reasons we should be complete

by trashyeggroll

Summary

Post 01x05 "Other Women": A series of mysterious homicides and unfortunate coincidences bring our favorite intrepid detective and Charmed Ones together again.

aka

Nobody accounted for the way everyone knows everyone in a college town LGBTQ+ community.

Notes

I started writing this after 01x05 and have been rewriting it ever since. Given events on the mid-season opener, I figured I might as well start posting it.

See the end of the work for more notes.
to you it's just a late night

Chapter Summary

"give me reasons we should be complete/
you should be with him, i can't compete/
you looked at me like i was someone else, oh well/
can't you see?"

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for my word vomit reflections on Charmed and ruminations on my decisions in this fic, if ya want.

fic mood: "SLOW DANCING IN THE DARK" by Joji
chapter mood: "Good Guy" by Frank Ocean
club scene music: "Special Affair" by The Internet

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Rough night?”

Detective Niko Hamada glanced up through the bars of her fingers to see her boss, Captain Paul O’Doule, standing on the other side of her desk with a wry grin on his pockmarked face. She slammed her hands down to her lap in alarm, then immediately brought one back up to adjust her glasses. “Sir! Hi. No—well yes, the Lindsey case is—“

“Relax, Hamada. Jeez, like I beat you guys or something. If only.” The pot-bellied captain dropped an overflowing file on her desk with a heavy thunk. “Suspicious death, 4584 Springfield. You two are up.”

“So… then what’s this?” Niko flicked open the folder and was greeted with the first page of an extensive rap sheet, complete with a mosaic of mugshots showing the age progression of a white male, blonde, green eyes. 5’ 9”, 180 lbs.

“That’s your victim’s file. Have fun.”

Her partner, Jimmy Morris, groaned as the captain strolled away with a chuckle.

“Charles Paulson, 37,” read Niko aloud before closing the folder and shoving it in her bag. “My turn to drive.”

That earned her another wordless protest from her partner, but he slid his feet off his desk and stood to gather his coat and scarf. The walk from just the station to their department vehicle was short, but the air was frozen and the wind howling—Niko’s teeth were chattering before she’d made it halfway there. They had to wait for the car to defrost, using the idle minutes to fiddle on their phones. Niko had a couple Messenger notifications from her wife, Greta, and her brother Sora. She opened the
latter first, greeted with a cat meme about existential dread. Typical. Greta had sent a grocery list and a reminder about their dinner party that evening to celebrate her recent promotion to museum director for the Hilltowne Historical Society. Also typical.

“How’s the missus?”

Niko glanced over at her quite unmarried partner, who was smirking and sipping coffee from a huge styrofoam cup. “I bought you a tumbler so you stop using those. They don’t kill polar bears and they have lids.”

Jimmy shrugged, spilling a little bit on his shirt and proving her point, though he kept his face defiantly casual even as he dabbed at the splash with a napkin. “I forget it at home all the time. Don’t change the subject. Greta Hamada-Smith, status update.”

Pianoing her fingers on the steering wheel, Niko huffed out a breath. “She’s great. Been really happy about the promotion, even if old Botts had to literally die for her to get it. Good pay raise. She—we’re great. So great.”

“Uh huh.” Her fellow detective was searching her face intently, as detectives do. “Right. You make a strong case for the married bliss thing.”

In lieu of a response, Niko threw the car into reverse and headed south. Truthfully, she and Greta weren’t great per se, but they’d made it through worse periods in their five-year relationship, the last six months of which they’d spent officially married. There’d been more sniping at each other over the last month or so, less affection, more silence. They just needed to get back in sync—in the past, that usually included a high volume fight and some epic makeup sex, which after a six-week dry spell would be quite the welcome development. Maybe the wine and good company tonight would put them both in a better mood…

“You know, you can talk to me about that stuff if you want.”

Niko kept her eyes forward. “You’ve been divorced twice.”

“Exactly. I’m getting better at the divorce warning signs each time.” Despite his explicit teasing, Jimmy did sound genuine enough. “Just, yanno… partners and all that. Supporting each other.”

She had to give him credit for trying.

Despite numerous arrests for violent and smuggling-related offenses (well, or perhaps because of them), Chris Paulson owned a two-story brick McMansion with a manicured lawn and custom stone driveway, elements of orderly beauty that totally belied the brutal scene inside.

There was blood everywhere, floor to ceiling, in thick oblong shapes of solid contact fanning out into thinner splatters, as if Paulson’s body had been swung around like a baby with a rattler. His mangled body gave further evidence of the excessively rough treatment, limbs folded unnaturally under his bloodied torso. Surprisingly, the sheer extent of the damage wasn’t the most striking feature of the body—that award went to the oak crucifix protruding from his mouth, the two shorter arms half buried in the flesh of his cheeks like a Joker smile.

“Very… specific,” muttered Jimmy as he knelt by the man’s head, where his neck twisted too far to one side. “How much of this was he actually alive for?”

The medical examiner hummed in thought for a few seconds before offering, “Totally unreliable educated guess—this guy didn’t die until the cross lacerated his jugular. It’s hard to say for sure, but if you look at the puddle under his body, it’s pretty small, so I think that was done… last.”
“Yikes,” muttered Morris with a sympathetic whistle.

“Detective,” called one of the techs. “In here.”

Niko carefully paced into the kitchen after the voice. “What d’you got?”

“I… don’t know.” The tech—Niko thought her name was Zelda—was pointing at the ceiling with a gloved index finger.

Resisting the urge to wince, Niko slowly raised her eyes. There was a symbol burned into the plaster, a three-leafed polygon with a circle around it, and some kind of lettering that looked like… maybe sanskrit? She Googled a sample, and the script was similar, but not definitely sanskrit. The burn itself was perfectly uniform, as if a single stamp or brand—but the whole thing had to be at least two feet by three, and that would be a ludicrous prop to bring to a murder. She considered the three-pointed flower shape and circle. It tickled something in her brain, a hazy recollection of… what? Maybe a previous case? She drew it in her notepad despite the crime scene photos, wanting to do some more research and contemplating later.

While she stared at the symbol, Jimmy materialized next to her, observing the brand for a few seconds before launching into an almost subconscious summation: “Obviously, we’ve got overkill and a unique… pointless MO. Could be a crime of passion, but maybe more due to the killer getting hyped than whatever was between them and the victim. Doesn’t seem like Paulson fought. This message… I guess it’s just a big question mark until we figure out what it says.”

“So this all tells us absolutely nothing.” Niko pushed her glasses up her nose and looked at Zelda. “Make sure you try to remove this as one piece, if at all possible.”

The tech nodded even as her dark brows knitted with concern at the task.

Back in the living room, Niko and Jimmy circled the body a few more times before fanning out to look around the house. Upstairs, Niko found three bedrooms, each with a modest bed and a single chest of drawers. The air was musty and still, the scant furniture covered in a layer of dust. Obviously, Christopher Paulson didn’t have a lot of guests. She found mostly clothes in the drawers, but also two handguns and a rifle wrapped in shirts—all three with the serial numbers filed off. Lovely.

In the upstairs bathroom, she poked around empty drawers for a few seconds before popping open the medicine cabinet, which was filled with unopened toiletries. She moved a couple bottles of Nyquil aside and peered closely at a hole in the back of the hanging cabinet. Swallowing her body’s natural protest at the unknown, Niko stuck her finger in the hole and pulled. The backing gave, and she quickly removed the contents of the cabinet to pull the false wall out completely. Stacks of cash bundled in saran wrap, at least $30,000, lined the inside of the cabinet.

“Not a robbery then,” she muttered to herself, placing an evidence marker on the bottom shelf. More cash hid in the back of the toilet, perfectly dry within several layers of Ziploc freezer bags. Niko shuffled back into one of the bedrooms and crawled under the bed, predictably finding more stacks stuffed into the box spring. She was pretty certain the floorboards and walls would have some fun surprises too.

The scene was way too noisy, too full of half-formed implications that could take the investigation in wildly different directions and too lacking in anything that seemed singularly important. While cryptic messages would undoubtedly be fodder for social media, and the cash grab would get the interest of the feds, there was no clear murder weapon and a scene that spanned an entire household. That type of mess typically chewed up and spit out its helpless primary detectives, unless the techs
turned up something really good on the forensics side.

Sitting back on her heels, Niko rubbed the bridge of her nose and allowed herself an indulgent, brooding sigh.

“Whose house party is this again?”

Perry Trudeau glanced over at her clearly nervous girlfriend with a grin. “It’s a dinner party, fancy and the like. No pong. That’s why you’re wearing that stunner, remember?”

Unconsoled, Mel Vera played with the hem of her above-knee Little Black Dress as she slouched in the passenger seat of Perry’s Wrangler. Mel and the green-eyed, fade haircut Perry, CrossFit trainer, had only been “dating” (see: exclusive) for two weeks of their eight weeks of having sex, and meeting the friends seemed like a big step. A too big step. A stumble, maybe. Right? Mel was no good at winning over an established friend group, almost as bad as she was at letting people into hers (though that part had some obviously heavier implications given what happened last time). Adding to her stress, Maggie and Macy had been nose-deep in the Book when she left, working on some new protection charms that she really wanted to be there to—

Perry’s warm hand came to rest over hers on the center console, giving a slight squeeze. “It’s gonna be fun, I promise, but if you’re not feeling it we can leave, totally. Good?”

“Yeah!” Mel replied too quickly, breathless. “I mean, how scary can a bunch of lesbians really ever be?”

“What if we have a secret escape sign? Like tug on your ear or something?”

“Right, because that’ll look so casual. And it’s not the first thing everyone suggests in every sitcom, ever.”

Laughing softly, Perry brought the hand to her lips and gave a soft kiss to Mel’s knuckles, eyes still on the road. “Don’t worry about them. Just try to have a good time—I promise I won’t let anything bad happen to you.”

“Nothing bad?” Mel raised an eyebrow, plucking at a wrinkle in Perry’s shirt as they pulled up to a well-timed stop sign. “Not even if I ask nicely?”

Perry leaned over for a not-so-quick kiss, long enough that the SUV behind them gave a frustrated honk. “Shush, or we’ll never make it.”

And of course that had absolutely been Mel’s hail mary intention. Alas. Within a few minutes, they arrived.

The house was a modest one-story with white siding and a burnt red door with a lattice window. Muffled music and laughter drifted out into the chilled night air, and Mel caught just a whiff of a savory, enticing smell that was hopefully dinner. As Perry knocked on the door with the hand that wasn’t holding their gift offering, a bottle of blackberry wine, Mel just happened to look over the driveway. There were three or four cars crammed close together on the concrete patch, a couple sedans, a van, and… an El Camino. Candy Black. Whitewall tires.

Icy tendrils bloomed in her chest, shutting out the actual icy temperature of the air as adrenaline raced through her veins. She knew that if she checked the car’s glove compartment, she would find a secret stash of Jolly Ranchers, because—
The door opened, and Mel froze everything in a fit of panic.

Detective Niko Hamada stood smiling from ear to ear behind the glass weather door, mouth slightly open in the start of a greeting. Niko Hamada, owner of that stupid car that she loved so much. Niko Hamada, who the witch had only just finally managed to move past enough to date again, but who still managed to wriggle her disarmingly sweet, gorgeous face into Mel’s mind on a daily basis and as a bonus, every time she heard sirens. In a college town, that was a lot. And Niko looked so good. She wore a fitted pastel blue button down with white collar, the top two buttons open, rolled sleeves showing off her biceps and forearms.

Next to Niko stood Greta, who in the past timeline had nearly come to blows with Mel in an impromptu grocery store confrontation, before the manager had shoved himself between the women and had plump, bored security guards throw them out. The insults tossed at each other over metal carts had been predictable and hateful, blazing a forever negative impression in Mel’s mind… but this woman was entirely different, smiling so warmly through the glass that she almost seemed like a separate person. Her blonde hair fell in perfect curls over her shoulders, her blue eyes rounded with friendly affection. Greta, to Mel’s dismay, was also wearing a Little Black Dress, high-necked with lace down to the bust and over the bodice, like she was Heidi fucking Klum or something. They were holding hands tightly.

Mel’s heart lurched. What was she supposed to do? Turn tail and run? Just fucking vanish? Because that wouldn’t be suspicious at all. She regretted tut-tutting the emergency exit ear-tug with Perry. Briefly, she considered calling her sisters. No. All she had to do was act natural. Definitely easier than vanquishing demons, right?

They hadn’t just wiped Niko’s memory; they had changed time. There was a zero percent chance Niko would recognize her, because they had literally never met. She secretly suspected they might cross paths again at some point given the size (or lack thereof) of the queer community in town, but somehow it hadn’t even occurred to her that Perry would be the bridge (even though she was one of those people that had like a thousand Facebook friends, as if any one person could keep up with that many people). Focus.

“Okay. Okay. You can do this,” Mel said out loud just because she could. “We’re strangers. No feelings here. Okay.”

Knowing she she couldn’t just leave them like this forever (as much as she wanted to), Mel took enough time to calm her breathing, and when she was ready, she released the freeze. Act natural, get through the evening, don’t call attention to herself. Ready.

“Per!” hooted Niko immediately, popping open the door. “Jessa and Rachel are already here. Thanks for the wine.”

When Perry moved to enter the house, Niko’s eyes flicked over to Mel. The witch held her breath.

“Hey guys,” greeted the trainer breezily, hugging each host.

A tiny, muffled voice inside accused her of wishing reality wasn’t the case, that some sort of timey-wimey magical residue would make Niko’s eyes flash with confused, vague recognition— “Have we met?” But when it didn’t happen, the devastation that gripped her chest in an icy fist proved that little voice right.

Because Niko’s eyes held no familiarity at all. In fact, they quickly moved on from hers after a polite nod in greeting. It felt like appropriate penance that Mel could still clearly remember those same brown eyes gazing at her with open longing over coffee dates, curling with her smile as they
watched One Day at a Time on a rainy Sunday, or looking up at her, hooded and dark, from between her legs...

“Mel? You okay?”

The witch startled and focused on Perry’s furrowed brow. “Yes! Sorry. Just thinking about something… I read earlier.” She cleared her throat. “Are you going to introduce me to your friends?”

“Yeah…” Perry was still frowning, but dropped it. “This is Greta and her wife Niko. We went to college together. Hamada-Smiths, this is my girlfriend Mel.”

“Perry’s told us a lot about you,” offered Niko helpfully, but blandly.

Greta held out her hands, palms up. Her lips, perfectly painted a bold red, were curled into an unsettlingly friendly smile. “Let me take your coat.”

Mel did so with reluctance, unable to shake the visceral memory of just how intimidating Greta could be during the heat of a shouting match in the ice cream aisle. “Thanks for hosting, and uh—didn’t one of you get a promotion? Congrats!”

“Greta’s Hilltowne’s newest museum director. The first woman to hold that position in the 200 years it’s been open,” clarified Niko with seemingly genuine pride. Greta put a hand on the detective’s forearm, smiling bashfully, and leaned forward for a kiss while Mel tried to look anywhere but at them and Perry made joking disgusted noises.

Mercifully, they next moved into the dining room, where the other couple awaited them: Rachel, willowy and redhead, and Jessa, who had a septum piercing and a gorgeous afro. Another couple arrived after Mel and Perry, two mid-fifties, solidly Second Wave women who apparently worked in the fire department, Sarah and Stephanie. They sat at a long white table with a burlap runner hanging off both ends, held down with natural-cut wood platters sporting Christmas-y flower arrangements, all red berries and deep green garland.

The house was small, but cozy, and very IKEA—all brushed silver and white with flashes of color. The walls had actual art on them, but also pictures in simple blondewood frames. Niko and Greta smiling together on the edge of the Grand Canyon. Niko and Greta eating street food in what looked like Singapore. Niko and Greta in front of their house. Niko and Greta in a tight embrace in a forest during snowfall. What, do they bring a professional photographer with them on every trip?

Niko and Greta kissing, each wearing a white wedding dress under a floral archway of white roses. Oh. She gulped several mouthfuls of prosecco, wincing at the cold as it dragged down her throat.

It was all so very perfectly Pinterest. Other timeline Niko would’ve been making fun of it with her quietly, mouth hidden by a beer bottle, not a glass of wine. Somehow, the dissonance helped calm her nerves.

Knowing no good could come of further examination of the aggressively happy home, Mel tried to focus on the meal, which consisted of a large communal cheese and meat plate to start (“Charcuterie” Greta had announced in a very pleased tone), then a salad, and steak that was honestly so good she felt somewhat better for the precious five minutes of eating it. There was also, of course, plenty of wine.

The friends seemed predictably tight-knit, covering past shared holidays together and making near constant inside references (“Not like that time in San Diego, am I right Per?” or “I’m no expert on that, unlike Jessa over here”) that made the conversation somewhat difficult to follow, but also
provided the perfect cover for Mel to mostly stay out of it. Given the apparently historic connections between the other women, she idly wondered why she’d never met any of these people in the old timeline, never heard their names or saw them tagged in old photos.

Except, the answer was obvious, and it danced alongside old demons; Niko must have lost them in the breakup with Greta, given that the detective had been the one to carry on an affair and leave months before their planned wedding. Not many people got to keep the crew in that split. While that realization tightened her chest with regret, the next thought loosened it again. Just another wrong dealt by Mel that was righted by her absence, another affirmation of the decision she’d made. Right? A good thing. Yep.

Luckily, the conversation veered into something she could understand and enjoy: true crime gossip.

“So Hamada… We heard on the scanner about that murder out south. EMTs said it was… unique,” began Stephanie, ignoring Sarah’s elbow in her ribs. “Was it Satanists?”

“Ah, you know I can’t—“

“Just a little,” begged Perry, who was on her fifth glass of wine. “It’s, like, rude for you to not tell us now.”

“Because Steph brought it up?”

“The news is gonna have most of it by now already,” added Jessa, eyebrows wiggling. “Can’t be anything worse than I’ve seen before.”

Mel mentally rewound through the earlier conversations for a context clue, recalling that Jessa had said something about being in a surgery all day.

“It was… something,” conceded the detective, leaning back in her chair.

“Was it sexually motivated?” asked Rachel conspiratorially.

“Isn’t everything?” countered Niko with a noncommittal level of seriousness.

“Twitter says the guy was folded like origami.”

The collective table made disgusted noises at the redhead as she held up her phone. “Also saying there was kind of weird message, huh? Cult? Serial killer? It’s the Zodiac, obviously.”

“Oh, obviously!” laughed Sarah.

Apparently unnoticed, or perhaps just ignored, by everyone but Mel, Greta looked increasingly unhappy as the friends carried on. Mel remembered Niko complaining in the old timeline that Greta had always hated her job, had said it was not only dangerous, but a waste of her brain power and college degree. She suspected that the thought process had classist roots more so than out of concern for Niko (especially when there were so many legitimate reasons to take issue with the institution), and seeing elegant Greta pearl-clutching over the conversation with her perfect lip stain and stemless-wine-glass dinner party… Yeah, that’s exactly what it was.

“All I can tell you, dear armchair quarterbacks,” sighed Niko, her voice thin but still breaking through the overlapping jokes of the friends. “Is that it was incredibly violent, and the killer left a message, just like it says. There’s only one crime like this on the books, so no, technically it isn’t a serial killer. Boom.”
“What message?” Apparently Stephanie just couldn’t help herself, her tone taking on a distinct teasing edge. “Like a manifesto? Threats to the rest of us? You gonna save us from this psycho or what, Hamada?”

“Maybe everyone but you.”

“Better not f*ck it up or you’ll look bad on the podcast in a few years—“

“Dessert!” announced Greta in a shrill, breathless tone as she practically jumped to her feet. “It’s time for dessert! I made oreo cake.”

Mel hid her smirk behind her wine glass.

“Oreo cake and murder, the best dinner party,” crowed Perry, who was swaying slightly in her seat. “Ever.”

Earlier, the trainer had rested her hand on Mel’s knee like the attentive girlfriend she was, but now that warm palm was sliding up over the smooth fabric of her dress, making it that much more difficult to concentrate. When fingertips brushed against her inner thigh, Mel grabbed the offending limb under the table and squeezed, meeting her girlfriend’s smirk with her own. “Hands, Per,” she warned quietly, a little more breathlessly than she expected.

“Sorry,” muttered the taller woman, leaning back and continuing to smirk in a way that suggested otherwise. She gave the muscles under her palm a good squeeze, and Mel was honestly relieved to feel a corresponding flash of anticipation at the pressure. The rest of the table kept on chatting, moving to the oh so fun topic of presidential 2020 candidates, and thoughts of penance veered wildly towards a flare of righteousness.

“You’re not sorry, ass,” teased Mel, brushing her fingertips along her girlfriend’s cutting jawline. *Perry’s top shelf anyway. Look at those shoulders in that blazer. “Behave now, and we can have fun later.”*

Perry hummed happily and leaned over for a kiss, indulgent and laced with promise.

“Gross,” complained Rachel, causing the two to part. “In the cutest way, of course. Like little babies.”

