutter into my ear as I drop my head to his shoulder, so fucking close to my own release but now I need Phil to come first, I need him- oh, and I'm a fucking idiot. My free hand, the one no longer occupied by holding me over him, slides between us to grip his neglected cock. And I barely have to pay it any attention before he's tensing up, before he leans forward with a strangled sound and actually bites into my shoulder as he comes - the feeling takes me totally off guard, not quite pleasure but not pain either, and I end up following him right over the edge.

It takes longer than I expect to come down from the high, to properly collapse into Phil and get my heart rate and breathing back to something in the realm of normal. It takes even longer to realize Phil's hand has found my back, drifting up and down the sticky skin in slow movements. It's almost calming enough to warrant falling asleep, except I'm still inside Phil and we're both covered in cum.

And just like every other time, it takes an almost nonexistent effort to tap into my witchcraft, to summon the energy to clean us up, and I pull out of Phil slowly, looking up from where I've been resting on his chest to watch his reaction.

He stares back at me with a heavy, tired gaze, and his expression scrunches up just slightly when I've left him empty.

"Good?" I ask, brows lifting up partly in question and partly in surprise at how scratchy my throat feels; I don't recall being particularly loud, but then, I don't recall a whole lot aside from the sensation of being inside Phil and, well, Phil. Although now I've had the thought, I'm starting to feel an ache in my arms from keeping myself propped over him, so I let myself collapse back down and into the space between his arm and his side.

Instead of a response, he just lets out a soft breath, and I squint at him from my new vantage point; he's staring up at the ceiling, but I think his lip has curled up in a grin, or at least I hope that's what it is.

"Good." He agrees with a nod, though he bites his lip and doesn't look over. "For you?" Still staring at the ceiling. I reach my hand up to tug at his chin, to force him to make eye contact. Which he seems to be avoiding. I wait for a purposeful second once I've gotten him properly focused on me.

"Really good," I keep my eyes wide as long as I'm able, until his hesitant half-smile turns into a proper one. "If you want," I tilt my head, "we should definitely do it again sometime." And then he's fucking beaming, which for some reason makes me giggle, and then he's giggling as well, doing that absurdly adorable biting-his-tongue thing, and we're both just sort of squished against each other, a little sweaty and worn out and giggling like two idiots in love. Which, I suppose, we sort of are. If 'love' is the kind of word we want to use, and if it's a word we want to use right now, I have no idea. Maybe I'm just in a sappy, post-coital state, but I don't really give a fuck and Phil doesn't seem to either.

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I really don't recall us falling asleep, especially given it was the middle of the fucking day, but it seems we did and it seems we - or, at least, I - don't wake up until the sun's already set. Phil, if his deep, slow breathing and relaxed features are anything to go by, is still asleep, so I let my eyes drift
shut and try to sync my breaths with his.

Until a tiny little sensation tugs at the back of my mind and refuses to let me focus on unfocusing and falling back asleep.

The unfamiliar feeling takes a few seconds to place, and then a grin curls my lips as I press my face into Phil's shoulder - although, it's hard to be really immensely happy when the reasons for being so damn happy are either asleep or outside the door and waiting to be let in. But I get the feeling I can remedy both those unfortunate circumstances pretty easily.

"Susan," I mumble, and I don't even have to ask before I can hear the door creaking open and the muffled clicking of claws on wood. I have to squish my lips together to hide my grin when the bed dips under Mellix's weight as he climbs over and plops down at Phil's feet, Darby balanced on his head; she flaps her wings once, and there's something like a sense of content that drifts over through our bond, and I send her a silent agreement.

"Ow, ow, ow, Mellix, who- oh, Dan?" Phil's mumbling beside me, and I turn to find him bleary-eyed and squinting at me, then glancing over to the wolf and hawk at the end of the bed. "Oh." He says again, but softer and with a smile as he tucks his head into the space beside mine, like ‘oh, it's you. I've missed you. It's all of you, it's my family.’
"Dan, I know you're trying to impress PJ but you don't have to go through every outfit in your closet, just pick something, we're already late!" I can't believe Dan's still trying to decide after nearly an hour of locking himself in our room and switching between different shirts with slightly varying shades of black, some with a pattern and some without. Although, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised after nearly a month of this any time we go anywhere.