“You’re a lucky asshole, Per,” added Stephanie, winking at the shorter woman. “Mel, you know there are other, smarter, and better looking women out there, right? Don’t be fooled by those quads.”

Mel couldn’t help but grin back at Stephanie, who had spiky blonde hair and, of all things, an eyebrow ring. Truly a sign of their generational gap.

“Dessert!” announced Greta as she appeared in the formal dining room with aforementioned cake in hand.

The dish was admittedly delicious. Mel managed to politely ask Greta for the recipe, giving herself a mental high five for the most basic interaction. She took an opportunity during a lull in conversation while everyone chewed to surreptitiously check her phone.

7:34 lil sis: how is your gay party

7:51 lil sis: pride banquet

8:03 Macy: Sorry about… Maggie.
8:04 Macy: Harry says a demon killed someone today. Are you staying at Perry’s tonight?

Mel responded: 8:48 she’s not even punny & probs not

8:49 Macy: Text me when you leave

8:49 lil sis: i can see u texting macy and not me :( 

Mel quickly slipped her phone back in her dress pocket when the dinner seemed to have come to a conclusion without her. The women stood and began gathering dirty plates to hand to Greta, then they all moved into the living room. After getting comfortable around the various low couches and wide armchairs adorned with exceedingly soft knitted blankets, Niko remained standing with her wine glass in her hand. She lifted it and took a breath, looking around at each guest, and then to her wife.

“I just wanna say babe… I’m really proud of you. You worked hard and totally deserve this. I love you, and I’m so looking forward to our goal of being a super power lesbian couple. To Greta!”

“To Greta!” came the echoed cheer.

It occurred to Mel that she had never actually been with Niko and Greta in the same room in the old timeline, having met the detective on her own and suspecting that she would have never been able to continue their affair if she had to look Greta in the face. They, as a partnership, made more sense in person than just from the one-sided stories of discontent and fighting that Niko would sometimes whisper after another night where they’d inevitably gone from we shouldn’t to harder and again. Greta had an easy beauty in that white Instagram influencer way—breezy, fun, and on-brand, with blonde hair cascading perfectly over her shoulder as she gripped Niko’s arm, blue eyes shining with affection. All night, despite a flew flickers of human emotion, Niko and Greta had been consummate hosts, ensuring wine glasses remained filled and the conversation flowed. The detective’s controlled, bright energy meshed with Greta’s antsier, insistent one in a model, balanced partnership. The witch felt a little sick.

“Mel?” Perry’s confused voice jerked her back to her body. She grasped Mel’s hands in her own, brushing her thumbs over her knuckles in tiny circles. And Mel felt a new pang of emotion now—guilt. Perry was a little arrogant, a little dumb, but so, so sweet. Earnest. And she was clearly worried, like a good girlfriend would be, but maybe not for the correction reason… which is that her girlfriend is still pining after her married friend. Classy. “Are you feeling okay? You seem kinda… out of it.”

Seeing the out on a silver platter and unable to continue down this road of dual torture, Mel grabbed it enthusiastically. “You know, I’m really… maybe I’m getting sick?” She put a hand on Perry’s chest before she could reply: “And you are drunk. Let me call a Lyft, hmm? I don’t wanna be a drag on your night.”

Perry gave her an airy, droopy-eyed smirk, and then leaned forward for a kiss, her hands tugging lightly on the front Mel’s dress.

“Wait, I don’t want to get you sick,” she protested just before their lips met, remembering she was trying to leave and putting a finger to Perry’s lips.

“Mmm, well we have already kissed like, a ton, today, so I think I’m fucked no matter what. And we should keep kissing. And now that I say it out loud... fucking sounds good, too.”
Then the trainer was leaning forward again, catching her mouth with a playful growl. In spite of herself, Mel wrapped her arms around that muscular neck and thrilled to feel her body respond with a heavy throb of pleasure, to feel something good amid the misery of the night. There. See? Not so difficult to enjoy her proper girlfriend. Enjoyable, even. She sighed happily into the kiss, grateful for the port in a storm in the form of a warm, firm body that made her laugh a lot.

But when she pulled back, Niko was standing nearby, grinning at them as she sipped her wine. “Okay, you guys are pretty cute. I approve.”

“Shhhh,” admonished Perry, holding up a sluggishly bobbing finger. “Mel’s s-sick. She’s going home. I can’t drive.”

Niko’s brown eyes slid over to Mel’s, both amused and concerned. “You all right?”

Okay, maybe she still had some work to do, because all she could think was: Don’t look at her lips, don’t look at her lips, don’t— “Yeah, just need to sleep to get ahead of it, I think. Orange juice. And sleep. I called a Lyft.”

“Well, it was nice to meet you.” Niko extended a hand. “Not a hugger, but thanks for taking such good care of ol’ Per Bear here. Nice to see her happy.”

The witch accepted the shake, wishing she could ignore the way her whole being still felt drawn, like gravity, to the tall woman wearing those stupid glasses again. They were a painful, physical reminder that this wasn’t her Niko. This was safe Niko. Niko who still had a chance at normal and happy. She put on her bravest smile as their hands fell back to their sides. “Your house is lovely. I appreciate the hospitality. This was so great. Usually it’s just my sisters and me, and my sister Macy is a great cook, not like I’m complaining, but, uh, this was so new and fresh and your friends are so nice, so… thank you.”

Smooth, Vera.

If Niko judged her for the rambling, she didn’t let on, her expression remaining maddenly kind as she reached for the doorknob. “Let’s do it again sometime soon. Don’t be a stranger.”

March, 2016

Four drinks down, floating in that special space called buzzed, and Mel was feeling much better about GA Night Out than she had before it started. They’d hopped three bars in as many hours and were wearing matching blue t-shirts that said HILLTOWNE U ENGLISH DEPARTMENT. Inspirational, but at least the university had sprung for one drink ticket at each location and taxis home. Mel hadn’t been able to catch and hold onto the names of the coworkers dancing around her, but hey—the fact that she’d even joined them was a win in itself. Her mom said she needed to ‘put herself out there’ and whatnot, as if finishing up her master’s degree left so much time for making friends. But like always, when her mom suggested something, Mel could be swayed enough to give it at least one shot. Marisol had yet to be wrong (but she would never admit that to her mother’s face).

As the club swelled with the “fashionably late” crowd, Mel felt, rather than saw, eyes on her while some of the GA group broke off for refills. Nothing that made her instincts shout danger, but something… magnetic. Like searching for a word on the tip of your tongue, maddeningly close, like you’d be frustrated all week if you never found it. The DJ was announcing the lineup for the midnight drag show, so she had a moment to stand and catch her breath while casually sliding her eyes over the crowd for the source of that primitive tickle at the base of her skull.

Her gaze eventually settled on a raucous group of preppy twenty-somethings wearing paper birthday party hats and fingerling jello shots into their mouths. Next to the suspected birthday girl
One of her coworkers whispered something along the lines of “You’ve got a friend”, and then a warm hand touched the back of her arm. The mystery woman was taller up close than she expected, leaning slightly over Mel when she turned to face her, and the realization sent a jolt of anticipation down her spine. She lifted a hand and brushed two fingertips along the jawline that sat at eye level, thrilling at the nervously flexing movements under her touch.

“Hi. I’m Niko.” The stranger’s voice rumbled with a natural low timbre, unreasonably enticing against the overly loud music and press of other people on all sides.

“Mel.”

“Can I…?” ‘Niko’ looked down and Mel followed her gaze. The tall woman had unfurled her hand near Mel’s hip, palm hovering calmly, waiting for consent. She put her own smaller hand over Niko’s and pressed it to her side. Instantly, Niko’s other hand came up in a mirror grip, but she still paused to search Mel for any type of negative reaction.

So Mel waited, curious. The stranger wavered between the swaggery confidence of the woman who’d been staring back at her, unabashed, and the woman who, despite consent being already given, stood frozen to the spot for a solid twenty seconds before finally, her hands tugged their hips flush with each other. Mel liked seeing the little cracks in each character, and it made her feel strangely at ease. She could feel Niko breathing hard, pupils dilated as they started moving together to music that was helpfully meant for nothing below a PG-13 rating. Niko smelled like jasmine under all the whiskey. A beauty mark sat very distractingly just slightly right of center on her chest, where Mel could also see the tantalizing ripple of muscles under smooth, golden skin.

She abruptly had the urge to slow this down, her body embarrassingly keyed up just from the adrenaline and brief contact, in no small part due to the fact that Niko’s knee had slipped between her own--Fuck, when did that get there?

“Axe murderer?” she blurted, eyes squeezed shut, not caring that it sounded breathless. Her hands wandered a little, smoothing across a wide back.

Niko’s laugh was an unexpectedly whole-bodied thing, hearty and earnest, and it made Mel’s eyes slide back open to see the smile accompanying such a comforting sound. “Only on Sundays.”

“So... I have until midnight. Like some sort of Cinderkiller.”

That earned her another laugh, Niko’s eyes creasing just slightly at the corners, and Mel found herself leaning forward, seeking more, suddenly resolved to do whatever she could to again draw that sweet sound, and many more, from the stranger’s mouth. “You’re lucky I don’t mind really, really bad puns. Or, I guess you might say I like beautiful women more.”

It should have been off-puttingly cheesy, really. It was cheesy. Right? But those words from that mouth in that Scarlett Johansson voice? Unfair. Mel realized and simultaneously accepted that she was a goner. She slid one hand back up to Niko’s shoulder, skimming the other over the neck of her shirt where defined collarbones peeked out. She had to rise to her tiptoes to say into the shell of her ear: “Next question: You were staring pretty hard back there. Was there something you want from
me?"

Without pause, Niko seized the challenge, smirking as she gently but insistently pushed on Mel’s hip until the shorter woman turned, and then she tugged her backwards again. Mel swallowed a groan as she felt firm breasts and a taut stomach pressing into her back, but more distractingly, hot breath against the crook of her neck. “I think you know what I want.”

Oh. Her knees may have deserted her, but Niko’s strong arm was holding her waist, and Oh god Mel could imagine the firm body behind her doing so many other, more satisfying things than grind slowly against her back to Syd’s dulcet tones and the heavy beat.

The stumbling trip to the bathroom was a blur. Mel could only register the warm hand holding hers as they needled through the crowd, to a dark hallway, and then into a dimly lit restroom. She’d already taken a step towards one of the stalls when Niko suddenly tugged her back.

“Jackson? Is that you?”

Another stall door opened to reveal a smirking redhead. “Hey, Nik. What, uh… what’re you doing?”

“Get out.”

“Who’s your frien—“

“Get out,” Niko practically barked, and she locked the main door after the still cheeky-looking woman finally obeyed.

Mel stared for a few seconds before deciding she was more turned on by that little show than nervous.

They crashed together in a tangle of lips, teeth, and hands, Niko greedily swallowing Mel’s groan as they pushed against each other. Everything had that fiery haze of novelty, two people testing out the landscape of each other’s bodies... in the most delicious way. Mel was a kinetic learner, after all. A nip there. A squeeze here.

She nearly yelped when Niko’s hand slipped under her dress to her bare thigh, rough fingertips just grazing along the soft skin.

“Is this okay?” whispered the taller woman before kissing down Mel’s neck, which was very distracting, and rendered Mel helplessly silent for long enough that Niko lifted her head and asked again, louder: “Mel?”

“Y-yes!” she got out, her hands twisting in the stranger’s poor V-neck. “Green. Very green.”

Niko gave a sharp nod of understanding, and that was all the warning Mel got before her hand was there, slender fingers pushing past her panties to slide along the join of her legs.

“Fuck,” she groaned into Mel’s skin, breath hitching before she seemed to come to a decision. Using her hips and shoulders, she crowded Mel backwards, somehow executing a spin move so that the shorter woman’s back hit the door. Mel herself could barely form words against the rush of urgent heat radiating to her limbs.

There was no more talking.

Bracing her free hand against the pressed wood, Niko captured Mel’s mouth again in a rough kiss.
right as her fingers found home, pausing for a few wet swipes before slipping into her, drawing
gasps from both of them. With one more vigorous nod from Mel, Niko latched onto her neck, teeth
worrying the skin as her arm settled into a quick, merciless rhythm that had Mel’s back thumping
obscenely against the door. Her rough palm eventually angled just right, and it was just a few more
rough strokes, Mel’s body tightened like a bow and released. She had to bite down on her fist to
avoid shouting her pleasure to the entire club as cold heat flared from her belly and blood roared in
her ears. Niko stayed tucked inside, massaging the pulsing muscles to help her ride it out until
eventually, Mel was laughing and softly slapping her hand away. The taller woman smirked, wiping
her fingers on Mel’s thigh and fuck why was that so hot, sending a little aftershock through her core.

Mel lifted her head from the door and her lips found Niko’s skin sweaty, dark brown hairs sticking to
her forehead. That made her feel a little better about the probably three-minute encounter. If she
hadn’t felt so blissfully giddy, she might’ve spared a thought to be embarrassed. “That was…
Fuck.”

“I want to do that again,” gasped Niko, eyes somewhat unfocused.

A sharp series of knocks on the door and someone yelling SECURITY would stop that from
becoming a reality, but they exchanged phone numbers and met up two hours later at Mel’s
apartment. Niko got to do it again.

“You smell like wine.”

“What, do you want me to shower? I changed my clothes already.”

“I’m just saying, you reek —“

“Why are you even talking right now?”

“Cut it out,” interrupted Macy, pinning her sisters with a glare. “Focus.”

Mel clenched her jaw, knowing the flare of anger she felt was due to the situation with Niko, not her
sisters. When she felt she had a handle on it, she apologized and slumped down in her spot on the
couch. Probably better to lay low until she figured out if there was any reason to rock the boat at all.
Which, she was pretty sure there wouldn’t be. Yep.

“Okay. Now. While you were off supping, we got ahold of this picture from the scene.”

Mel looked at Macy’s phone, grabbing her sister’s arm so she would stop waving it. The photo
showed the Charmed Ones symbol, the triquetra, hovering above some ancient text. She couldn’t
quite make out how it had been written, but it appeared to be attached to a large chunk of wall or
something. “What does it say?”

“It’s a taunt,” answered Harry, his jaw doing that flexing thing it always did when he was worried.
“It says, roughly, ‘I come for your loved ones. I come to destroy. You will fall before me, power of
three.’ Absolutely unimaginative and droll as far as threats go, but more importantly, it tells us
nothing about the demon who murdered this citizen.”

“The choice of language doesn’t tell you anything, either?”

“Just that we’re dealing with someone who studies tongues, which isn’t uncommon for beings who
live for millenia. Based on the simplicity of the language, I would guess it’s a smokescreen. That’ll at
least keep the humans preoccupied for a bit.” Harry clapped his hands in front of his chest. “Now, if
you ladies are ready to go?”
He apparated them into the living room of the house, where Maggie gasped softly at the fanning splatters of blood everywhere. “Did Pebbles Flintstone kill this guy?”

“You mean Bam-Bam,” corrected Mel without thinking, earning herself an exasperated eye roll from her sister.

“What are we looking for?” Macy asked Harry.

“Since we don’t know exactly who we’re dealing with, this is more of a know-it-when-you-see-it situation.” Harry tried to offset his annoyingly vague answer with crooked grin, but Macy was having none of it as she launched into the inevitable round of 20 Witch Questions with him.

“How was dinner?”

Mel turned to face at her shortest and nosiest sister, who was trying and failing to look only casually interested as she considered the victim’s vinyl record collection. “Fancy. Cheese board and whatever. It was nice.”

“I’m just glad Perry dropped outta the sky onto your lap. I wasn’t sure you’d ever…” Maggie’s eyes widened with panic as she trailed off of the obvious: *I wasn’t sure you’d ever get over Niko. “...ahem, find someone who would put up with you.”*

“Uh huh, nice save,” muttered the older sister.

Harry’s suddenly raised voice inadvertently rescued them from the awkward, heavy moment. “The victim was a Mr. Christopher Paulson. He was an antique dealer who managed to get his hands on more than a few magical artifacts over the years, though he never knew that particular feature or else he would’ve paid much more for them, obviously. Though you could say he paid the ultimate price for whatever did this to him.” Only Harry gave the slightest nervous chuckle at his pun, though he didn’t seem the least bit ashamed. “As you might imagine, he’s a known element to the Council, so this one definitely has their full attention.”

“But why *him* as your opening sonata?” Macy wondered aloud. “He doesn’t have any connection to us, if that’s whose attention you really want.”

“What if he accidentally unleashed the demon from something in the house?” Mel eyeballed an Egyptian bust of Tiye on the fireplace mantle; it looked genuinely old, not like a Romancing the Stone knockoff.

“It *would* need to feed quickly to gain strength.” Harry hummed in agreement and decreed that they would split up to search.

Mel was grateful for some precious few moments alone, even if it was while looking for some literally cursed object. This was like throwing yourself into work, right? Totally. Despite all that the sisters had accomplished so far, they were not even close to the full potential of their powers, and every new battle was an opportunity to get better. Stronger. They were supposed to be the most powerful witches in history, damnit.

She hovered her hands over cans of paint in the garage, the nice Buick still parked there, and a large woodworking bench pushed up against the front of the garage. It featured plenty of dangerous-looking power tools, but those carried very little chance of demonic possession, so she quickly moved on to the storage area. Eventually, she stumbled on a large cardboard box sitting half-open in front of some shelves. It was marked “SORT”, like some sort of comically bad bait setup in a horror movie. If the guy was dealing in artifacts, this was probably his latest Antiques Roadshow haul.
“Maggie!” she called her sister from the kitchen, having watched enough horror movies to know better than to proceed alone.

Maggie arrived in short order, and together, they peered suspiciously into the rumpled cardboard box. It contained maybe a couple dozen knick-knacks and small sculptures, all of them dirty and dull, some broken or cracked. One by one, the sisters began removing items, weighing them in their hands for a few seconds before placing them in the floor.

It wasn’t until Mel’s fingers ghosted near a large, curved drinking horn that she felt the palpable tingle of something—that new energy that matched the spark in her hands and chest whenever she used her powers. She closed her hand around the smooth surface and carefully dragged it into the open. A rotting strip of leather hanging limply off one side had probably once been a strap for carrying the horn, which was gray at its wide base, but transitioned to black at the sharp, slightly curled tip. A bit of rusted wire hung uselessly from the mouth, attached to a wooden cap with a broken wax seal around the sides. It wasn’t hard to figure it out from there.

“Nice,” muttered Maggie, and Mel had to slap her hand away as she reached to touch it. “What?”

The older sister quickly grabbed a shop towel and wrapped it around the horn. “You just never know.”

After making sure nothing else magical was hiding out in the box, they headed into the living room and called for Harry and Macy.

“Looks… Norse, perhaps,” murmured the whitelighter as he turned the horn over in his hands. “This horn belongs to the ure breed of cattle, now extinct, but native to Europe and Asia.”

“And that’s just, what? A little tidbit you have for Whitelighter trivia night?”

“I’ll have you know, Maggie, there would be no modern domestic cattle without the dear ure of old—the classic longhorn steer being a prime example.” Harry put the horn in his bag, looking affronted.

“But does it tell us who came out to play?”

“Not yet. I’ll take it to the Elders and see if they can suss out anything. I think we are done for the evening.”

“Babe… wait—you… it’s okay, it’s okay.” Niko had one arm gripping the pillow next to her head, the other loosely fisting a handful of her wife’s golden hair. Her entire body felt tight, like a drawn bow, too close to snapping. “It’s the alcohol, really, I’m fine.”

“Nik, I…” Greta’s eyes were watery as she dropped her cheek against Niko’s thigh.

“Just some whiskey dick,” the brunette huffed, trying for her best comforting expression as she gently pulled her wife back up her body. “Sorry babe. My fault.”

“I can try—“

“It’s okay. I’m tired.” She wanted to get off. She truly did, the ache of it still burning low in her belly even as she called things off. Greta had been dutifully trying different tactics for more than thirty minutes. Not even feeling the blonde lose herself around her fingers, which usually left her hovering at the edge, had helped. That coiled pressure sat tight and insistent in her gut, worsened by Greta’s attempts to unwind it, and now she was just an overstimulated mess.
The blonde slumped against her, face buried in her sweaty neck. “I’m sorry.”

Niko twisted around to look down at her face and tapped a pale shoulder until their eyes met again. “Baby. It happens. Don’t worry. We have plenty more nights together. All of them, in fact.”

Greta sniffl ed, curling a hand over Niko’s hipbone. “It’s just... been so long since we’ve done this, Nik. Even tried.”

Letting her fall back on the pillow, Niko sighed, considering the ceiling intently. Fuck. This should not have been happening. Women would bite off their own arm to be with her wife. Greta was a vision, clothed or naked—all soft, creamy skin and generous curves in the best places, the kind that other people got implants to achieve, along with toned muscle underneath from where she did CrossFit with Perry at least five times a week. Greta looked like fucking Blake Lively for chrissakes, and yet Niko was laying there naked against her, dry as the Sahara. Fuck. Her mind wouldn’t stop racing, like a View-Master at lightning speed, and goddamnit wasn’t alcohol supposed to help with this kind of thing? She pinched the bridge of her nose with her thumb and forefinger. What was the matter with her?

Unbidden and unwelcome, the memory of Perry kissing her new girlfriend into a puddle earlier popped into her mind. Stupid charming, nice, Ruby-Rose-looking, gym trainer Perry would never have bedroom problems in either direction. Perry oozed that languid soft butch energy, had since the day they’d met, where it’d taken Niko three weeks to even get Greta’s number. The new girlfriend (Mel?) had been quiet and aloof all night, but she’d practically fallen out in their entryway at the kiss. It was the most life Niko had seen out of her since she’d shown up looking like a prey animal about to bolt. At the very least, Mel was undeniably intriguing, despite her awkwardness. Truthfully, Niko had been a little taken aback by her instant, wildly inappropriate attraction to the stranger, and it had taken a lot of concentration not to stare over the dinner table all night.

Because come on, those lips—

Niko nearly startled at the brush of skin against her cheek, coming back down to her body. Greta’s hand hovered cautiously, fingertips just barely touching her cheek. “Where’d you just go?”

Oh nowhere, just lusting after our friend’s girlfriend. “Thinking about work.”

Greta worried her bottom lip, clearly suspicious. “Are we okay, Nik?”

“Yeah, baby. Of course. Just a little hiccup.”

“Are you sure? Nothing’s wrong? Did I do something?”

And here was the difficulty. If someone held a gun to Niko’s head and asked why they were struggling, she wasn’t sure she would be able to put words to it. Even though they were pressed tightly together, skin to skin, Niko felt the yawning chasm between them, cold and heavy in her bones. But she was tired. And she had no words. So she just said:

“Nothing’s wrong, baby.”

Chapter End Notes

I was not a huge fan of the original Charmed, but I did watch a lot of it. There’s
something unnecessarily limiting about the original Charmed lore (like I never understood why they'd have 1 power??), but at the same time, they always left the door open for something new and totally out of left field, which I do appreciate.

The Niko/Mel storyline felt really rushed and unnecessarily messy (Greta? She left her fiance? What?), so I'm trying to work out some of those things in flashbacks and dialogue, even if it takes forever and we have to spend some time with Niko/Greta and Mel/OC. I don't like reading flashbacks in all italics, but they left us with so many loose ends... gotta get through it.

In conclusion: I was HiGhLy oFfEnDeD by what they did to Niko, and I honestly assumed she was never coming back, so I'm just going for whatever Fix-It I would have wanted to see.
never sing that song you like

Chapter Summary

The Charmed Ones have no chill. Morris gets suspicious. The demon makes its debut appearance.

Chapter Notes

chapter mood: "TEST DRIVE" by Joji

:: dance instructor voice :: And we're worldbuildin', and we're worldbuildin'.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Vikings?”

“Vikings.”

Mel absentmindedly smeared butter on her sourdough toast as Maggie and Harry did their typical verbal dance.

“Vikings... have demons?” Maggie scoffed. “I must have missed the part about Viking exorcisms in history.”

“Well, the Vikings worshipped the Norse gods, so it is actually the, er, Norse who have demons, of a sort. But it was the Vikings brought this particular spirit over the pond. It seems Mr. Paulson picked up the horn at a garage sale north of the border sometime in the last year. With the holidays coming up, perhaps he was looking to unload some specialty items for people seeking gifts.” Harry paused, the next thought clearly forming on his face: “Also, do you really think your history classes told you everything there is to know about Vikings?”

“Big dudes. Long beards. Boats.”

Macy had the Book open on the table and sipped orange juice with one hand as she flipped pages with the other. “Drinking horns are pretty popular with the dudebros on campus lately. It makes them feel so very manly. As if the bigness and the beards were transferrable.”

Harry shrugged at no one in particular.

“So what do we do next?”

“We may be able to use the horn for divining the thing’s location, but the efficacy of that method will depend on how it moves. I would also hesitate to pit you ladies against an ancient magical being without a little more information first. Maybe some reconnaissance before we, er, throw down.”

The sisters variously nodded and shrugged their assent. It was a little anticlimactic.
The whitelighter smiled weakly and cleared his throat. “There is... one more thing. A bit of a curveball, as they say.”

Mel glanced up mid-chew and found Harry was looking directly, pointedly, at her. “Wha?”

“It turns out that the primary homicide detective assigned to the case is an intrepid gumshoe named James Morris. And, er...”

When he didn’t go on, Mel had to swallow both her toast and a flare of annoyance. “Okay?”

“Detective Morris is this timeline’s partner of... a one Detective Hamada.”

Oh. Mel flashed back to Stephanie’s words at the party: *We heard on the scanner about that murder out south. EMTs said it was unique.* She cleared her throat several times and took a few gulps of water, suddenly hot under the gaze of her sisters and the whitelighter. “Well, I mean, it’s not like we have to talk to the police or anything, right? We don’t have to even see her... them. It’s fine.”

Macy’s eyes narrowed to slits. “It’s... fine?”

“Yes! You know... I’m with Perry now, Niko’s married, it’s all good.”

“Niko’s married? To that Jennifer-Lawrence-in-her-blonde-times harpy?” Maggie had closed the space between the kitchen counter and the table with superhuman speed, motivated by the power of FOMO. “Have you been looking at her Facebook again?”

Before Mel could slap the phone out of her hand, Maggie had pulled up said profile. She frowned. “That’s not on her public info. I don’t even see wedding pictures.” The furious typing began. “Not on her Instagram, either.”

“It was in the paper! Public record, you know. Unemployed, lots of free time. To read the paper. Good for them, right?” Mel wasn’t entirely sure why she was lying, but she felt fairly sure that she wasn’t ready to tell them about her evening yet.

“Which paper?” asked Maggie, scenting blood in the water.

“The, um—Daily... Hilltowne... Press.“

“Mel.” Macy’s voice had that big sisterly timbre she’d been working on for months. “Remember why you cast the spell. This was about keeping Niko safe. You worked so hard to move on, and Perry seems really nice—so just... talk to us, okay? If things are... too much. There’s a chance we run into her, but she’s an entirely new person, new timeline. Just remember that. I don’t want to see you like you were right after the spell, that’s all.”

Mel looked down at her plate, throat suddenly dry. She’d been prepared for suspicion and preemptive accusations, maybe some arguing, but now felt even worse for thinking her sisters would do anything but want to help and protect her. “Yeah, of course.”

With the sisterly exchange over, Harry clapped his hands together at the first opportunity to exit. “I’ll leave you ladies to it, then!”

Assamese. That was the mysterious language their unsub had used to write the message on the ceiling, and after a solid four hours, Niko had finally managed to translate the words. The sentences were ominous, maddenly vague, and so very random that she was having trouble processing what it might mean for the murder of Chris Paulson, if anything. If not for the Asiatic Languages department
at the U, she might not have even known where to start. The thing was, the message was noncommittal, but also so dramatic that it seemed like something a very established killer would do, someone who was comfortable enough with it that they would take the time to leave such a dramatic scene. If the murderer was a serial killer, they might have to wait until their next victims turned up to find out, because nowhere in any database or search engine had she been able to find a reference to Assamese in a murder case. Maybe the script was just a red herring, meant to force the police to do exactly what Niko was doing: wasting an entire day chasing down a big fat goose egg. But if that were true, she was back at the conclusion that they were chasing an experienced, violent killer confident enough to toy with investigators… and so it went.

She groaned and tossed her pen across the library table in frustration, and a nearby student half-obscured by a mountain of books glared at her. Niko gave him a quick apology wave, and then started stuffing her notes into her bag. The origin of the three-pointed shape still eluded her, and after two weeks they had exactly no leads and forensics that went nowhere. Nobody had even come to claim Chris Paulson’s body, meaning she barely had a sense of who he even was besides a fence and a thug. Jimmy really didn’t need another unsolved on his plate, so she’d continue working the case with gusto for as long as it took.

Back at the front door area, a thought pricked at Niko’s brain. Assamese. She’d found only three books on it in the library, two of which were mind-numbing etymological histories of Indo-Aryan languages in general, and one that was your standard translation dictionary, which was missing pages and practically disintegrating in her hands. She walked back to the front desk and smiled at the middle aged woman behind it, peering at her nametag before the librarian looked up.

“Rhonda! Hi, um, I found a twenty dollar bill that I think someone used as a bookmark in this book and forgot. Could you maybe let me know who had it last, and I’ll return it to them?”

Rhonda’s smile was apologetic before she even responded: “Sorry, that’s not something I can just release. Privacy, you know.”

“Well, well—I get it. I wouldn’t want to break the rules. It’s just, twenty bucks goes a long way these days, you know? I hope the person isn’t too bad off without it, this could be a month’s gas money…”

The librarian obviously saw straight through Niko’s little ramble, but she still gave a resigned sigh. “Looks like the last person to check this out was a Macy Vaughn. That’s all I will tell you.”

“You’re the best! Thank you!”

“You didn’t hear it from me!” called Rhonda as Niko scurried towards the door. “I’ll deny it with my dying breath!”

Niko’s phone buzzed as she hit the first rush of winter air, and she scowled at the screen for a moment (she really wanted to put on her earmuffs) before answering, “Hamada.”

“It’s Aiko.”

The detective paused at her patrol car door, recognizing the voice but not the name.

“Zelda.”

“Oh! Oh, I definitely knew that.” She could’ve sworn she heard Zelda’s eyes roll, but pressed on. “What’s up, you got something for me?”

“I wouldn’t say I got it for you, per se,” answered the tech flatly. “And I’m not sure if it’s actually
anything, but it’s weird.”

“Weird is better than useless.” Niko turned the engine and waited for her phone to connect to the BlueTooth in the car.

“...from the body, and there was animal fur in the wounds.”

Niko stopped mid-way out of backing from her parking spot. “Excuse me?”

“It’s hair, it’s non-human, but it doesn’t readily match anything easy, like a cow or a camel. The DNA could be degraded.”

“So it could have come from one of the artifacts in the house. Can you test anything with fur on it?”

“You gonna talk to O’Doule about my overtime for that?”

A car honked, and Niko waved apologetically for the second time in ten minutes. “I’ll even bring you french fries when I get back to the office.”

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May, 2016

Mel traced a fingertip along Niko’s chest, along the pleasing dip down the middle of her stomach. She followed her finger with her lips and the occasional swipe of her tongue until she heard a soft chuckle from above.

“What?” she asked, turning her eyes to look up at her lover even as she continued peppering kisses across her soft lower belly.

“Tickles,” whispered Niko, eyes closed.

“Mmm but your abs, babe… I think you should wear crop tops.”

“A crop top?” laughed the taller woman, catching Mel’s chin with her hand. “In your dreams.”

“Oh yes in my dreams.” Mel shouted in surprise and delight as Niko suddenly surged up, rolling them so she was pinned to the mattress. “Well hello there Officer Hotmada. Nice of you to join me.”

Niko growled into her neck, “You’re gonna be the death of me.”

Mel leaned up and nipped her earlobe, probably a little harder than she meant, earning a head shake and pout. “What a way to go out though, huh?”

A chirping noise from the bedside table made both of them freeze, a Pavlovian response to the reminder of reality outside this moment, in the sun-drenched paradise of Mel’s bedroom... to be specific, that Niko was still engaged to her partner of four years.

Mel’s stomach dropped as Niko slid off her to snooze the alarm, then sat up and rested heavily on her arms. She stared at the expanse of smooth, golden skin on Niko’s back and tried not to think about the way her chest clenched imaging someone else’s hands there. Straying too close to that thought made her skin crawl with an icy dread, like the moment you feel a beloved birthday balloon’s string slip out of your fingers. They had not talked about That yet.

As the police officer began shrugging into her patrol uniform, Mel slid to the edge of the bed and grabbed Niko’s hand away from mechanically fastening buttons, and she held it until their eyes met. “Hey, um... I just wanted to say, I’m having a lot of fun with you... doing this... but I can’t be the
other woman forever. We promised we’d talk about this when… it seemed right.”

Niko sighed and knelt between Mel’s knees, taking both her hands in hers. She squeezed and relaxed her grip a few times before getting out: “I understand. Can I… do you….” The officer swallowed thickly. “I don’t want this to come off the wrong way.”

Rubicon crossing ahead. Proceed with caution. Mel allowed herself the time to take a deep, steadying breath. She no longer had the will or desire to deny that what started out as opportunistic fucking had transformed into something… else. It currently lived somewhere tucked away in her chest, sleeping, but present. Waiting. Growing, if left unattended. “Just… say what you need to say.”

Although Mel startled when Niko’s police radio crackled from across the room, the officer remained steady, thumbs rubbing slow circles over Mel’s thighs as she gathered her words. “Greta and I have been in trouble for a long time, obviously. There are moments where it seems fine…. but I’ve just been too chickenshit to do something. It’s my fault that it hasn’t ended yet. And my biggest regret about that is it… People make a lot of assumptions. Judge. In situations like… this.”

It took a few seconds of processing the halting words, but Mel concluded with fair confidence that this sounded like movement towards something (dot dot dot) more.

“So this ve-ry eloquent word scramble is, uh, just to be clear that… I don’t expect anything of you. I know have some things to work out for myself, too, but I don’t want there to be this shadow of my mistakes forever. I really, really like you, and I think we could be good together. If you want, of course. If you want me.”

“And the drama?”

“And the drama.”

Apparentley emptied of words, Niko deflated, slumping against the shorter woman with her forehead against her shoulder. Mel gently but firmly pulled a handful of Niko’s hair so her head tipped back up, and their eyes locked. “You aren’t going to call off your engagement with Greta because of me. You’re calling off your engagement with Greta because you need to. That’s what you’re saying, right?”

“Right. You’re not a safe landing, you are a whole new world to me.”

Mel kissed her, a little too hard, but briefly. “Prove to me that you want it. I’m not going to pressure you into doing anything, but… let’s just say, if you became single again, I’d be first in line. And Niko?”

“Hmm?”

“A ‘whole new world’? Really?”

“That’s where we’ll be-e-e… A thrilling place…” Niko sang, unabashed, chuckling as she dropped her body back onto Mel, who giggled and shrieked in delight despite the added weight in her chest, and not just from her lover pressing her into the mattress.

Whatever had burst out of that old horn, it was fast. The divination crystal swung across its chain as if the miles it represented were just the inches on the page. Other times, it would hover for hours, usually over wooded areas that would be dangerous to traipse without knowing what they might find. Sometimes, it just disappeared entirely, probably time spent in another realm. The movements didn’t appear to have a pattern or cycle, but luckily, the visitor didn’t appear to spend any significant
amount of time near their house, mostly just incidental passes. They wanted to get it to it during the
day, and as out in the open as possible. Nobody in Hilltowne had been reporting anything stranger
than usual for a college town, like students climbing random structures (they would climb anything)
or dumping trash in neighbors’ yards.

Mel was tired of it. Two weeks with zero occasions to use magic, or not the fun kind, anyway. So
she’d taken matters into her own hands and managed to schedule a block between her sisters’ iCal
appointments for a shot at spotting the Roadrunner-esque demon.

They were busy dumping random defense (enchanted rope, pure silver blade, salt: the usual) items
into a bag when the doorbell rang, prompting confused looks between the sisters. After a quick
sudden death tournament of rock, paper, scissors, Mel was the loser who had to go downstairs and
answer the door.

Through the peephole, she could see a man in a black parka, blonde, mid-thirties, scruffy facial hair.
His arm was raised mid-knock, and Mel opened the door slowly, peeking just her head out. “Yes?”

The mystery caller held up a police badge in his other hand, and Mel’s stomach dropped before he
even said: “Good afternoon, ma’am. I’m Detective Morris, and this is my partner, Detective Hamada.
Is Macy Vaughn home, ma’am?”

Oh no. Mel hadn’t seen Niko standing behind Morris when she looked through the peephole, but
now the detective was definitely there, leaning her head around his shoulder, and she peered in the
doorway for just a second before Mel could see the dots connect in her head. No no no—

“No no no—”

“Mel?” said Niko, moving around her partner. “You live here?”

“Oh! Hi!” Mel heard herself let out a shrill, strained laughing type noise, smooth operator that she
was. “Yes! I do! Nice to see you again. Macy is, uh, my sister. Remember? The cooking one?”

“We just wanna talk to her,” said Jimmy, flicking his eyes between his partner and Mel. “And how
do you two know each other?”

Niko was already looking past Mel at the footsteps she could hear approaching the door, and this
was all getting very out of control very quickly. She answered almost absent-mindedly: “Mel is
dating my friend, Perry—you know Perry, the trainer?”

Jimmy nodded as if that explained everything, and then Maggie and Macy were there and pushing
Mel out of the way, ostensibly to distance her from Niko judging by the warning look Macy shot
over her shoulder.

“Macy Vaughn?” asked Jimmy, one eyebrow quirked.

Macy flashed her friendliest smile, trying with subpar success to lean against the doorframe in a way
that was both casual and also blocking entrance completely. “What can I do for you?”

“We’re working on a case where the perpetrator appears to have left a message in a language called
Assamese. Are you familiar with it?”

“Why would… that… ring a bell with me?”

Mel managed to squeeze herself between Macy and the door, wanting to intervene with a brilliant
excuse that she would devise as the words left her mouth, but instead she popped out onto the stoop
with an ungainly stumble that had Niko automatically catching her by the shoulders as she chuckled
softly.
“Whoa there, calm down everyone,” said the detective, keeping her hands on Mel until she was sure she’d recovered. “Can we come inside?”

“I’ll need more information before I let some strangers just barge into our house... detectives ,” replied Macy thinly. “What’s this about?”

Niko stepped away from Mel, the small pivot giving the shorter woman the space she needed to breathe. Her skin practically burned where the detective’s familiar hands had steadied her.

“I’m sorry ma’am, we can’t give you a lot of details. I can tell you this is a murder investigation. The last person who checked out the library’s Assamese-English Dictionary, 1973 edition, was you, Ms. Vaughn. I don’t have anything to suggest that you’re a suspect, but if you’ll just let us run some things by you, then we’ll get out of your hair—and we don’t have to come inside. It’s pretty cold out here, though.”

She looked, as always, handsome and put together—a blue velvet blazer, gray slim slacks, and a white scoopneck tee that showed off just the tops of her collarbones. It would be helpful if she would stop smiling like that too, the “aw, shucks, you’re a pretty lady” face Niko always pulled to get her way with women, and some men. Old ladies especially fell for this routine. Mel certainly was not immune, and even Macy looked like she swooned for a second there.

“Just come inside,” snorted the eldest sister, finally stepping back.

While Macy sat with the detectives in the living room, Maggie none-too-subtly dragged Mel into the kitchen and hissed, “What the fuck?”

“What? How is this my fault?”

“I heard what she said about Perry!” Maggie pointed to the living room. “How long have you been hanging out with her? Are you insane ?”

“I’m not hanging out with her.” Mel had to take a breath to calm down when her voice rose above a whisper. “It’s exactly like she said, Perry’s a friend of hers. I didn’t know, and… you remember that dinner party a few weeks ago?”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “You’re kidding me.”

“I didn’t think we’d see each other again, or not for awhile, and she’s married , it’s not like we see each other one on one, or at all. Perry doesn’t hang out with them, like, all the time. I promise, I wasn’t... trying anything.”

After a heavy beat, Maggie sighed, and her face softened. “Fine, but we’re not done talking about this. Are you okay?”

Mel decided on honesty. “I don’t really have a choice, do I?”

Maggie frowned sympathetically and held out her arms, hugging her older sister tightly.

Niko’s second interaction with Perry’s girlfriend, Mel... didn’t seem much less awkward than the first. It might’ve been worse, even. Then again, they were talking murder investigation in the sisters’ living room. Maybe Mel’s nervous energy could be forgiven, but the way she kept looking at the detective from the kitchen, eyes permanently widened—what was that? Guilt? Fear? Should she take it personally? Or the strangest, most alarming thought: Did these sisters have something to do with the murder? She’d walked in convinced that was a no, but all three of them were exchanging furtive
glances about something. Best case scenario, maybe they had something illicit in the next room. The youngest, Maggie, was wearing sorority letters, after all.

Macy explained with genuine confidence that she and her sisters were antiquities buffs, going so far as to produce some strange looking artifacts they’d apparently collected as part of this… totally normal mutual hobby. Their alibis needed to be verified, but they all sounded plausible and easy to check—Macy had been working in her lab, Maggie had been in class, and Mel had been bartending, adding hurriedly that the day shift was “shit for tips” and she really wanted to get a job at the university.

Ultimately, the sisters hadn’t provided so much as a whiff of a lead. Niko felt the beginning of a headache behind her eyes as she closed her notebook.

“Well, we should let you get back to your Saturday,” said Jimmy when he’d run out of ideas. “Thanks for your time. Is it okay if we get your phone numbers, just in case we have more questions?”