And, though I won't exactly admit it to his face - because then I lose all the fun of teasing him for it - I sort of adore how seriously he takes his clothing choices. And how un-seriously he takes them when we have a lazy day in together, sweatpants and jumpers that neither of us bothers to ensure are matching.

"Okay but if this isn't good, you have to tell me," Dan calls through the door, as if he's under some silly impression I won't think he looks amazing, regardless of what he's wearing.

"You know I will," I lie. Partly because we're definitely gonna be late, especially if he thinks he's got to change again. Fortunately, this seems to be enough to get him to pull the door open, to step out with his lips pressed together and his eyes on the floor. I don't know if I'll ever get used to the rare occasions when he's not obviously comfortable around me, or if those times will disappear altogether, but for now, I give him my best attempt at an appraisal.

"You look incredible." And that isn't even remotely a lie - he's in head-to-toe black, which isn't a surprise in the slightest, but he's wearing classy basic black boots and his jeans cling to his legs all the way up to where they disappear under the hem of an untucked black button down - this, at least, has some pops of color in the form of tiny red roses dotted throughout the material.

I let my gaze drift up from the collar of his shirt to his face, where his cheeks have tinted to match the rosy accent.

"Yeah, alright," he mumbles at the ground, "let's go then, and can you just make sure they're all..." Dan gestures at his shirt as he steps closer, until I can run my fingers across the material - the roses had been his idea, after I'd complained about the lack of color anywhere in his wardrobe; they're actually living accents, embedded with my witchcraft and kept blooming and healthy by his energy. But he doesn't seem to trust himself with them, and every time he decides to wear the shirt he asks me to make sure they're all alive. As if he needs any help in the witchcraft department anymore these days.

But I'll take any excuse to run my fingers over his chest, twist my lips and pretend it's taking an incredibly long time to assess the vitality of each of the many tiny roses.

"Phil, come on, you said we're running late!" Dan's frowning when I look up, though he makes no move to push me away or move past me and head downstairs. And his cheeks are still decidedly pink, so I lean in and press a quick kiss to his lips; he twists them at me the moment I pull back, but it's that I'm mad but not really sort of thing he does when he's trying his best to hide a smile.

"We are, now come on and get us to PJ's," I turn to gesture at the stairs, and he casts me a sideways glare before taking them two at a time and racing out the back door. I follow after him, thanking Susan for holding it for me.

Dan's already stood in the middle of the garden and tapping his foot, like we're stuck in some old-timey movie, and I'm wondering if he's about to tap at his wrist as well, quirk a brow at me and ask...
where I've been. He does the eyebrow thing, at the very least, but he tends to do that quite a lot so I'm not really surprised.

He grumbles something as he grabs my hand, then we're off an through a portal he's only just pulled up like it's a walk in the park. Or, as it stands, a walk in the garden, and then a walk in the grass just outside PJ's house. I have to admit, aside from just the impressiveness of his witchcraft, it's really convenient to not have to make a two-day trip whenever I want to visit. PJ, for his part, is still not too enamored with the fact that Dan has no issue breaking through his wards whenever he sees fit, although he also doesn't seem to inclined to bother doing much about that fact.

Dan barely hesitates before dragging me along up to the front door, where we're met before even knocking by a grinning PJ.

"Phil!" He passes Dan to hug me first, and I think Dan's brief grimace says exactly how he feels about that, but I know PJ doesn't mean it that way. Or at least I don't think he does.

"Peej," I find myself smiling in spite of the slightly awkward encounter and the equally awkward angle - Dan still hasn't let go of my hand, not that I really want him to.