The sisters agreed, dutifully writing down their contact information in Morris’ notebook. For all intents and purposes, they seemed eager to cooperate despite their odd, nervous behavior. That could mean a lot of things. Could it be “guilty” behavior? Maybe. Everything in this case felt like a big fat “perhaps”. Niko chewed her lip and watched the sisters say goodbye to Morris, then her phone lit up with O’Doule’s name and his special ringtone, the Apple one that sounded like a nuclear warning alarm. “Hamada.”

“ ’There’s a second victim. ”

Niko immediately twisted away from the sisters, moving towards the door and holding her hand over her mouth and the bottom of her phone. “Are you sure?”

“Got a funny script, same symbol, in blood this time. The old warehouse on County Road 10, mile marker 18. Get there as soon as you can.”

Sighing, Niko ended the call and held the phone against her suddenly pounding forehead. She and Greta were supposed to have “a talk” in about three hours, but that would now have to be postponed. Again. And she was so looking forward to the additional mini-talk they would have now, mostly consisting of Greta railing against this job ( “How could we ever raise a baby together if these are your hours?” ) and Niko ending the argument by disappearing into the garage to drink beers until she was sure Greta had given up and gone to bed. Joy.

“What’s up?” asked Jimmy, who’d moved closer and donned his coat.

With the sisters watching them like owls, Niko turned away to quietly answer, “Second db. We have to go.” Turning back, she raised her voice to reach the homeowners: “Thank you again for your time. Mel, tell Perry I said she owes me twenty on the Thunder game.”

Mel gave her a quick nod, but it was Maggie who responded: “Good luck, officers—I mean, detectives! I hope you… get that bad guy.”

She’d been moving forward as she spoke, and suddenly the youngest sister’s outstretched hand nearly jammed into Niko’s stomach. Somewhat caught off guard, Niko accepted it, and the small woman shook for a beat or two longer than strictly necessary. She quickly did the same to Jimmy, and then finally, the detectives made it back into their department car.

“They were… interesting,” he commented casually as they pulled out of the neighborhood. “I mean,
you’ve taught me well, cops and POC and whatnot—but it was… different? I’m trying to put my finger on it.”

Niko took a moment to pat herself on the back for her padawan ally, who could still use some work on his delivery, but then agreed. “This might sound weird, but did it seem like… they were nervous about me? Specifically?”

Jimmy drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. “Maybe. You are pretty dreamy, Detective Hot mada. I saw you flex to get into the house. The middle one practically passed out. What is it, the half-dimple?”

“First, it was cold outside so, whatever works. Second, her name is Mel, and third, if you weren’t driving, I would punch you. Just remember that for when we stop.”

“Her name is Mel,” muttered Morris in a mocking, but quiet tone.

Niko absolutely socked him in the arm when they got out of the vehicle, and he took it like a man who knew he deserved it. Their jockeying quickly came to a halt when they entered the warehouse, where another macabre tableau waited. There was no religious element this time, confirming their thought that the crucifix in Paulson had been an opportunistic piece of flair, but there was the same crumpling of limbs. There was also at least one more noticeable difference.

“We looked everywhere, and there are some deputies out there still looking, but no sign of his skull so far,” said Zelda with a weary sort of look.

Niko knelt next to where the man’s head should have been. His neck ended a couple inches above the shoulder in a ragged, convex line.

“Doesn’t look like they did this with something already in the warehouse, or if they did, they took it with ‘em,” narrated Jimmy, hands on hips. He added under his breath for good measure: “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“It’s not a clean cut, and there is some crushing damage to the flesh,” said the medical examiner. “I would guess the head was removed by some sort of vice. Pressure from the top and the bottom.”

“What machine could even do that?”

“Something industrial, heavy, like for metal stamping. But there’s no power to this building.” Zelda chewed her lip. “Could be manually powered, something that ratchets, like a woodworking clamp.”

Niko’s headache was becoming a thunderclap between her eyes, as if in sympathy for the victim.

“ID?”

“Hank Faulk, 43. No drivers license, just a state ID in his back pocket,” the tech replied.

“Hank… Faulk…” repeated Jimmy slowly, his eyes turned upward as if physically searching his brain. “Why do I know that name?”

They phoned dispatch for more information, and it turned out Morris had arrested Mr. Henry “Hank” Faulk during his first year on VICE; the guy was a notoriously violent john who often complained that women hadn’t delivered “acceptable” service to get paid. He interestingly also had a history of smuggling stolen property, and that sounded like a solid enough connection to the previous victim. A case was taking shape with this overlapping information, but the plot remained fuzzy and out of reach. Hopefully, forensics would be more helpful this time.
When Zelda showed Niko the patch of concrete where another three-pointed symbol had been drawn, the detective could have punched the wall upon seeing that the message below was written in a different language, something no more recognizable than the last. This time, it looked almost like hieroglyphics, or maybe an Asian character type language... She took another picture.

“There’s only one car outside, and only one set of tire marks. What, did our unsub walk here? We’re pretty off the beaten path,” muttered Jimmy, circling the symbols. “And got away carrying some kind of... mega murder machine and a blowtorch? Does this guy fucking fly?”

Niko straightened up, groaning at the winter ache in her bad knee, which had lost the battle with a small caliber bullet her second year on the job. “We gotta find out what these guys were trading, see if we can get inventories or sales orders, find out what's missing.”

“Right, because these are the exact kinda dudes who are going to keep pristine books?” Morris held up his hands in retreat when she almost snapped at him. “Sorry, you’re right. That’s all we got. Are you gonna translate this too?”

“Maybe I don’t have to. Remember that time we met that trio of people with a keen interest in weird languages?”

Morris rolled his eyes.

“Okay so, they totally thought we were being sketchy, and there’s a second body,” announced Maggie as she closed the door behind the detectives, having used the goodbye handshakes for a primary source gander at the situation. The next, she said directly to Mel: “Also... Niko likes your lips. A lot.”

“Maggie,” scolded Macy.

“If I had to hear that, then you do too,” she snapped back. “The old warehouse on County Road 10, mile marker 18.”

“Well, we can go visit when the cops are finished with it. Do you guys still want to try for the demon? I feel a little all packed up with nowhere to go.”

Maggie hesitated in the doorway, and Mel tilted her head in question. “I just... uh, nothing.”

“I didn’t ask you anything.”

The youngest sister sighed, arms crossing tightly. “Right.” And after a brief, internal struggle that was written all over her face, she added: “I didn’t like what she was thinking about... Greta. It was... really sad, I guess.”

Mel took a deep breath against the pull of emotion behind her eyes. She chose to press on. There was nothing to say to that. “Let’s just find this demon.”

They found the visitor roaming the edge of Hilltowne Park, and their subsequent plan amounted to all of running around with their phones in a group call until they caught up with it. Mel and Macy went to the park while Maggie kept the divination going, giving them updates on the demon’s location as they went. Because nothing could be as easy as cornering it by the skate park, they trekked about a mile into the woods before coming across a trace of it.

Fur. A patch of black fur, to be specific. Mel spotted it hanging from a broken branch about four feet off the ground, and might not have thought much of the dark spot except for the shimmer of energy
around, just enough to catch her eye. They bagged it and kept going for maybe another half mile before a noise made them both freeze in a crouch.

“Should be in front of you,” said Maggie into Mel’s earbuds, whispering even though she wasn’t in the forest with them.

Mel tilted her head and honed in on movement ahead. She had the impression of a slow glide, but her eyes were having trouble distinguishing the edges of the shape—until she saw it, like a splash of cold water.

“What is it? What do you see?” huffed Maggie, more concerned than curious.

Macy’s face lost a little color when she saw it, too: A wolf, pacing across the forest perpendicular to the sisters. Neither of them had ever seen a wolf in real life, but it didn’t take an expert to see this was clearly a massive specimen. Mel couldn’t decide if she felt better or worse knowing the size confirmed that this was their new, very magical foe.

“Demon wolf,” whispered Mel, tugging Macy back the way they came. “Abort, abort.”

“Demon wolf!?” hissed Maggie loud enough that both older sisters winced.

“Yeah, yeah,” muttered Macy, hobbling to sink on a chair. “So do you know who he is?”

Harry finally appeared in front of them, catching one sister in each arm, and the wolf gave one last hail mary leap before they disappeared, reappearing in their attic.

“Problem, ladies?” he asked, straightening his blazer. “Was that part of the plan or did it go wrong? It’s hard to tell sometimes.”

“Did you see it?” Mel was doubled over, trying to catch her breath from the life or death sprint. She didn’t even have enough spare energy to take issue with his sass. “Demon wolf.”

“I saw. I wish you would’ve let me know before your spy mission.”

“Yeah, yeah,” muttered Macy, hobbling to sink on a chair. “So do you know who he is?”

“No, but the wolf form will certainly narrow it down. I’ll ask the Elders, and please—for me—don’t go chasing the wolf until I’m back. Please.”

Mel waved him off, and once he was gone with the sample of fur, she dropped to the floor. “Okay. That’s enough huntswomaning for today.”

Macy laughed wheezily and accepted a glass of water from Maggie. Once they had sufficiently calmed down, the sisters shared about what they’d seen, commiserating on the difficulty of controlling it.
“It’s no Harbinger, but I wouldn’t want to try that again without all three of us there,” concluded Macy, closing the Book. “We need a really big net or a way to slow it down, weaken it enough for us to send it to Hell or kill it.”


“It wasn’t very talkative,” offered the oldest sister with a shrug. “Just… toothy. Let’s wait and see what the Elders say, maybe if they know who it is, they can fill in the blanks.”

Both younger sisters groaned in frustration, and Macy tossed crumpled papers containing rejected spells at them making “poor baby” noises until they were laughing and heading downstairs.

———

“Tap.

“It doesn’t match any fur we found in the house. I sent a sample to a geneticist who specializes in this type of thing—“

“Tap.

“—and he says that it’s extinct wolf fur. Don’t laugh, but it’s a dire wolf.”

“Tap.

“Morris, I swear I will shove you in a trashcan and throw it off a waterfall if you keep doing that,” snapped Niko, unable to laugh at Zelda’s tinny words, when she normally would have, because: “A fucking dire wolf? Like Game of Thrones?”

“Stolen likeness,” said the tech after a beat. “Wikipedia says the real things weren’t that much bigger than modern wolves, just their teeth, so that’s kinda disappointing. Also, you are really bad at threatening people.”

“Cap sent out an email. Personal banter and threats of bodily harm should be kept PG-13 in the pen. Didn’t say anything about capital punishment, though.” Niko chucked a blank notebook at Morris, whacking him on the shoulder, when she saw him rear up to throw another Skittle at her. She mouthed Fuck you several times as Zelda continued, and the next projectile candy beaned her shoulder before dropping to the desk.

“Here’s the thing. This fur sample is the most complete genetic sample of the dire wolf that’s ever been found, by a long shot. These weren’t hunted out by guns, they went extinct like 100,000 years ago. It’s ludicrous that I even got to touch this fur. If it weren’t part of our crime scene, the Smithsonian would be breaking into the lab.”

“But what does the fur mean for our scene? Why would it be on the murder weapon?”

“I think… that is your job to figure out, no offense.”

Zelda’s gamble on a jibe paid off, because Niko froze, then laughed softly, a little bit of her broody energy leaving through her lungs. “Thanks, Aiko.”

When they’d hung up, Niko relayed the update to her partner, whose face grew steadily less amused.

“So… the murder weapon… is a dinosaur wolf?” Morris shoved the rest of his Skittles in his mouth and groaned with annoyance as he slammed the crushed wrapper in his trashcan. “Uthe-thess.”
Exhausted, frustrated, and nearing the end of a long shift, Niko abandoned her dignity and ate the Skittles that had landed on her desk as she hummed her agreement.

“And what’re you two pouting about?”

Morris and Niko shot upwards from where they’d been prone over their desks, both shouting, “Sir!”

O’Doule glanced down at Niko’s notebook. “The weird case?”

“Yeah… the weird case, sir,” sighed Niko, turning a couple pages to illustrate the walls of text and sketches. “And it’s just getting weirder.”

The captain leaned down over her notes, his eyes narrowing, then he plucked his glasses from his shirt pocket. Still squinting, he held the frames in front of his face, not bothering to unfold them.

“You know that’s a triquetra, right?”

“A what?”

“Triquetra. Father, Son, Holy Spirit.” O’Doule touched each point for each part of the Trinity. “It’s not exclusively Christian, but mass is always where I saw it, you heathens. Crack the case now?”

“Sure, if the killer was Jes—”

“Don’t you dare,” snapped the captain, pointing at Morris. “Go back to being scared of me. And Hamada—” He swung his accusing finger to her, and Niko just barely stopped herself from scooting her seat back. “You look like shit. I can’t have you carrying around your service weapon looking like you’re a Running Dead extra.”

“Walking Dead?”

“What did I just say, Morris?” O’Doule smirked at them when the detective nearly fell out of his chair, and then he swaggered off back to his office, muttering something like “still got it”.

Morris and Niko sat in a stunned, annoyed silence for a few minutes, processing.

He spoke first: “Why is he so goddamn scary?”

“I have no idea,” Niko laughed, her earlier annoyance melting away. “But I hear his voice or see him at my desk and my ass just—” She dragged two hands together in open fists.

They chuckled together for a few minutes, and then a serious look took over Morris’ face. “You don’t think… this is aimed at the sisters, do you? Or they might be involved in some way? Three sisters who happen to hobby in the world that these dudes do business?”

“No evidence they’ve done business based on both victims’ phone and email records; there isn’t a trace of these sisters. They’ve also got alibis.” Niko stared down at the figure, the triquetra, as an ominous but unnamable feeling settled in her stomach. “They’ve helped us with the investigation.”

“I mean, we haven’t gotten anywhere, so… have they really been helping us?” Morris moved over to her desk, pointing to the first message. “Three.” He touched the triquetra sketch. “Three.” He held out his own notebook with the three women’s names and numbers. “Three. And you said yourself, they’ve been weird. I saw it.”

“Come on, they’re just… You can’t just say someone’s a suspect because they’re a three-sibling set and the number three happens to appear with strange frequency in our case. They’re harmless.”
Morris raised his eyebrows. “Are they?"

“Okay, Mr. Conspiracy. Well what do you want to do, haul them in, make ‘em sweat? Hope they don’t see right through it and just walk right back out because we have zero evidence?”

“Not yet, not yet.” Morris was holding his hands up as if in defense and used his soothing voice. “Let’s see what forensics come back from Faulk before we head down that road, so we don’t waste these fine taxpayer dollars paying for Megan’s private preschool.” Morris rubbed a hand down his face, then stretched. “Time to clock out. You know that O’Doule is right, yeah?”

Niko frowned at him. “About what?”

“You look like shit.” He popped up from his chair to cut off her protest, putting his palms down on her desk and waiting until she looked up at his face. “And I know how it is, and I’m a man, so I’ve tried to give you a little space because I would rather change a thousand diapers than have this conversation, but you… I’m worried, okay?” The last was said in a huff of masculine insecurity, but Morris’ eyes were round with sincere concern. “You’re a good partner, and you’re my friend.”

“I’ve been sleeping on the couch for like three weeks,” murmured the younger detective, avoiding his eyes. “It’s, uh, hard to sleep… on it.”

“Okay. Okay. You can be like that. I got teenagers, I can do this.” Morris made an exaggerated show of puffing his breaths as if gearing up for a big sonata. “Stop me if you’ve heard any of this before.”

“What?”

He slid into the chair next to her desk, but leaned forward and lowered his voice so that she had to focus to hear him. “My first wife… We were high school sweethearts. That label carries a lot of weight, a lot of sentimentality. There was a lot of, ‘Oh Jimmy and Susan, they’re the dream’ and ‘I wish I had a relationship like you’. And when you’ve been together for like seven years, that’s the type of thing you want to hear, right? Everyone around us insisted we had the best marriage they’d ever seen in their entire lives.”

Niko’s hand tightened to a fist around her pen, and she had to look away from his earnest expression. Mercifully, he kept going anyway.

“But they didn’t know shit. Yeah, we loved each other, at some point, maybe for the first three years. After that, it was all just a rehearsed sitcom show in front of our friends and family, and then scorched earth once everyone left. We got married because we were bored and unhappy. We had kids because we were bored and unhappy. Lucky for you, that last part is a little easier to avoid for you than it was for me, hmm?”

“What’s this got to do with me?” The fake ignorance felt crumbly and dry in her mouth, and Morris frowned.

“Hamada, it sucked, I was drunk for a year straight afterwards, did some things I’m not proud of, and… try as I might, I am not gonna be able to let you do that to yourself while I watch, unless, you know, you tell me to go fuck off because you’re your own person, though I highly advise against that because I am very wise.”

Niko felt herself reaching that point where holding onto righteous anger and denial bordered on petulant. Morris was a good partner and a good friend, too. She couldn’t hide anything from him. And she very suddenly couldn’t recall why she ever would, anyway. “Fine.”

“Fine what?”
“Things are… bored and unhappy in the Hamada-Smith household. But we’re not getting a divorce. We haven’t even talked about that.”

“You seeing a counselor?”

“Well, no, but—”


Niko glared at him as he smiled back down at her. “No.”

“Try it, my friend. Seriously. That’s why I don’t hate my second wife nearly as much as I hate the first. We took all those steps they put on the mommy blogs, only to find out we really weren’t the good match we thought we were. Nothing personal, except your personality.”

“Mommy blogs?”

“It’s a multi-billion dollar industry, Hamada. Jeez. Luddite.” After a pause, he offered: “You need a place to stay?” When he saw her start to protest, he held up a hand. “Just for some space, a bed, some quiet time to think. One of my AirBnBs is empty for a couple weeks, there’ll be painters during the day, but otherwise it’s yours.”

Niko couldn’t meet his eyes. She wasn’t ready. “Thanks, Jimmy. I… I’m good for now. Like I said, we haven’t even…. I’ll let you know.”

Morris nodded, the kindly smile on his usually scowling face making her chest warm, and then he dragged the strap of his laptop bag up over his shoulder. “Also, I want you to eat a fucking sandwich before you hit your couch tonight, and that is non-negotiable. Got it?”

Hanging out with Perry helped take Mel’s mind off of Niko and the demon, at least for a little while. They had Thai food and stayed for dessert, sticky coconut rice topped with mango slices. Perry listened with genuine interest as Mel vented her frustration with the night shift crew at the bar, but they quickly moved on to less exhaustive topics, like Emily Blunt in the new Mary Poppins movie. Mel felt her heart relax for the first time in weeks as her girlfriend relayed a tale of her obsession with Mary Poppins as a kid, to the point that her parents bought her a separate TV and VCR so she could watch it in the basement and they could get back to their regularly scheduled programming. That story ended with a long, stormy pause, and Mel’s chest twisted with an answering pang of understanding. Perry’s parents had died in a car accident a few years earlier, a terrible topic which nonetheless had quickly and inevitably bonded them on their third date.

Which was why Mel wanted to tear her hair out from the guilt when she lay awake in Perry’s bed that night, the trainer out cold and snoring.

Making out in the Lyft and all the way up to Perry’s second floor apartment had been easy, fun, and hot. But then she’d been on her back, legs wrapped around Perry’s hips as she drove into her… as she neared a desperately needed release, her vision had suddenly blurred, and when she could see clearly again, it was Niko looming over her. Niko muttering her name with eyes closed, fingers curling in that exact right spot—she came undone around Perry’s hand, but she had to bite her lip to avoid sighing Niko.

Mercifully, Perry hadn’t seemed to notice, collapsing as she did and nuzzling into her neck. Tears pricked at her eyes, and breathed out in silent relief that Perry couldn’t see her trying to hold them back. Get it together, Vera.
Eventually, Perry murmured something into her collarbone, and Mel dabbed under her eyes to check for any strays before lifting her girlfriend’s chin. “What was that?”

“I said…” Perry’s eyes were hooded with impending sleep. “Nothing, it’s stupid.”

“Tell me.” Mel wrapped her arms around her neck and kissed her temple. “But off first. You’re heavy, Hulk.”

The trainer made an adorable whining noise, but slid off to one side as requested, keeping one leg tangled with Mel’s. “I said... I’m really happy to have you for the holidays this year.”

Oh. This time, Mel couldn’t do anything about the tears. Her guilt ratcheted up tenfold, colliding in a confusing morass with a sudden warm, delicate feeling for the woman in her arms. “Me too.”

Her phone buzzed as Perry drifted into that sub-awake space, and she rolled to grab it from the black lacquer nightstand, accidentally knocking a glass of water to the floor.

“Shit.”

“Don’t worry… just water.” Perry didn’t even open her eyes. Mel wondered if she should take pride in so thoroughly wearing out someone whose literal job consisted weight and stamina training. She did desperately need a win of some kind for the month, so she took it without shame.

“I’m gonna get a towel.” Mel swung her legs over the side of the bed, thighs immediately goose pimpling at the cold air. She wrapped a quilt around her shoulders and headed into the master bathroom, closing the door quietly behind her. Her phone was almost painfully bright in the darkened, small room.

9:02 lil sis: you missed pizza

9:17 MISSED CALL - PRIVATE NUMBER

9:23 Macy: Niko and Morris want us to see if we can translate the new murder scene message

At least nothing was on fire. Mel retrieved a towel and dropped it on the wet spot before climbing back into bed and wriggling her way into Perry’s side, managing a smile when a muscular arm lifted to let her get closer. She forced herself to focus solely on her girlfriend, the way her chest gently rose and fell, the sound of her breathing, the smell of her skin—spicy, clover and orange, plus sweat and that essence that was just Perry, her sweet, handsome, clueless girlfriend, now snoring softly next to her. She could live with that. She had to, right?

Chapter End Notes

I wish we could’ve seen more interaction between all the sisters and Niko in the old timeline, specifically Maggie, because Niko had to have been around when Marisol died, and do you expect me to believe she let the sisters go through that by themselves, even if Melko broke up later? No way. Headcanon Niko was an important bonus big sister to Maggie and did things like teach her how to put air in her car tires.
take my hand, you’ll like it

Chapter Summary

Somebody gets concussed. Somebody feels left out. Flashback Marisol Vera knows EXACTLY what she is doing. Niko is Mel catnip.

Chapter Notes

chapter mood: "Letter Home" by Childish Gambino
Mel's "I Am The Captain Now" work track: "Living Single" by Big Sean
We're gonna be working through some feelings today.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“It’s Akkadian.”

Niko raised her head from a report to find none other than Macy Vaughn looking down at her from across the desk. She tried to casually close her notebook on the triquetra case. “Dr. Vaughn! Hi. How... did you get in here?”

“Desk sergeant said, and I quote, ‘Hamada is in the pen, and she didn’t say hi to me this morning, so good luck.’” Macy grinned.

“Sounds like Moe.” Sighing, Niko stood to shake Macy’s hand and straighten her clothes. “Akkadian, huh?”

“Related to Sumerian. A true ancient language.” At Niko’s gesture, Macy sat down on the plain wooden chair next to her desk. “It says, ‘Heavy is the heart of a hero with a loved one.’”

“Well that’s a little more poetic than last time, but doesn’t really help us… again.” Niko pianoed her fingers on her desk, humming. “Thanks for doing that. I’m a pretty good researcher, but this... a little out of my wheelhouse. I did have one more thing to run by you, if you have a sec?”

“Sure.”

Niko opened her notebook to the page of scribblings from the first murder. She gestured at the triquetra, careful to keep her other hand over the rest. “Have you ever seen this before?”

The tall woman stared at it intently for a few seconds, then back up at the detective. “No. Never.”

Hm. She was definitely not dealing with a hardened criminal here. Macy blinked rapidly and cleared her throat as she answered, as if she were the star in an instructional video of how to give away a lie with body language. “Never? In all your... antiquities studies?”

“You know, let me take a picture of this, and I’ll see if Mel or Maggie know.”
It was a decent save, and Niko let her get away with it for now, for some unknown reason she would try to process later. “Okay. Thanks anyway. I’m sure you’ve gotta get to work.”

“Let me know if there’s anything else I can research for you. Happy to help, Ni… Detective Hamada.” Macy was looking at her with an odd mix of concern and curiosity.

“Can I… help you with something else?” Niko said eventually, knowing she was off her game for giving in to the silence first, but too tired to care. Maybe they were involved with the murders, but this was just putting out feelers, anyway. Not like Macy Vaughn was about to Slasher her in the middle of the station.

“How are you? You seem kind of… tired. No offense! Just, uh—are you... okay?” Macy was slowly lowering herself back onto the chair from where she’d stood to leave.

Niko’s cheeks and neck flared with heat, and she self-consciously rubbed at her eyes. If one more person chose to make her sleep schedule their fucking business… She steeled herself. “Me? Yeah… yes. This work never sleeps. Thank you, for asking.”

“I know the feeling. Sometimes I blink in the lab, and I haven’t even stretched my legs for six hours.” Macy smiled softly. “Sorry, I don’t want to be rude, just in big sister mode today. Maggie and Mel are hard to keep safe, if that makes sense.”

Even though they’d only spoken a few times over the course of the week since she’d met the trio of sisters, Macy Vaughn had an air about her that seemed unquestionably good. That was the strange feeling Niko had felt before—trust. Macy was warm, whip smart, and open, despite the occasional weird lie, and more than once Niko had wondered how she could be so different from her middle sister, the walking embodiment of a balloon just about to pop.

“Did your sisters send you down here as tribute? You lose a bet or something?”

Macy chuckled, rubbing a hand over the side of her neck. “The station is on my way. Besides, you and Morris are okay as far as cops go, I guess.”

Niko found herself smiling exhaustedly back at the tall woman. “The station is on my way. Besides, you and Morris are okay as far as cops go, I guess.”

Niko found herself smiling exhaustedly back at the tall woman. “Thanks, I guess.” She huffed, putting down her pen. “You and your sisters haven’t… You haven’t been bothered by anyone lately, any strangers or lurkers that made you uncomfortable?”

“It’s a college town. It happens a lot more than I’d like, but nothing aside from drunk students wandering the wrong way home.” Macy’s smile faded. “Why? Is there—should we be concerned?”

“Hm? No, no. Not that I know. I just wondered. There’s obviously someone fucked up around town.”

As the eldest sister stood yet again, she cocked her head and gave the detective another one of those looks. Each look seemed to have its own mysterious meaning for each sister, but they were packed with something that Niko was growing very weary (and increasingly suspicious) of not understanding, no matter how much she personally liked Dr. Macy Vaughn.

So she found herself stalling again as Macy almost turned to walk away: “Can I ask you another question?”

“Well, that does seem to be your favorite pastime, detective.”

Niko shrugged, kept her tone light: “You and your sisters keep giving me this look, and the only place I’ve seen it before is with the families of victims whose cases I’ve worked. Am I missing some
kind of history between us, civilian to cop? I’m sorry if I am forgetting something that was significant to you, it’s just that I talk to a lot of people in this job.”

Macy’s friendly expression faltered for a split second, almost fast enough that Niko’s imagination might’ve put it there—but for just that moment, the detective could’ve sworn the look was a swirl of sadness and... pity . Then it was gone. “No, I—not that I know of. No.”

“Okay.” Niko slumped back into her chair, rolling her head to try to get some of the cricks out of her neck. “My bad, then. Forget I said anything.”

“We did lose our mom this past year,” blurted Macy, leaning forward slightly. “She was murdered. You didn’t investigate, but just... it’s fresh, you know?”

Niko frowned as she straightened back up, chair creaking in protest of the sudden movement. “Wait, your mother? How did I not know this? Who was your point of contact?”

“I’m not sure, I wasn’t living at home at the time. It’s a, um, a long story.”

The detective held up her hands, a little too quickly. She wanted to look up the case before launching into a soft interrogation with the any of the sisters about it. “That’s okay, you don’t have to explain. I appreciate the perspective, regardless.”

Macy opened and closed her mouth a couple times before seeming to come to a decision, and then she produced a bottle of water from her purse, setting it gently down on the desk. “Just... take care of yourself.”

When she was sure Macy had left the building, Niko unlocked her computer and checked for murder victims with the last name “Vaughn” before remembering, belatedly, that Maggie and Mel’s last names were Vera.

It didn’t take long to turn up the case of Marisol Vera. But not in the homicide files.

August, 2016

“Maggie? Maggie, what the fuck did you do with my—“

Mel froze with her hand still on the front door, nearly tripping over her own boots. Maggie sat in the living room of their mom’s house with Niko, and both of them looked a little puffy-eyed as they turned to Mel.

“Hey,” greeted Maggie first, delicately wiping at the shining skin under her eyes. “Sorry, we were just talking—“

“Can you give us a second?”

Maggie shot her sister a pleading look, but still got up from her chair. As she passed, she stopped to whisper, “Go easy on her. Remember what mom said.”

When they were alone, Mel crossed her arms and raised her eyebrows at the officer, who looked as though she was trying to make herself as small as possible, like a kicked dog. “What are you doing here?”

Niko gestured to the chair recently vacated by Maggie, but Mel just shook her head. “I, um... I just wanted to talk.”
“I’m sure,” snarled Mel before she could stop herself, and not really sorry that she failed to. A month earlier, in a weeks-long process of escalating arguments, she’d ended things with the very much engaged officer, no longer able to bear the hurt of Niko going home to someone else every night, of Niko making her the homewrecker because she wouldn’t just talk to her fiancé about their problems, despite numerous promises that she would. The wedding had even gotten a firm date at a venue… and to mark the occasion, Mel had thrown Niko’s random stuff left at her apartment in a trash bag and hurled it at the officer when she’d come up the stairs the last time they’d seen each other. She’d hurled plenty of colorful, multilingual insults, too.

“Look, I’m not… My friends are mad at me right now, so I don’t… I don’t have anyone else to talk to. Sora’s deployed, and… And it’s not your problem, I know. But I could really, really go for just a half-second where I can just pretend I have a friend right now.”

Mel’s traitorous being felt a pang of sympathy, but she remained stubbornly still in the entryway. She had given Niko months to follow through on what she said in the haze of pillow talk. Months.

“I told Greta everything, and we called off the wedding. I moved out.”

“When?”

“Two weeks ago.”

“Good for you.”

Niko looked at her hands as she anxiously wrung them in her lap. “Like I said, I don’t…” She took a deep, but shuddering breath. “Fuck, just… why are words like this?”

Mel could feel her carefully constructed anger dampening, but thankfully, even just realizing how Niko could make her walls crumble like that with a few watery words made the rage flare back up, brighter and tinged with the impulse to lash out.

She didn’t fight it. “I honestly don’t give a shit what words you use, Niko. If you want to soundboard me, go ahead, but you and me are… We are nothing. You strung me along like some little pet, so we don’t get to be friends now. You made me every stupid girl in every movie where this exact thing happens, in addition to being the scapegoat for your issues with your marriage. I’m sure Greta and her old money Anglo-Saxon-Protestant family don’t blame the spicy little Latina at all for ruining her life, right? How many people that I have never met now think I’m a horrible person?”

The officer slid out of her chair to her knees, head hanging, arms limp against her sides. “I’m sorry. I’m really s-sorry. You’re right. I fucked up.”

Mel tightened her jaw at the first sob she heard float across the room, but she moved closer regardless. Just a couple steps. The officer looked like she might pass out. “Get up, Niko.”

Instead, the tall woman crumpled to her elbows and knees, forehead on the ground. It could’ve been a bow, but it honestly looked like a full body collapse, and Niko’s chest began heaving with shuddering sobs. Emotions warred in Mel’s chest, banging around like a toddler with wooden spoons. Resentment. Jealousy. Shame. Love. Without her mind’s permission, her body carried her across the room and down to her own knees, her hand gently resting on Niko’s head. The rage-fueled urge to destroy Niko had been briefly satisfying, but now she just felt… empty.

“Niko, sit up. Please.” Mel wrapped a hand around a trembling shoulder and pulled her back into a sitting position, then let go.

The front door startled them both when it burst open, and it took Marisol Vera a few seconds of
fumbling with her keys to realize they were even there. Mel saw her mother spare a glance up at the
landing, where she was sure Maggie sat trying to listen in from out of sight, and then Marisol
cautiously stepped towards the living room.

“Are you two okay? Hi, Niko, nice to see you.” Her mom had two large paper grocery bags in her
arms, but she still lifted one of them in a wave-like gesture.

“Hi, ma’am,” said the officer in a low tone, pawing at her wet cheeks. “Sorry, I was just leav—”

“We’re fine, mom. Can you give us a second?”

Marisol eyeballed them for a beat longer than strictly necessary, chewing her bottom lip, before
casually saying, “I’m glad you’re here, Niko. Mel has been really moody without you.”

“Mom!” protested the elder Vera sister, throwing her hands up.

“I’m going, I’m going.” Marisol headed towards the kitchen, exaggeratedly holding a bag up to
hide her face.

As angry as she wanted to be, Mel knew immediately as she turned back to Niko that her mother’s
interruption had shifted the energy between them, a little nudge off the planned course. Though
unhappy that an engaged woman had stolen and subsequently broken her daughter’s heart (“Don’t
get me wrong, I’d throw a drink in her face if I was thirty years younger,” she’d said testily over a
mother-daughter wine night), Marisol stood firmly in the corner of Team Forgiveness, which
happened to also include Maggie. As far as the household went, Mel was alone on the Island of
Bitter Resentment. At this very moment, it was not a fun place to be. She sighed and, resigned, took
one of Niko’s shaking hands in her own.

“I’m sorry. You didn’t deserve all that,” she said quietly. “I made the choice to continue seeing you
because at first I just wanted whatever piece of you I could get, until I started wanting it all. I ended it
because I love you, and I still love you.” Mel lifted one of her hands to the officer’s cheek. “But I’m still
really fucking pissed at you.”

“I know.”

“And we’re not done talking about… this.”

“I know.”

“We can’t rush into something. We have to go slow.”

“I know.” This time, the two simple words had a tinge of hope to them. “A whole new world.”

Mel didn’t fight the way the happy little spark in Niko’s eyes made her cheeks warm. She pulled the
officer to her feet and pressed their lips together firmly, but briefly. She only pulled back a couple
inches to ask quietly, “What are you doing Saturday?”

“What?”

She repeated the question, adding, “I’d like to go on a date with you. A real one. In public. With
clothes on. Like adults. And then we’re going to go to our respective homes and not have sex, just so we’re clear.”

More tears trickled from Niko’s eyes, but she broke into a smile that faltered, like she was afraid of what Mel might think of it. “I think I’m free.”

“Pick me up at eight.”

They stood awkwardly for a moment, Mel’s hands on Niko’s shoulders, and then Marisol poked her head back in from the kitchen with a knowing smile on her face. “Are you staying for dinner, Niko? It’s just chicken and rice, but you look like you need to eat.”

The officer looked at Mel first for permission, and she gave a small nod. As mad as she was at her, Mel didn’t want Niko to go home to be alone, not when she looked so damn devastated under the small improvement in an appreciative, small smile. This wasn’t just about the two of them. If Niko was going to be part of Mel’s life, she was part of the Vera women’s lives, too, though ideally more present this time around. The officer excused herself to the bathroom to wash up, and Mel shuffled over to give her mom a bear hug in the hallway, not the least bit mad about Marisol’s knowing smile or the way Maggie appeared from behind the door.

“Hello, Charity.”

“Harry.”

Mel ignored the sexually tense magical beings as she stepped into the attic, having gotten a text from Maggie that they’d identified their demon wolf. The fact that Charity was there meant the answer wasn’t pleasant, not that there had been any chance it would be good. The anticipation set Mel’s teeth on edge before anyone even began speaking.

“What do you witches know about werewolves?” asked Harry as preamble.

“Uh, full moon, silver bullets, nasty temperament. Thank you, next,” replied Maggie, already using her bored tone.

“Werewolves and other animal shifters are fairly common cultural fixtures; there are wendigos, kitsune, wargs, varúlfur… they’re all a little bit different. Hence our difficulty identifying our furry friend.”

Charity cut in: “Your wolf is not the silver bullet allergy kind. His name is Fitela, and he was one of the first. He is actually a man who stole his power from a warlock. This is an old, old creature, twisted by magic he was never meant to have. He won’t hesitate to kill you for your power.”

“Why is he killing humans? Just to gain strength?”

“That, and apparently some other gain. The second human died so Fitela could retrieve an unknown artifact. We don’t know what he had yet, but Mr. Faulk specialized in Norse weaponry.”

“Big sword, wants to eat us, got it,” sighed Mel, rubbing her temple. “Very helpful, guys.”

“Are you all right, dear?” Charity was suddenly in Mel’s personal space, her slender hand resting on the witch’s shoulder as her usually perfectly smooth brow furrowed.

“About as good as I can be with a demon wolf on the loose.” Much as she had tried to hate Charity for what happened with Tripp… his death hadn’t been her fault. He’d been a really good detective.
And the frame job? A heat-of-the-moment decision that the lizard brain part of her could understand. Besides, Charity had been so close to her mother... if only the sisters could figure out how to make her stop being so damn Dumbledore about everything, maybe that connection would mean all the difference someday.

“I came here to deliver this news because I... I need you to understand how serious tangling with this creature can be. Witches cannot be turned into weres, but humans — if one were to survive an attack, they’d turn. That can set off an epidemic very, very quickly. Take the time you need, make three contingency plans, and call me immediately if humans get infected. Okay?”

Mel nodded on behalf of the trio of sisters, and the Elder and the whitelighter disappeared in the trademark shower of purple sparks.

“Cool, cool, cool, cool, cool,” muttered Maggie, opening the Book before immediately closing it again. “Nope. Not doing this. I need a break. Going to Kappa House.”

Macy suddenly blurted: “I saw Niko today. Gave her the translation.”

Both sisters looked at her with mirror surprised expressions.

“How was she?” asked Maggie, quicker than Mel. She’d paused where she’d been headed towards the stairs.

“She asked me about the Charmed Ones symbol Fitela keeps leaving with the messages. I told her I didn’t know what it was. I don’t know why, I just panicked.” Macy plucked at an imaginary wrinkle in her shirt.

“Yeah, but how was she?” repeated the youngest sister.

Mel wrinkled her nose, confused about the note of distress in Maggie’s tone.

“She seemed... tired.” Macy spoke carefully, not quite meeting Maggie’s eyes. “She asked me outright why we’re always looking at her funny, and I couldn’t exactly tell her we just have no chill, so I told her about mom. I just thought you should know, in case. Lying to her is a lot harder than I thought it would be, for some reason.” Her nose wrinkled as she seemed to wrestle with a thought.

Maggie frowned along with her, rubbing her crossed arms idly. “Tired?”

“Like, to the point that I was a little worried about her. I’ve never seen Niko like that.”

The youngest sister gave Mel a meaningful look. “I think I have, and trust me, it sucks.”

Mel turned away, playing with the hem of her shirt. Niko and Maggie hadn’t been friends per se, but they had spent plenty of time together, including holidays and birthdays and funerals, through the course of the now-extant relationship with Mel. Niko had helped teach Maggie to drive when Mel and Marisol were out of patience. She’d attended Maggie’s high school graduation.

When their mom died, it had been Niko who loaded the devastated sisters into her car after identifying the body and drove them home. It had been Niko who half-carried both of them to Mel’s bedroom, knowing they needed each other to get through the night, and it had been Niko who dragged them out of bed three days later to begin their lives again. Guilt seeped into her belly as she considered that she’d never before thought about how maybe, possibly, she didn’t have a monopoly on being affected by Niko’s reappearance.

Maggie groaned, throwing one arm out. “It’s not like we can force her to go a marriage counselor or
something… can we? So fucking stubborn… She’s always been like this, I shouldn’t be surprised.”

They both suddenly turned to Mel, as if just remembering that she was even in the room. “Sorry,” they said simultaneously.

“No, it’s… It’s fi... It sucks . We should talk about it so that it sucks… less. Or just, we suffer together.” Mel tugged each sister under an arm, dragging their heads together.

After scrubbing the ground floor of the house of anything bearing the triquetra, just to be safe, Mel headed in to work, a much-needed getaway from the relentless feels that was currently her personal life. Perry had sent her some selfies from the gym, bulging quads and veiny arms, and that certainly helped get her out of the stormcloud zone as she headed inside the bar. While yes, absolutely, she would’ve preferred to be teaching, there was something undeniably comforting about taking the slow shift and spending her hours mechanically cleaning cups and wiping down tables. Wax on, brain off.

Only a handful of permanently drunk and semi-to-unemployed regulars were milling around after the lunch rush. Mel had some time to get ahead on maintenance tasks for the evening shift, and since her boss was out that day, she also got to control the music, ending the tyranny of 1970s rock covers of classic Christmas songs. Hello, Big Sean. That’s why she was knelt behind the bar restocking the disinfectant bottles when the bell over the door jingled, and she called out without rising, “Hi! Be with you in a second!”

Heavy bootsteps moved towards the bar, and the patrons were suddenly muttering unhappily. Mel froze, listening.

“It’s 5-0, Melly. Ladycop,” called one of the regulars, and Mel straightened up so fast that she whacked her head against the wheat ale tap. Pain bloomed in her forehead instantly, red-hot, and her vision blurred as she doubled over, torso slamming into the corner of the bar and knocking the air from her lungs.

“Oh shit, Mel, are you--”

“I’m fine!” gasped Mel, holding her palm to her forehead. The detective had somehow teleported from the door to the other side of the bar, the sudden proximity just adding to the pinwheeling haze in Mel’s aching skull. “Don’t touch me!”

Niko froze, hands slowly retreating while someone cackled at the perceived rebuke.

“That is a lot of blood,” confirmed Irene, the patron who’d been warning her. She gave Niko a sideways look and added haughtily, “And here we are with the wrong kinda responder.”

“It’s okay, Irene,” said Mel quickly. She could feel warm liquid dripping as far down as her neck. Just a scalp wound. Those bled a lot. This was fine. “She’s a friend.”

“I am?” was somehow the next thing Niko said, and Mel pulled her hand away to look at the damage.