"And Dan," PJ says after finally releasing his grip on my shoulders. He turns with a slightly tighter smile on his face, though he barely pauses before pulling Dan into a much more uncomfortable-looking hug. Dan keeps his body angled away, and I wonder if that's a normal thing for him or just a PJ thing. I make a mental note to ask later, though a part of me knows I'll probably forget. Besides, I don't expect Dan to be hugging PJ too frequently anyway - not that I'm at all jealous of him. Not at all.

Dan casts a tight-lipped almost-smile over PJ's shoulder at me, and I can almost see him exhale the moment PJ releases him.

"Hey guys!" Another voice - and the person accompanying it - appears at the door, and PJ grins before gesturing grandly toward her.

"And this, Dan, is the lovely Sophie." It's funny how, now that I'm watching them, now that I know that feeling, I can see the adoration in PJ's eyes, or the brightness Sophie gives off the moment she looks over at PJ and lets out a laugh. I can't help but glance over at Dan - who seems to be taking everything in stride and with a very convincing smile plastered on his face.

"Dan, it's a pleasure to meet you," she doesn't offer a hug, though, and Dan doesn't move in for one. "And Phil, it's always lovely to see you. Come inside!" And, like the good guests we are, Dan and I follow her and PJ into the lounge. "I think- oh, Bea, Mel, I think you've all met?"

And now it's my turn to plaster a grin on over PJ's shoulder at me, and I can almost see him exhale the moment PJ releases him.

"We have," Mel says, apparently the only one aside from Sophie that has any ability to talk. Her smile looks like something right on the edge of laughter, and one glance at PJ confirms he knew exactly how this would turn out.

"Bea!" Dan's grinning when I look over, and I shouldn't be surprised. What I should be is polite, because I haven't had a single reason to dislike Beatrice since Dan came around and she's been more than helpful when teaching Dan had extended beyond the limits of my knowledge and skill.

Dan drops my hand and wraps Bea in a hug, one that I'm selfishly pleased to find matches the one he gave PJ, still very distanced and brief. Then his hand finds mine again and gives it a little
squeeze, and I realize he's just staring at me, brows arched the tiniest bit up his forehead.

"Bea, Mel, it's really nice to see you both again," I enthuse, more to Mel than Beatrice - Mel's always pleasant to be around, but I'm still having trouble getting over the ages of not-so-great history I have with Beatrice. Mel offers a warm smile, and Beatrice flashes her fangs at me, so I take it as a moderately decent sign things will go well today.

'Go well' as if we're doing something major, or making some big announcement. The reality is we'd only come out here at PJ's invitation - or insistence, really - just to visit. But with Beatrice and Mel here, it feels more like an event. I'm suddenly wondering if I shouldn't have been a little more concerned with my own attire, although PJ's clearly not dressed for any special occasion in his t-shirt and jeans.

"Tea?" PJ asks then, and there's a chorus of mumbled agreements in the few moments before steaming mugs appear before us and cushioned seating appears behind - Dan and I seem to have been assigned a particularly large armchair, one that's really meant for one person but could probably fit us both so long as we're squished hip to hip. Which I certainly have no problem with.

Dan, it seems, feels the same, and he tugs me down into the chair as soon as he's got his mug in hand. I'm not personally the biggest fan of green tea, but it's usually all PJ offers and I'm not rude enough to demand something else as a guest in his house; besides, Dan seems happy settled at my side, blowing out a breath over the steaming mug.

There's a moment, then, when everything around us sort of slips out of focus, when Dan turns to glance over at me - even though we're about as close as we can get without sitting on each others' laps, it feels like we somehow drift closer; Dan leans against me then, just a bit, just enough to say he's here and he hadn't been expecting Beatrice and Mel either but he's here, he's with me and I'm not alone.

I manage a little smile in return, and his lip curls up, and I'm not entirely sure what the rest of the night will hold - or the rest of the week or year or the rest of our lives, for that matter - but whatever it is, we're in it together.

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End Notes

bless daliensgradads for betaing this she is a queen

feel free to rb if you'd like!

thank you to every single one of you lovelies for reading, i cannot express how much your support means! <3

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