Okay, it was definitely a lot of blood. She had the brief feeling of weightlessness, heard someone shout, and then shit I’m gonna—

“Mel? Mel?”

“I told her not to touch you, Melly. She didn’t listen.”

Her eyes popped open to folded knees on the ground. She swiveled them up slowly and, as she
feared, the body parts in her vision belonged to none other than Niko, kneeling over her as if ready to perform CPR. She groaned more at the embarrassment than anything.

“Medical response is on its way. You might have a concussion. Do you want me to call your sisters or Perry?”

“No… no sisters… no Perry.” Mel closed her eyes against throbbing pain. “No… hospital.”

“Let’s have the EMTs check you out and go from there, okay? There’s no charge for care. Can you keep your eyes open for me?”

“Mmphh. No.” The witch tried to focus on her body, to reorient her senses. Obviously, she was on the floor, on her side, and there were several patrons crouched around, breathing down a cloud of tequila and whiskey vapors. Niko had removed her jacket and placed it under Mel’s head.

“I hear sirens pulling up. Stay still.” Mel groaned again, this time out of sheer disbelief, when she heard Niko call, “Steph! It’s me, and—it’s Mel.”

“Hey there, kids,” greeted Stephanie, setting a bag down. She looked more old school than ever in her tight navy HFD t-shirt, black cargo pants, and black boots. “Your friendly neighborhood EMT-certified firefighter has arrived, no need to panic, ladies and gentlemen. I heard something about a cranium and a spigot. Classic.”

“She passed the fuck out,” added Irene loudly. She’d grabbed her own whiskey bottle from the bar, and saluted Mel with it when they made eye contact. “It’s the cop’s fault—scaring the literal life out of good folks.”

Niko rolled her eyes, but said nothing to Irene. Instead, she said to her friend: “She was only unconscious for maybe five seconds, if that.”

“Long enough,” murmured Stephanie, more to Mel than Niko. She leaned down, smiling warmly. “How you doing, kid?”

“Fucking hurts. Don’t call me kid.”

The firefighter chuckled, but was nice enough to keep it quiet. “It’s a good sign you’re well enough to take issue with that. Do you have any pain in your neck or back?”

“Uh, yes…” She was losing the will to fight against Stephanie’s steady, pleasant voice, and quieted down for the narrated exam.

“Can you wiggle your fingers and toes for me? Good. Is it okay if I touch you? I’m gonna roll you onto your back now. I want you to keep your muscles relaxed. Now sit up. All right.” Stephanie went through a few more questions aimed at assessing cognitive function, did a quick physical check for pain and reflex response, and then rocked back on her heels. “I do think you’re concussed, but it doesn’t seem severe. Good thing RoboCop here caught you before you hit something, there’s plenty to reinjure yourself on back there. Unfortunately, this all just means the effects could get worse, or could be off and on for a little bit. You might be just fine. And you don’t want to go to the hospital?”

“I’m fine. Just leave me down here for a minute.” Sitting up had been a chore, and she worried they’d whisk her away if she passed out again while trying to stand.

“Serious talk now. You shouldn’t keep working today, and I’d honestly suggest having someone nearby for the next few days.” Stephanie unwrapped and applied a couple bandages as she spoke. “Might not pass out, but you could become dizzy, fatigued. I’d really, really recommend talking to
your doctor about it. Capisce?"

“Works for me.”

“I’m gonna get the ambulance bros to actually close that up for you, they should be just a couple minutes out.” Stephanie helped her to her feet. “And put some ice on that. It’s hideous.”

Mel tried not to notice the chuckle that got out of Irene.

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Niko’s third encounter with Mel Vera went the worst of them all, and at what had to be record speed. The bar was somewhat known for an unsavory element, whispering remnants of Russian mobster activity, so she hadn’t been surprised by the birdcalls and other audible warnings that went out as soon as she stepped from her department vehicle. If she was being honest, that reaction was always a little exhilarating, not because she felt that she was in danger, but it was all very The Shield and inspired a reflexive swagger. She liked to think of herself as HPD’s Ronnie Gardocki, but Morris argued she was no one if not Curtis Lemansky.

As for the task at hand: Marisol Vera.

Partly out of indulgent nosiness, partly for their investigation, and mostly out of genuine curiosity, Niko had pulled the full file on Marisol and reviewed it from top to bottom. Butch Rogers, a patrol sergeant, had been the primary officer on the case since it had never been referred to homicide division, and she didn’t see any reason to doubt his conclusion: a terrible accident. The window was a known problem. Alcohol in her system. He did note that the victim’s daughters had repeatedly suggested murder some months after the death, but there was just no evidence to support that. Some families turned to murder theories in the face of unbearable tragedy because it somehow made their grief easier—the loss more sensible. Less meaningless. She’d personally seen it plenty of times.

Still, the text message the daughters had received shortly before their mother’s fall, urgent and clipped, did pique her interest, enough that she’d ended up down a rabbit hole of accidental death reports. Two in particular caught her attention: Paula Garcia and Cecilia Lopez, 54 and 42, respectively, married, no children. Paula had fallen down a flight of stairs. Cecilia had slipped on a puddle of water in her garage. Both women died from severed spines. So did Marisol. She looked up their maiden names, and the hair on the back of her neck rose: Vera.

There weren’t any obvious warning signs that anyone in this family was a brutal killer or involved in something other than a peculiar collecting habit, but that’s what people always said in the documentaries about heinous crimes, right? (“We had no idea. They seemed so normal. Except for all these warning signs I only see now.” Every damn time.)

By all accounts, Marisol was a fierce, kind woman who single-handedly raised two daughters while rising in academia. The faculty picture of her included in the file showed a beautiful smile and hair just like Mel’s, cheekbones that she could see in Maggie. Macy Vaughn, recipient of Marisol’s bright eyes, had clearly been a secret up until after Marisol’s death, with no mention of her in the file, and Niko couldn’t imagine how that reunion went, even if the sisters were thick as thieves now.

It all had nothing to do with their current mystery killer situation, not necessarily, but with this lightning bolt of coincidence swishing around in her brain, she needed to work through it with someone before being able to truly concentrate on anything else.

Morris was 96% there in his estimation that, at the very least, the sisters knew more than they were saying, and he would have preferred to bring them in for questioning, but Niko’s gut had begun spewing this tale of the sisters as targets, not as perpetrators. The Marisol Vera topic seemed to be a
good opportunity to shake the tree one more time for… *something*, while also clearing the non-case-related curiosity from her overfilled head. They had nowhere near enough to file charges, anyway, so a little bit of extra context would be nice, either to rule them out or push the investigation in that direction. The ADA would’ve sliced them with a boxcutter at the first hearing if they tried right now.

Macy had been her first choice of candidates to talk about the Vera connections, but of course Macy hadn’t been there. The youngest, Maggie, might have been an option, but she was just this side of 18, still practically a kid, and Niko didn’t feel it would be fair to the youngest sister to dredge up these theories and potentially get her hopes up for no reason. Maybe that was a little bit of her natural big sister tendency. Many a schoolyard bully had gotten a fat lip from “Sora’s Big Sister.” Whatever the case, she wasn’t going to talk to Maggie about it, either. Which of course left… Mel. In all her nervous glory.

Jimmy had court for the afternoon, so with some time to kill, she’d asked Perry where to find her girlfriend, and then headed down to the bar upon the reply. She suspected Mel would turn her away if she texted directly, but this was more or less police business, and she didn’t need permission to show up and ask some questions.

Look how the fuck that turned out within a matter of *seconds*.

Niko recognized Mel’s disembodied voice as she approached the saloon-style, cherrywood bar. But when that patron—who Niko was certain she had arrested for d&d during her rookie year—had called out in warning, there was a flash of long black hair, and then a stomach-curdling *thwack*. For the next few seconds, she’d watched the shorter woman sway and clearly spiral, unsure what to do as long as she remained upright and unconsenting. When that shoe finally dropped, the parkour move Niko executed to clear the bar and catch Mel before she hit her head or neck on anything had surprised even herself, but she was just glad the petite woman woke up within a matter of seconds. Irene had not been impressed.

Troublingly, even though she opened her eyes again fairly quickly, Mel remained a little longer just outside of consciousness, unfocused eyes opening and closing slowly as nonsensical words squeezed out of her lungs. Then she had said something that Niko swore was, “I’m sorry Niko.” And even louder: “I did it for you.”

Then her eyes opened and she seemed to come back to herself, and emergency services arrived. It was a mess. A literally bloody bless.

“What, uh… what’re you doing here, Nik?” Stephanie had asked while the ambulance techs sanitized and closed Mel’s wound across the room. “Day drinking, or something… else?”

Niko bristled. “What?”

Undeterred, the firefighter jerked her chin at Mel. “What are you doing here?”

“Seriously, Steph? Are you kidding me?” The detective’s chest flared with anger, her fists tightening. “I’m working on a case, Mel and her sisters are helping me. Ask Perry, she’s the one who sent me down here. Jesus.”

Stephanie held up her hands, shrugging. “Okay, okay. I believe you.”

“Why would you even imply *that*?” Niko snapped before she could stop herself, realizing immediately that it opened a door.

Her friend stepped right through it. “*Really?* You *really* don’t see how I might be surprised to find
my married friend visiting my other friend’s pretty young girlfriend?” She lowered her voice. “You really think I don’t know when you and Greta are fighting? I’ve been right next to you since the night you got her number. I see all, kid.”

Niko crossed her arms and huffed. “Glad to know you think so highly of me.”

“I love you, and you know that. I wouldn’t be your friend if I didn’t call you out every now and then.” One of the other firefighters called to Stephanie that they were leaving, and she clapped a hand on Niko’s shoulder before jogging away.

When all the responders were finished and cleared out, Mel stood leaning on the bar, a bag of frozen broccoli wrapped in a towel held to her forehead.

“This is so embarrassing,” she announced after a while, giving her head the barest of shakes.

The presence of sirens and uniforms had slowly but surely cleared the bar, though Niko and a couple of the firefighters made sure that they all paid something before making their exit (including Irene for the entire Southern Comfort bottle tucked in her jacket, but only after a long round of glowering at each other). The owner had called to tell Mel to just lock up, and the next shift would reopen. He had a cleaning crew for the blood on the way.

The detective noticed Mel’s arm quivering, and she reached up to put a palm over the frozen bag, which had their fingertips brushing. “Let me.”

Though she huffed, Mel dropped her hand away.

“Don’t be embarrassed, it was a freak accident. I have to ask though, did you break a mirror lately?” To her surprise, the petite woman laughed softly at that. The sound made her chest loosen and flicker with warmth. “See this scar?”

Mel glanced over, and her eyes followed to where Niko had pushed her hair aside to expose a jagged white line about two inches long, running parallel to the column of her throat.

“I was in eighth grade, and I was really trying to impress this girl, Sadie Miller. She was on the sidelines of a soccer game, and I was so focused on trying to see if she was watching me with the ball that I just—’ Niko smashed her free open palm against the bar. ‘—ran into a chain link fence, about yeigh high. Came very close to dying to look cool for a girl.”

“Yeahh, but that’s a much cuter story than this one: ‘Bartender forgets to be careful in the bar where she’s worked hundreds of hours.’”

“You did kinda freak out,” chided the detective, adjusting her wrist over the frozen bag so she could see both of Mel’s eyes. “Any… particular reason you’re so jumpy?”

“Honestly… I’m kind of always like this.” Mel shrugged wistfully. “Not always in a way that causes me bodily harm, though. Just a lot of anxiety.”

The detective nodded, abruptly uncomfortable with her own motivations, but unsure what else to do. Speaking of, she remembered that she never got the chance to say why she was there in the first place: “Oh, uh—by the way, I didn’t just come down here to give you a brain injury. Macy mentioned something to me a couple weeks ago, about your mom’s death.”

Mel visibly stiffened. “What about it?”

“We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to, but I’ve been looking at the case, and there’s
just something… weird.” Niko switched arms holding the cold bag in place.

“Yeah just, my head is pretty fuzzy right at this very moment. I don’t know if you heard but I knocked myself the fuck out.”

Niko let her jaw drop open in exaggerated surprise. “Was that—did you just make a joke?”

“I’ll have you know, Detective Hamada, that I can be a very funny person, you just have to earn it.” Mel almost managed a smile, but then it fell into a wince.

“Well, y’know what? You can prove it to me, and we’ll talk about your mom, but I’d like to get you sitting down. Do you want to maybe grab an early dinner? I think I saw a diner down the street?”

“Oh, Daugherty’s. You really know how to treat a girl right.”

A faint heat grew in Niko’s cheeks, and she had to give her head a little shake before it spread to her ears.

They drove the 500 or so feet, as Mel’s skull couldn’t take the teeth chattering cold, and were immediately seated in a bright blue vinyl booth. Niko found herself staring as the shorter woman idly thumbed through a menu. She had changed into Niko’s emergency spare HPD t-shirt since her own shirt had been ruined with blood, and it was a little tight around the chest and hips. Niko chewed her cheek, trying and failing to tear her eyes away. Though a beacon of anxious energy, Mel was effortlessly attractive, and at that thought the detective tried to put on the metaphorical brakes as her brain choked out increasingly weak reminders. Perry’s girlfriend. You are married. Perry’s your good friend. You are married. To Greta.

This was Steph’s fault, for putting the thought in her head, right? She tried to smile casually when Mel looked up.

“You paying, detective?”

“I guess it’s only right.”

“Good. I doubt my tips were great today.”

“They don’t pity tip?”

“The gallon of blood I dumped on the floor kinda made it difficult to get to the jar.”

Their waitress appeared with a kind smile and plenty of specials for the day. Niko ordered two fried eggs and four slices of bacon because honestly, who could be satisfied with only two slices of bacon? Mel asked for a sausage hashbrown scramble, more bacon, toast, a fruit cup, and a milkshake.

“O-kay, so it’s gonna be like that?” The detective nodded idly, and she had to admit she was impressed by the complete lack of remorse coming from across the table.

“It’s gonna be like that. That’ll teach you to make deals with me without some fine print.” Mel’s hands carded through her long black hair as she flashed a muted, almost bashful smile, which was so unfair.

Down, Hamada. “Duly noted.” The detective quickly gulped some coffee to get herself together. Whatever flip had switched in Mel (hopefully not due to the bump on the head), this back-and-forth felt too easy, too worn in. Morris thinks she’s involved in the case. Stephanie is preemptively
suspicious. Do not pass go.

 Except, despite her inner banter… something warm and gentle tugged at her belly as she considered the woman across the table. Her detective hat seemed to have blown away, and in its place sat a genuine sense of intrigue. She wanted to know more about Melanie Vera, favorite colors, childhood anecdotes, hopes for the future. It was unsettling, at the very least, but also…a bit exciting?

If she had to put a name to the feeling? **Inevitability.**

Luckily, Mel glided right past the moment: “So, I… I do want to talk about… my mom, but I think I need to eat first.”

“Sure, I understand. I just have questions, a couple things to clarify.” And after clearing her throat: “I, uh, I’m glad you have an appetite. That’s a good sign.”

Mel nodded, and Niko mourned the way her smile faded. “Thank you, for helping me back there. Maggie says I’m no good at showing gratitude so, consider yourself lucky for that.”

“I’ll take it.”

“How’s Greta?”

Niko blinked and glanced down at her wedding ring, a simple rose gold band. “She’s great. Enjoying the new job, putting together her first exhibit. ‘Female painters of the 1940s.’ Living her best life.”

Mel was nodding more vigorously than was strictly proportional to her words, but Niko appreciated the eager friendliness nonetheless.

“How’s Perry?”

“Great!” Her voice squeaked a little. “You know Perry. If she’s got some weights and her cappuccino protein shake, she’s happy as a clam.”

“Yes, she’s always kind of been like that. Luckily she’s gotten a lot less aggro since she hit twenty-five.”

Mel chuckled. “**Aggro.** What was her degree again? I remember it didn’t surprise me at all.”

After a thoughtful pause, their eyes locked, and they blurted simultaneously: “Nutritional science.”

As they snickered together, the waitress appeared with their food perched along her outstretched arm. She set it down with all the confidence of decades of experience, spilling not a single crumb, and left them alone after politely asking if everything looked good. The shorter woman seemed to have finally relaxed, her shoulders loose as she made little happy noises after every other bite.

**That** was so distracting, Niko almost didn’t hear the question when Mel said it: “Did it work?”

“Did what work?” she squeaked back, pressing her legs together nervously. **Yes, the noises you’re making worked.**

“Did the whole fence situation win over Sadie Miller or not? No cliffhangers.”

The detective cleared her throat. “Not in eighth grade, but senior year…” She gave a healthy eyebrow waggle. “Even though she was dating some baseball player at the time.”
“Scandalous, Detective Hamada. A taken woman?”

“Somebody had to give her her first orgasm,” Niko shot back without thinking, and she had to shove down the panicked urge to physically try to grab the words back.

Mel didn’t seem fazed, her smile relaxing as she said in a mockingly reverent tone, “A true public servant.”

“I do what I can to make the world a better place..”

“Ugh, of course you’d be one of those assholes who say stuff like that.” Mel’s eyes creased with mirth even as they rolled.

A quick movement to her left caught Niko’s eye—a young waitress had been walking by with the coffee carafe and stumbled. Mel’s hand was suddenly steadying the woman’s shoulder, but the grab had been so quick Niko missed it completely, even though she could’ve sworn she was staring directly at Mel the moment it happened.

“Oh! S-sorry about that,” apologized the waitress, brows furrowed, before walking off looking a little dazed.

When Mel looked back at her, Niko detected a shade of guilt in her expression. “Reflex. I used to play goalie.”

“Yeah… nice save.”

Mel tore into a slice of bacon with her teeth, a little bit of that nervous energy seeping back into her body language. “So, uh, my mom…”

“Right.” Niko wiped her mouth on a napkin and leaned back, pleasantly full. Detective hat dusted off and back on her head. “What was it about your mom’s death that made you start saying it was murder?”

“Oh.” Mel put down her fork slowly. “Well, I didn’t really have… evidence. It was just, the text, and she knew about the bad window. She wouldn’t have been stumbling drunk up there around it, not that she ever got drunk enough to be stumbling around, anyway. The whole thing didn’t feel right. Did you find something?”

“I don’t think so, necessarily.” Niko took a deep breath. “But I agree that the text was strange, so I checked some other cases, and there were two women of similar age to your mother who died in accidental deaths involving severed spines, all within about a month. The accidents made sense each time. The stairs were wet because it was raining, or the car was leaking water and they had a repair appointment scheduled. But this type of injury is very specific, and honestly tend to happen in accidents more like strikes of lightning than a rule. The last thing is, those two women had the same maiden name as your mom.”

Mel’s eyes widened steadily as the detective spoke, and her voice was thick and hoarse when she responded, “They what?”

“Vera. Their maiden names were Vera.” She felt a little spike of alarm as the color drained from Mel’s face and quickly reached across the table to touch her hand. “Sorry, this was a bad idea while you’re—”

“It’s okay. I’m glad you told me. That’s… I have to go,” she rambled as Niko handed the passing waitress her credit card. “I have to talk to my sisters about this.”
“Wait, wait, hold up. You shouldn’t be driving. I’ll take you home.”

Mel put up a little bit of a fight, more symbol than true ire, but they pulled up to the large, gothic house in Niko’s car a half an hour later. There was a light on in the kitchen and one upstairs, but the street was quiet and mostly dark. Niko felt a little bump of adrenaline when she spotted The Window that had taken Marisol’s life, for the first time understanding its significance. It looked so innocent up there, demure and glowing with flickering orange light. She glanced at her passenger to find Mel’s face tight with anxiety, and she touched the shorter woman’s shoulder.

“Everything okay?”

“Just trying to decide how I explain the giant crater on my head in the same conversation I tell them about this connection to Mom.” Mel worried her bottom lip as she stared out the windshield. “It all feels like a really big deal, but somehow could also be meaningless, you know?”

“Sure. It happens a lot in my line of work.” And before she could stop herself, Niko tacked on: “And my marriage.”

Their eyes snapped to each other’s, Mel’s surprised and Niko’s panicked, her hand snapping back from where it had still been resting on the other woman’s shoulder.

“Sorry, I was thinking out loud.” A beat. “Please don’t say anything to Perry.”

“I’m not that kind of girl,” replied Mel warmly, not pleased, but empathetic. “And anyway… I’m sorry to hear that. Doesn’t sound nice.”

Niko let out a long breath as her emotions unexpectedly tried to shove themselves up her throat. She pummeled them back down where they belonged, tightly bottled in her chest, under the guise of a cough. Still, her traitorous voice broke as she thickly replied: “I, uh… I don’t know if I can talk... about that.”

The detective felt, rather than saw, Mel’s hand come to rest lightly atop her own on the edge of her seat. Niko had been too busy turning her head away to avoid Mel seeing the tears in her eyes, because that was goddamn stupid, right? Mel was barely someone she considered a friend, or hadn’t until just a few hours ago, and this was some heavy shit. She swallowed hard and kept her focus on a nonexistent speck in the ceiling of her El Camino.

“Niko…” Mel gave her hand a firm squeeze. “Look at me. Please?”

Something desperate and raw in Mel’s voice made Niko’s body respond without explicit permission, and she found herself staring into watery dark brown eyes.

“I—you didn’t have to take such good care of me today, but you did without a second thought. I bet you do that for everyone in your life, and that’s why—that’s why Perry loves you. But take that and apply it to yourself, okay? As a fairly selfish person, I can tell you that it does wonders in moderation.” Mel licked her lips, the motion drawing Niko’s gaze there. “You don’t have to be unhappy. It’s not how people are supposed to live, no matter what promises they made in the past.”

Something snapped in Niko’s chest. And they were leaning towards each other when the porch light suddenly flickered to life, would have made the mistake that had felt unavoidable since they sat down to dinner, but like a sudden bath of ice water, the light made both women jerk back, voices overlapping and equally panicked:

“I should go, it’s really—"
“You should go before—”

And in a flash, Mel was gone, leaving Niko to keep it together until the front door closed behind her, and then slam her palms against the steering wheel with a classic, mildly consoling shout of, “Fuck!”

“Are you kidding me?”

Mel closed the door behind her and took a deep breath before turning around, jaw clenching.

“Maggie, I—”

“Shit, your face!” Maggie went from pissed off to concerned without missing a beat.

“What happened?” interjected Macy, suddenly filling Mel’s personal space too. “Jeez Mel, are you okay?”

“I’m fine!” she snapped, swatting her sisters’ hands away from her face and side-stepping away from them both. “I hit my head at work, the EMTs checked me out, I’m fine.”

Maggie’s face slid from a frown to a frown and Mel immediately realized her mistake. “Okay, so you’re fine. Cool. Except I kind of wish you weren’t fine, and maybe you hit your head hard enough that you’re delusional or something, because we’re back to: what the fuck, Mel? You called Niko to drive you home?”

“No! She was—she showed up at the bar, and she startled me.” Mel went on to relay the rest of the story, leaving out certain… parts. For example, okay, so she’d laid it on a little strong at dinner, but there had been something so comforting about re-hearing Niko tell the Sadie Miller story with that first-time enthusiasm and twinkling grin. And fine, she didn’t have a rationalization for that tiny slip in the car, except that she was exhausted and fighting the natural ease and attraction that still flowed between them had been a task too heavy to bear alongside everything else happening. So, fine. She had laid it on pretty strong, but they didn’t need to know—

Unfortunately, Maggie’s next words were: “I saw you two in the car.”

Damn. Couldn’t catch a break, again. “Nothing happened.”

“Because I pulled a Mom and turned on the light! Mel, what were you thinking?”

“Wait, Niko made a connection between our mom and two other women?” interrupted Macy.

“Not right now,” snapped Maggie. “Help me out here!”

Macy shrugged and locked eyes with her middle sister, shoulders squaring. “You know she’s right. You fucked up.”

“Not right now,” snapped Maggie. “Help me out here!”

Macy shrugged and locked eyes with her middle sister, shoulders squaring. “You know she’s right. You fucked up.”

“I know, okay? Fuck, I am so done having this conversation over and over—it’s fine, nothing’s happened and nothing’s going to happen. Just leave it alone.”

“Actually, yes. Timeout,” called Macy softly, but with conviction. “We’re tabling it,” she repeated when Maggie looked ready to protest. “Remember in the old timeline, how Tripp said that he thought he’d found two cases related to mom’s, before he died? This has to be what he was talking about.”

Mel tried not to wince upon hearing the deceased detective’s name. In a fit of dark self-pity, she’d Googled his name to find out what changed. Since she’d never met Niko, she’d never met Tripp, and
he hadn’t been at the warehouse when they took down Harbinger, but he still had to stay dead per the spell’s fine print. This time, the news reported he died in an accident at a construction site while investigating a major copper theft from the location, struck on the head in a freak accident of falling materials. His mother had been awarded a multi-million dollar settlement. Mel knew she’d rather have had her son, but the witch could take a modicum of comfort in the knowledge that he was no longer suspected in the Harbinger murders, which had subsequently just gone cold in the new timeline.

“Paula Garcia and Cecilia Lopez,” she explained after her stomach untwisted. “Née Vera, both of them.”

“We have to find their families, visit the places where they died,” said Maggie immediately, beginning to shift like she meant right now. “They were obviously mom’s sisters, right? That’s what we’re heavily hinting at?”

“Do we ask Harry?” The younger sisters nixed that idea hastily, as if Macy had suggested they go lick toads. “Fine, but we need to be careful. If we start sniffing around, then whatever did this to mom and her... sisters... could take notice, realize we’re getting closer.”

“Then maybe they’d finally show their face and we could take a shot,” muttered Mel, though she agreed in general with her sister’s assessment. “Tomorrow, I’m going to go down to the recorder’s office and the courthouse to see what I can find, maybe a way to contact their husbands. Niko couldn’t tell me every detail.” Mel paused to clear her throat. Damn. She had just been enjoying thirty precious seconds of not thinking about Niko. “And in the meantime, we’ve gotta get rid of this wolf.”

Hours later, Mel was thumbing through the Book of Shadows, nestled on her bed under all the covers, when she remembered that she’d turned her phone off before work. She already had a sinking feeling as it booted, and sure enough, within minutes, her Messages lit up with increasingly worried texts from Perry wondering where she was. Apparently Stephanie had told Perry about the head wound, but couldn’t update her on whether Mel ever made it home.

Shit.

She tried to call, but Perry ignored it and texted back:

11: 37 I’m coming over

Wrapping a quilt around her shoulders, Mel hurried downstairs and stood anxiously by the glass for the agonizing minutes it took for her girlfriend’s Jeep to roll up in front of the house. She opened the door as soon as the lights turned off, and her teeth were chattering with cold by the time Perry lumbered up the front steps and into the foyer. Her face was drawn, inscrutable, and somehow that was worse than anger or frustration.

“Perry, I had my phone off, and—“

“I thought you were dead somewhere. I was about to call the police. What the fuck?”

“My sisters are home, so no yelling.”

“No yelling?” Perry definitely yelled. “Je sus Mel, I don’t need to know what you do every minute of every day, but why did I have to hear from Steph that you got a concussion and passed out at work? I mean, it’s making me feel like I misunderstood, like... Am I not supposed to care?”

Mel had a passing wish that a hellhole would open up and swallow her. After this repetitive personal failure shitshow of a night, she deserved it. The pain in her chest demanded it. “Perry... I am so, so
Perry took a step back when Mel tried to touch her arm. “No.”

“Yes, I deserve that.” She closed her eyes for a moment, feeling lightheaded. This was too much all at once, the stress and burdens of her Charmed and personal lives colliding in the form of an epic migraine that made it difficult to think and a brokenhearted trainer trembling in front of her. This was _exactly_ why she’d done the spell for Niko. But she was quickly coming to realize that Perry deserved better than this, too.

“Everything okay down there?” came Maggie’s voice from the landing, sweet but with a tinge of warning: _That’s my sister you’re yelling at._ She’d apparently just gotten out of the shower and was toweling her hair in a long flannel robe. “Hey, Per.”

“All good. Thanks,” called Mel, giving her sister a curt shake of the head.

“All good. Thanks,” called Mel, giving her sister a curt shake of the head.

“Okay. Good to see you, Perry. Thanks for sharing her for girls night—we don’t get to do those enough. After what happened today, it was really nice to spend some time together, just us, you know? Anyway, have a great weekend!” she called the last part from her room before closing the door.

Annoyance at her younger sister evaporated at the easily delivered excuse, the little intervention reminiscent of Marisol in a way that was both comforting and painful. Perry had softened a hair when they turned back to look at each other. Mel shakily held her hands out, silently asking this time, and Perry took them after a beat. The trainer’s palms were rough and warm. Mel brushed a thumb over tanned skin, sighing deeply.

“I’m sorry. I totally understand why what I did was scary and hurtful. It’s been a _really_ bad day, but you’re right. Concussions are typically the type of thing you at least mention to… the people that you care about.”

Perry sniffled, watery green eyes pinned to the floor. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

Mel gently pulled her girlfriend into her arms, and the taller woman hunched a little to rest her head on her shoulder. She murmured something completely muffled by Mel’s sweatshirt, and the shorter woman pulled back a little. “What did you say?”

Perry stiffened. “I… love you. I’m sorry for yelling.”

Oh.

_I’ve missed you._ Mel blinked hard against Niko’s voice filling her head, panic rising in her throat.

_Is your sister home?_

Her brain was misfiring and her lungs seemed to be filling with sand. Maybe the concussion was worse than she thought? Was she going to pass out again? It seemed like a _distinct_ possibility. Perry continued watching her for a response, her expression slowly darkening as seconds ticked past in silence. The witch would’ve frozen things there if she thought it would do any good, but…

_I will text you and ask you out. And nervously watch the dot dots for your response._

She knew what Perry wanted to hear, that wasn’t the problem. She just couldn’t bring herself to say it. It wasn’t true. And that came with the realization that even if she wanted to, she _couldn’t do this_ again, couldn’t bear even the thought of reciprocating Perry’s words, and then having to lie to and
lose her. This was why witches became “old crones”, wasn’t it? Her sanity wouldn’t make it out of a second storm alive.

*I love you so much, and you’re the worst driver I know.*

Mel stayed silent.

The trainer made a noise like a strangled whimper, turning towards the exit. “It’s—you know what, that’s… You’ve got a lot going on so, I’m just gonna… I’m gonna leave. I wanted you to know. And I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Perry—“ The front door closed. “Shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Marisol Vera shipped Melko despite the messy origin of their relationship, and I will go to my grave believing that.

Every few thousand words I think to myself, "Greta should probably reappear in this at some point, that makes sense", but then I also think, "Nah."
Today, there would be no angst. Mel would not allow it. This was an angst-free zone. The Angst Prohibition was in effect. If her body was a temple, then angst was sacrilege. No pining, no existential crises, no arguing the merits and disadvantages of using weaknesses in the time-space continuum to fix your relationship problems.

Today, there would only be demon-slaying. Empowered witches using literal powers. For the good of humanity. It sounded so epic when put like that, though in reality it never seemed quite so grand because nobody knew about it, except people who expected it of them—

Ahem. Today, that was okay, it was water under the bridge, because there would be no angst. They were going to vanquish Fitela.

Because if they didn’t do that today, Mel was going to vanquish her little sister first. Maybe there was a fourth secret sister out there somewhere and the trio status could remain. They could do a little swaparoo.

The younger segment of the Charmed Ones had been needling and poking at each other all week, with no discernible point of origin other than boredom and maybe some lingering, unprocessed feelings about a certain detective, for both of them. More than once, it had devolved into shouting matches ended by slamming doors. Macy had deployed her best peacekeeping tactics, but even she wasn’t immune to the shadow of the two little stormclouds that had become her housemates, and it wasn’t Mel and Maggie had been kind towards their referee.

So yeah. They all could do with some demon vanquishing action, please and thank you.

Harry was worried. “Are you ladies sure you’re feeling okay?”

Macy pinned him with a baleful look. “Ask us that one more time, Harry.”

The sisters stood with a plainly awkward distance between them, a miniature live action Orion’s Belt constellation across the attic floor. Mel wore a pair of black jeans, her black combat boots (typically
reserved for bar nights), and a dark gray jacket over a black t-shirt. Somehow she must’ve anticipated different wardrobe needs than her sisters, who were just wearing sneakers, blue jeans, and bright Hilltowne U shirts, one magenta and the other green. Whatever. Not that all-black was necessarily out of the realm of her daily outfits anyway, but she knew it looked like a symptom of their household turmoil as they stood with three sets of arms crossed, waiting.

A purple shower of light announced Charity’s arrival (on ET, or Elder Time, as they’d taken to calling her fashionably late appearances). She didn’t seem to notice the sartorial or psychic awkwardness of the room, or if she did, the Elder ignored it. “All right. Is the wolf bedded down?”

“Looks like it,” confirmed Harry after a little clear of his throat. “The divination has been still for about an hour.”

Charity held up a duffel bag, and like a medieval Mary fucking Poppins, began pulling ornate weapons out of it, “Just in case you want to use any of these. Some witches think of weapons as crutches, but honestly, even Angels use them, and if it helps achieve a goal…”

Mel didn’t catch the rest of the hoity ramble as she picked up a smallish crossbow and turned it over in her hands. While the bow and mechanisms themselves appeared handmade, the bolts were clearly not of this world--metal, but swirling with changing color even when sitting still in their quiver. She gingerly touched the living metal, smiling in spite of her mood when a little spark of magical energy shot up her arm at the contact. The charge hit her brain and the answer to her unspoken question somehow manifested itself without the need for assistance: *Infusion enchantment. Whitelight and gold bolts, for use against dark creatures.* She jerked her hand back, but felt a thrill of pride at the passive evolution of her divination abilities.

“That’s Athena’s crossbow,” offered Charity, setting the emptied bag on the floor.

“*Athena*? Like the Greek goddess?” Mel didn’t care that she was spluttering; that type of factoid was a stark reminder of their destiny: The most powerful witches in history. But there again was the Charmed Ones’ duality, because Charity said it with the tone and level of boredom of someone identify the pair of scratchy socks their grandmother had given them for their birthday.

“Quite a moody lady,” replied the Elder with a wink. “If you like it, you can keep it. It’s very nice for quick defense, better than guns, that’s for sure.” For reasons unknown to Mel, Charity glanced at Harry as she said the last part.

Maggie frowned the entire time she considered the cache, but she ultimately decided to drag a thick knife out of the pile and hang its sheath’s long strap around her shoulders, like a satchel at her hip. Macy politely declined, and Mel didn’t miss the tiny smile that that choice brought to Harry’s face. She filed that away for later analysis.

Their brilliant plan this time around amounted to three steps: One, wait for it to settle down. Since they knew what it was, they felt better about popping into the woods with it. Or, they felt better about that than trying to follow it into a Norse dimension. Two, set it on fire. Magical fire, that is; the sisters had been practicing the spell all week. Fitela would have to remove the cloak, at which point: Three, recapture him in human form to return to the Elders for safekeeping and imprisonment. Additional steps may include: *Don’t get eaten.*

They chose a new moon night. Fitela’s powers would be at their weakest, and though the Charmed Ones would be a little weaker too, they weren’t nearly as reliant on lunar energy for their power (according to Charity). Something to that effect. Mel wasn’t too interested in the magical backstory this time. *Crossbow v. demon wolf* was going to be the highlight of her week, no matter the academic details.
Harry landed them about a hundred feet away from Fitela’s divined location amongst thick trees, the mismatched quintet moved quietly towards him, faces growing tighter as they went.

It took about as long to reach the wolf as it did for Mel’s eyes to adjust to the unrelenting darkness. Just as she was able to make out the starlight on individual leaves, she also saw a hulking shadow beyond them, like the forest floor itself was breathing. The group stopped. Best Mel could see, Fitela was reclined in a small clearing, the space barely big enough for him from snout to tail.

They split into two groups for the next part, Mel and Macy getting as close as they could while Maggie hung back with Charity and Harry, curling a little around the front of Fitela. At the moment the wolf’s head lifted, Mel heard the whoosh of air, the sound of Maggie lighting the faefire, and green light sprung up from across the clearing. That directed the beast’s head towards the trio, and it was completely unprepared for the swing of Macy’s arm from the other direction; its huge body jerked to one side, a thunderous snarl ripping through the night before Mel froze it in place, feet suspended in the air. The force of Fitela’s resistance nearly drove her to a knee, but she sucked in a sharp breath and surged forward, allowing just a stutter of movement before the wolf froze again. One of Charity’s streams of purple electricity joined the effort, splitting a tree on its way to wrapping around the beast’s chest.

“Pull!” called Macy, and Maggie threw a burning branch into the air… poorly. It crashed into a tree and crumpled to the ground before Macy could redirect its flight, lighting more fire and, much to her immediate disappointment, illuminating Mel and Macy’s location.

“Nice job.” Somehow, Mel found the time and headspace to hurl her ire at her sister even as the wolf broke free and lunged at her, the closest target. Macy drove it to one side, but could not stop it completely, and the tip of one of its long claws caught Mel’s leg before it went crashing past. The force of just that much impact sent her sprawling across the ground as pain lanced through her thigh, and she imagined that this must be what it felt like to get clipped by a bus before her cheek collided with the ground.

Yelling rang over Mel’s head as she tried to catch her breath, the trees tilting in her vision. Another flying branch went by, and then darted in a straight line away. Mel heard the wolf roar, and the sound came closer. With some difficulty, she looked down her body to see it airborne and incoming, paws out, thick claws reaching for her. Her hands found the crossbow wedged against her side, and she spun it, pulled back the mechanism, and released without aiming; Fitela was close enough anyway. The whitelight bolt struck it in the shoulder, knocking the wolf just enough off course that she could roll away before those paws caught her again. Someone’s hand closed around her shoulder and tugged her to a sitting position while the wolf whined and rubbed the burning spots on its legs against the ground.

The burst of purple lightning from over her head slammed into the beast so hard its teeth crackled even after the bolt faded, its body arching and writhing, muscles out of control.

“You’ve got to get up. Get up, get up, get up,” gasped Charity, yanking on her jacket with her free hand until the witch made it up to on shaky feet.

Mel looked down and registered three deep grooves in her jeans, sticky and dark with her blood. That nearly made her knees give, but the Elder’s grip was firm, and she tossed another lightning bolt before half-walking, half-dragging Mel over to where they’d set the main fire. Harry pressed his open palm over her thigh, pristine light surrounding the wound, and her sisters moved in front of her, hands held tightly.

Fitela had recovered and rocked back up onto his feet, now slowly moving in a curve around them.
Macy shifted her feet so that she blocked Harry and Mel from the wolf no matter where it stalked, and something about looking up at her sister’s determinedly straight spine, hands on hips, protective and fierce… for a moment, for a nanosecond ripped from a better world, Macy’s form became Marisol’s, like the time she’d protected her daughters from a feral dog in much the same way, offering her body as the final protectionist sacrifice. Out of love. Warmth and gratitude swelled in her chest simultaneously with a sensation that could only be called power. She pushed Harry’s hand aside when the skin of her wound closed and grabbed one of Macy’s hands. Maggie took the other.

The wolf lurched into a run towards them again.

Charity lifted a thick knot of green-burning branches and leaves.

Describing the sensation of the Power of Three in a way that did it justice would be impossible; Mel had never even tried out loud. She imagined the pulling feeling in her chest like a deep, strong tree root, encapsulated in the unseeable stuff of life, drawing it in from every pore and with every breath. Their hands glowed green where they touched, and electricity prickled across her skin. Snapping jaws disappeared in the ensuing faefireball, which didn’t just break apart over the beast, but wrapped over it like glue, drawing the first of increasingly loud and long shrieking whines.

Rushing forward just a couple steps, Charity yelled at the immolating figure in some language that didn’t register to Mel’s ears.

“Take off the cloak,” muttered Harry, his voice thick and horror dawning on his face as seconds ticked by, filled with the wolf’s tortured cries.

“He’s not going to…” Maggie put a hand over her mouth and had to look away. “He’s gonna take it off, right?”

Mel steeled her jaw. This asshole had brought a lot of angst to her life, come to think of it as she watched him burn alive. She would have liked to see him under lock and key for the rest of his days, but no matter when the reaper came for him, Death would surely send him to Hell… for eternity. That sounded great, too. She lifted her crossbow and loosed another bolt before anyone noticed. It flew true, slamming into the wolf’s scorched head. The thrashing beast gasped out one final whine and fell over, and the inferno jumped to a seemingly endless column. Then it was gone. A pile of ash, sparkling with green energy, lay in its wake.

Maggie’s jaw dropped open. “You—Mel, why—”

“He wasn’t going to take it off,” replied the middle sister thinly. She refused to meet any of the barrel-eyed stares the others were sending in her direction.

After a long, awkward silence where Mel focused on making sure every fiber of her being gave off leave me the fuck alone energy, Charity stepped over to the pile of smoldering demon-wolf ashes and examined it with pursed lips.

“Oh so… that didn’t go exactly to plan, but… that one’s done,” offered Macy, ever the reliably neutral good member of the party.

“Yeah, well, if Maggie could maybe do her one job decently, then—”

“Oh please, I’m not the one who got sliced because I was too busy being a bitch —”

Warm feelings, gone.

Macy moved between the two Veras before they could leap at each other, but the verbal insults kept
flying as Harry tried yelling along to get them to stop.

It wasn’t until Charity turned around and arched an eyebrow, muting both sisters, that they finally heard what she’d been muttering near the Fitela leftovers: “The weapon, from the second human victim. It’s not here. It should have survived the fire, even if it were a human weapon, that’s why we used it.”

Mel hated being muted. She could feel her vocal chords moving, could feel the air of the words, but no sound. Not even that quiet huffing people sometimes do when they lip-sync. Fucking Charity. The witch might’ve gone to shake the Elder by the shoulders, but Macy pivoted her feet to stop that movement, too. “Don’t,” she whispered.

“And we still don’t know what the weapon is?” continued Harry.

Charity murmured in the negative. The difficulty of the fight sat evident in the sudden hard lines of her face, the way a few locks of hair hung out of place on her forehead. “Mel, Maggie, can we behave?”

They sulkily nodded their heads, and Mel said, “Thank you,” just to make sure everything was still working. Then, she pressed on: “If we don’t know what it is, then we don’t know if it’s something he would have hidden or—or sold, maybe. But we got the demon, so do we really need to still worry about that?”

The Elder produced a brandless plastic baggie from her pocket (“ElderBasics, instant delivery,” Mel thought absently) and scooped Fitela’s remains into it. “I suppose that’s one way to look at it. Whatever it was, it obviously wasn’t enough to save him.”

When the older members of the hunting party leaned their heads together to examine the ashes, Mel and Maggie exchanged dueling glares behind their backs.

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_ June, 2017_

_“Hap-py Pride!”_

_Mel startled at the kazoo honk that followed Maggie’s overly eager greeting. She tried her best to smile, accepting the myriad rainbow accessories shoved into her hands even as she tried to pull her keys out of the front door. Niko chuckled behind her and caught a bright bandana as it tumbled, unfurling it to stuff into her back right pocket with a wink at her girlfriend._

_“Thanks for the swag, Little Vera,” greeted the officer, side-hugging Maggie around the shoulders before moving further into the foyer to set down their empty cooler. Michigan didn’t always have summery Pride weather, but this year it was hot enough that Niko wore a pair of high-waisted denim shorts that showed off her endless golden legs, in rare form since she’d been training to apply for a detective position. Maggie had talked her into rainbow suspenders after some token resistance (“ Honestly it makes me feel really old, I wore these to my first pride and that was 14 years ago”), and under these was a white t-shirt with black lettering that just said DIVINE._

_Maggie’s outfit almost matched Niko’s, though her shirt was just plain black, and the two of them cheerfully commiserated over the coincidence for a few minutes while loading the cooler with Gatorade and alcohol. Marisol had done two annoying things leading to this current, ultimate annoyance. One, she’d asked if Maggie could go with Mel to Pride. Two, she’d done it in front of Niko, who volleyed an enthusiastic affirmative back to Marisol before Mel could even open her_
mouth to protest. The officer had an unrelenting desire to make Marisol happy, a drive which the matriarch was more than happy to stoke when it suited her, from forcing sister bonding time like this to maybe occasionally doing some free yardwork. If Mel took a step back from her own general irritation with having her life so often interrupted by her family, she knew it was a good thing that her partner wanted to make a good impression on the family. She just wished the officer was slightly less committed.

This was their first Pride as a real couple, and she’d really been looking forward to a day essentially consisting of eating carnival food, drinking ridiculous Pride specials, watching the parade, and a lot of making out. The second and last of those would probably be significantly hampered by her baby sister’s presence.

All of that was to say, Mel was not in the cheeriest of moods.

Niko hauled the full cooler up onto one hip and carried it out to the car while the sisters considered each other awkwardly from across the foyer.

“I’m not trying to ruin your day, you know,” said Maggie when she heard the trunk of Mel’s car open. “Mom wouldn’t let me go without a chaperone, and it’s fun.”

“Yeah, because you somehow sneeze near a food cart, and suddenly you have your hands on alcohol.” Mel rolled her eyes, daring her sister to call any word of that a lie.

“If you didn’t want me to come, you should have said something.”

“If you wanted to come, you should’ve asked me first, instead of making Mom guilt Niko into it.”

The younger Vera sighed and crossed her arms. “Whatever, Mel. I’m going to have a good time today, and I hope you join us.”

Niko popped back into the house with an oblivious smile, looking at least a little reddened from the effort. “Ready?”

The detective and Maggie chattered excitedly about the day’s events, such as the “Gayest Dog Contest”, as Mel drove them down to City Hall. The Pride area was a blocked off grid of streets around that and other government buildings, more like a block party than other park-based festivals. They staked out a spot in front of the main stage, where a drag queen and king duo were performing a Kehlani song that had the crowd melting, raining dollar bills on the stage. Mel laid out their blanket on the concrete while Niko parked the cooler and Maggie… Maggie’s face was alight with joy as she dragged her eyes over the crowd.

“The crowd’s not the show,” sighed Mel, tugging on her arm when she was done with the blanket. “Don’t gawk.”

“People watching is the best part,” argued Niko with a wry smirk, and Maggie stuck her tongue out at Mel over the officer’s back before plopping down.

Admittedly, Mel was finding it difficult to hold onto her anger, at least in a general sense, as she sipped a Miller Lite and applauded the performers when the song ended. Adorable teenagers, decked out in even more obnoxious rainbow than they were, chased each other around the back of the performance area, watched with amusement but not bothered by the volunteers standing nearby. Everyone was out in their queer best, feeling good, sharing a ritual that was rife with competing opinions and approaches, but ultimately was just… community. From the sporty-looking, unfriendly butches sharking around their beautiful, elegant femme girlfriends to the fuzzy-chested daddies
holding a gag play workshop at their booth. A community of people whose happiest pastimes and relationships were often hidden... but not today.

Maggie got up to go buy food, solemnly promising she wouldn’t stray or let someone charm her into their car, and Mel yanked Niko down to lay next to her on the blanket.

“You gotta be nicer to your sister,” said Niko through a smile, somehow conveying both a scolding and breathless tone as Mel kissed along her neck. “All her friends are leaving town for college, and she’s sad.”

Mel growled and pulled her head back. “Can we not talk about my sister right now?”

To accentuate her point, she slid a hand under Niko’s shirt to glide along twitching muscles in her stomach.

Niko pushed herself up onto one elbow, still grinning, but with a hint of exasperation. “Babe… don’t be like that. We’ll have plenty of time to celebrate pride the cuffed way tonight. We’ll drop her off before dinner. Just be nice while she’s here. Remember she’s struggling right now.”

“I don’t even know why you know things about her and I don’t.”

“She’s seventeen,” laughed Niko. “Sora was worse. So emo.” She leaned over to press her lips against Mel’s, her free hand curling over her hip to bring them closer. “I’m just the lady that hangs around and dates her sister, it’s easier to talk to me. She wants you to think she handles everything perfectly, because you’re her big sister and she wants to impress you. Trust me.”

“Funny way of showing it,” muttered Mel, but her inner fire did die down at the revelation. Just a little.

“Where is she, anyway?” Niko craned her neck up to look in the direction of the food trucks, and Mel watched as her face tightened into a frown.

“What?”

“I think… is she talking to that protestor?”

Mel shot upright and followed Niko’s gaze to where Maggie stood stiffly next to the barricade that separated Pride from the token protestors holding up signs warning sodomites and women who went to college that they were bound for Hell. One of them, a man with white-gray hair visible from this distance, seemed to be exchanging words with her. It did not look like a calm exchange, with some volunteers beginning to watch and speak nervously into their walkie talkies.

They were both on their feet in a second, cooler forgotten as they jogged towards the scene.

Don’t feed the protestors, Mel could’ve sworn she warned her sister in the days leading up to this. As they got within a few feet, she could make out the conversation.

“...abomination in the eyes of the LORD. There’s no amount of brainwashing that can change that.”

“Oh okay, 2003 called and they want their bullshit back, cabrón.”

She noticed he was wearing a MAGA shirt just as the next words came out of his mustache-shaded mouth:
“Is this your dyke family? Figures. Are all of you faggot anchor babies?”

“Hey! You can’t yell that stuff, protest area or not,” barked Niko, using her cop voice despite her outfit and putting her body between Maggie and the man. “That’s enough.”

“This is America, dyke cunt. U-S-A,” he snarled at the officer’s back as she turned away, putting two hands on Maggie’s shoulders. The younger sister seemed inclined to stay and continue the confrontation, stuck in a silent battle as she stared down the protester over Niko’s shoulder.

Mel moved closer, grabbing her sister’s hand. “Maggie, it’s okay. Just ignore them. They just want to get a rise out of you. Let’s just go enjoy the show.”

The man had started screaming “Build the wall!” at them in the background.

“The things he said,” hissed Maggie, finally allowing her feet to move away from the man and the three buddies that had shown up to join his chant. “Fuck, and this stupid Trump shit.”

It did hurt, beyond what she thought when the campaign had started, because it had been relentless for what seemed like years by now, flames fanned by mainstream institutional “validation”. Mel felt the tug of fear in her stomach, but Maggie was too freaked out for that right now.

Security had circled closer to them, nobody making any sudden movements, and the three women were almost in the clear when a yell rose above the chant: “Hey senoritas, stop by to clean my mom’s house later and I’ll put an anchor baby in you. Arriba!”

This was accompanied by a soft cracking sound and a splash of something cold and sticky, and Mel looked down to see a broken styrofoam container of white cheese dipping sauce... “queso”... resting against her sandals. Her mouth dropped open in shock, and then a high-pitched noise took over her hearing, her vision turning red around the edges as she turned to face the cackling men. Later, when she processed this moment, she knew she would’ve (at least tried to) physically harm the protesters if her girlfriend hadn’t beat her to it.

Niko was too fast for security, too. Covered in splatters of cheese and bits of beef, she launched herself over the barricade and full body tackled the ringleader to the concrete while the rest scattered, getting chased by security and uniform officers assigned to the event. Mel and Maggie ran up behind her, and with no one else paying attention, they each delivered a swift kick to his side before Niko was able to push them away with one hand, holding the man’s head down with the other and her knee in his back.

“Hamada,” said one of the unis, approaching and giving the Vera sisters a sheepish look before glancing back at his fellow officer. He handed her the handcuffs from his hip. “Nice takedown.”

“I’m not on duty,” said Niko even as she accepted them.

“Yeah, but you can do it anyway if you want. I’ll write the report—saw the whole thing by the way. Assault’s the charge.”

Niko nodded gratefully and cuffed the protestor, leaning down to hiss something that sounded generally ominous in his ear before easily hauling him to his feet and handing him off to the uniformed officer, who introduced himself to the sisters as Trip Bailey, a fellow detective rank contender at HPD. He got them towels to wipe off the cheese.

“You okay?” asked Niko, straightening her suspenders when she was finished and giving Maggie a concerned look. “Really okay?”
“I’m fine. They were a live action Twitter troll feed,” muttered the teenager. “Pinche pendejos.”

“Mel?”

“Yeah... my heart’s racing a bit.”

Maggie agreed, and they stood watching the men get hauled away for a few minutes, holding hands as a trio. When everything had died down, Mel felt the knot of fear in her chest loosen. A couple drag queens blew kisses at the departing police vans. A gaggle of men in short shorts crowded Officer Trip Bailey, applauding his apparent heroism (and muscles) as he “aw shucks” smiled back at them. They were fine. For now.

Niko’s hand squeezed hers gently, and she met her girlfriend’s soft brown eyes. “You sure you’re okay? We can leave, if...”

“No way, that’s what he would’ve wanted.” Mel let go of her sister’s fingers to fold her arms around Niko’s neck, grinning. “And honestly, babe... that tackle may have been the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Maggie threw her hands out and made a disgusted noise. Niko’s cheeks burned red, but she pulled Mel in close for a quick kiss before escorting them (with a lot of extra swagger to her steps) to the food trucks, one arm over the shoulders of each sister.

“Hey Niko! Over here!”

The detective swiveled her eyes until she found the source of the voice, giving Perry a quick wave before carefully picking her way across the restaurant and sitting down. She hadn’t been to Texas Roadhouse in years, but apparently Perry’s diet required a lot of steak intake, so Niko tried not to wrinkle her nose at the bucket of roasted, salted peanuts sitting on the table. Down the row of booths, some poor soul was being forced to sit on a saddle and wear a cowboy hat while his friends and several waitresses sang Happy Birthday. This scene qualified under the “what fresh hell” category for the detective, and not only because of the birthday boy’s torture or the entrees drowning in cream gravy.

Perry had texted her starting at 6:13 that morning, insisting they have dinner after work. That wasn’t unusual per se, but after her last encounter with Mel, Niko was not keen on the idea of facing her old friend. The guilt had already practically gnawed an ulcer into her stomach.

She met Perry’s eyes with some difficulty after ordering a salmon salad and an IPA from the waiter. They conducted a few minutes of easy small talk, but eventually, Perry sat back in her seat and pinned Niko with a look.

“What’s on your mind?” asked the detective, proud of how casual her voice sounded despite her racing pulse.

“Do you want me to say it outright or dance a little first?”

Niko shrugged. Fuckfuckfuckfuck...

“I told Mel I loved her last week.”
One didn’t need to be a detective to tell that conversation didn’t end well based on Perry’s posture and tone.

“You know what she said? Nothing. You know what she’s said to me since then? Nothing.” Perry put her head in her hands. “I feel so stupid. When we’re together, she’s with me, you know? But that other day…” Perry swiped at her eyes and coughed. “She didn’t even think to tell me she’d been hurt or that she was okay.”

Niko waited for what she thought might be the next clause, and you didn’t tell me either, but somehow that was where Perry stopped. In hopes of cutting off that line of thinking before the trainer caught on, she blurted, “I was stopping by to talk about her mom’s case.”

“Her mom’s case? I thought her mom died in an accident?”

Oops. Hamada, shovel, hole. “Well, yeah, she did. The sisters just had some more questions, I figured I could help them out, reviewed some records.”

Perry’s devastated expression sent another pang of guilt through Niko’s already-pained chest. “She didn’t tell me about that either! What am I doing wrong? Is this controlling of me?”

A few of their neighboring patrons were glancing over at their table with annoyance or nosy interest, and Niko glared at them until they looked away before speaking again: “Those sisters seem like a tight group. Maybe she’s just not used to sharing with a new person, someone who isn’t living in a house with her. Things that seem obvious to you to share, maybe they aren’t obvious to her.” A brutal concussion is universally obvious though, she didn’t say.

“Maybe.” Perry took a long drink of water, sniffling and staring at the white tablecloth. “But what am I supposed to do now? What if she just never calls me again? Do you think she’d do that?”

Niko reached across the table to put a hand on her friend’s annoyingly muscular forearm. “Mel might think you don’t want her to call, if that last chat went bad. Text her, but only when you feel like you can talk about it without being mean or resentful, okay?”

Perry nodded like a kid agreeing to eat vegetables, her finger tracing a natural knot in the wooden table. “She said that her last relationship ended because she was bad at communicating and had a lot of fear. It just seems like she’d doing that to me now.”

“Her ex? Do we know her?”

“Oh, uh… I don’t know. She’s never said a name. I think it was a really long time ago?” Perry shrugged. “You’re right, though. You’re always right. I wish I could find someone who fits me like you and Greta fit.”

Niko used every ounce of self control to prevent her expression from so much as twitching in response to that.

Mercifully, waitresses interrupted to drop off their food, and Perry somehow made cutting into a huge strip steak look like a sad, depressing task. The trainer had a good heart, but also a perpetually young one; even though she’d moved on from her younger years of rapid-fire “situationships”, these days “I love you” after two months of casual dating was pretty standard for Perry Trudeau, no matter how many times the friend group tried to warn her.

“Look, Per… I love you, dude, and I totally get that when something scary happens, you want to take that opportunity to tell people things, make sure nothing’s taken for granted, right?” Niko idly noted as she spoke that Perry and Mel were, at the very least, well matched on the appetite front,
evidenced by how the trainer inhaled her steak and mashed potatoes. “But Mel really had a tough
day, she was confused, things were really scary with a lot of blood and people around. I think maybe
it just wasn’t the right moment. Yeah? You guys will be fine.” Her outer monologue was followed
by a sharp inner one: *You are an almost-cheating, homewrecking monster, Hamada.*

“I guess,” replied the green-eyed woman sulkily, but with less misery. “That makes sense.”

Fairly certain that Mel hadn’t said anything to Perry about the moment in the car (least of all because
she seemingly hadn’t said anything to Perry *at all* since that day), Niko allowed herself to relax, and
the night went back to feeling like a normal Drinks & Dinner with her old friend. They finished their
dinner over much lighter topics, from the latest gossip of power-hungry trainers in Perry’s CrossFit
Box to the most recent season of Supergirl, replete with maddening SuperCorp teasing ( “*I could
totally take Melissa’s biceps to the next level, but not like, too much*” was Perry’s solemn
conclusion).

By the time they finally left their table and headed out to the parking lot, the sky had fully darkened
to night.

“Thanks again! I needed that,” called the trainer as she veered towards her car. “You’re the best.”

“All right,” Niko replied, feeling strangely refreshed and recommitted to never fucking up like she
had with Mel ever again. She checked her phone as she slid back into her car.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Text Message</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6:40</td>
<td>Wifey: Text me when you’re on your way home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:43</td>
<td>Wifey: We were supposed to talk tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6:44</td>
<td>Wifey: Please don’t get drunk with P. This is important</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Her good mood came crashing down. Right. Greta.

As she debated the pettiness of refusing to notify Greta of her departure from the bar, her phone rang
instead. There was a third body. Maybe she’d been a homicide detective for way too long, because
she was almost *relieved*. Jimmy was on his way—Hilltowne Park, only a few blocks away from her
current location. He hadn’t arrived when she pulled her El Camino into the parking lot, but she still
grabbed her service weapon and badge and stepped into the icy night air. Floodlights shining a
couple hundred feet into the park helped guide her to the forensics team.

Zelda wasn’t there this time, and in her stead another new face greeted the detective a she ducked
under fluttering crime scene tape. The dark-haired, pale-skinned man with a long nose introduced
himself as Laurel, “the new tech from Detroit”, and he led her to where the body and the ME were
waiting.

“It’s a woman,” the medical examiner said as they approached. “No ID this time. I’d say mid-50s.”

Niko’s feet stuttered as the body came into view. The victim lay on her back… or what was left of it.
Her head and legs were pretty much intact, but her torso was ripped completely open from shoulder
to hip and emptied out, with just chunks of viscera remaining in the splinters of her ribs and spine.

“What’d they do with the organs?”

The medical examiner shrugged. “Haven’t found them yet.”

“This is totally different than the other two. Where’s the message?”
On cue, Laurel whistled from somewhere off in the trees. Niko followed the sound another fifty feet or so, where the tech was pointing at the message and triquetra branded on a fallen tree. She bent her knees to take a look, but knew before her eyes found it that she wouldn’t be able to read the script. Of course.

“And there’s another one over here.”

Niko glanced up, frowning. This wasn’t good. “Another one? That’s new.”

The detective followed Laurel deeper into the woods that connected their local park with the state-owned acres that stretched north, tugging her scarf up around her mouth as the bitter night cold sent pinpricks of pain across her skin. When he stopped, he gestured to another fallen tree, and Niko stepped past him to look. She circled around the rotting log, confused when she saw nothing, and then raised her flashlight back to Laurel.

Except he wasn’t there. She nearly dropped her MagLite in shock to see instead a big wolf with mottled red-gray fur staring back at her, lips curled to show massive teeth.

“Holy fuck,” she breathed, looking around for Laurel and slowly backing away from the creature. Her hand almost reached her gun before the thing pounced, huge paws ripping across her chest and throwing her backwards against a tree. Her head slammed into the bark with a crack that sent stars dancing across her vision, and then nothing.

“I wish we had, like, its big dumb head to put above the fireplace or something,” confessed Mel with a smirk, smoke curling from her nostrils as she said it.

“Gross,” protested Macy even as she accepted the smoldering joint Mel passed to her. The three sisters were holed up in the attic with all of the lights off save a couple candles, lying on their backs with their heads together.

After taking some time to decompress individually after the battle, Maggie had furiously knocked on her sisters’ doors and waved a baggie of weed in their faces while yelling something about an emergency family meeting. It wasn’t quite how Marisol used to do these; the matriarch Vera would typically utilize fresh baked conchas or sopaipillas to draw out her brooding daughters, but the core concept remained the same. Familiar enough that Mel didn’t even put up symbolic protest to throwing a quilt around her shoulders and trudging upstairs.

Maggie took a long drag and sighed through her exhale, gaze lingering on her middle sister’s face as she passed it. They both frowned and looked down at the same time, with their older sister looking on through narrowed eyes.

“What’s going on with you two?” asked Macy, not accusatory, but concerned.

Mel rolled onto her stomach, resting her chin on the back of her hands. “I never would’ve had my jeans cut up if she could throw.”

“Ah-ah!” Macy cut off Maggie’s oncoming protest. “Foul on the play, Mel. You guys have been fighting for days. Don’t make this about just tonight.”

Twin huffs floated across the dim room. So much for the no angst day. Maggie was playing with the
hem of her shirt, trying to look small. Mel’s anger reached a point of sudden rawness, a cresting burn that was beginning to chew up her insides more than was worth the selfish reward of lashing out with it. Maggie had always been an easy target for her, the curse of being a younger sibling. She was always there, and she was always small. And Mel had been angry since before she could remember, for whatever reason might present itself.

And in a moment of big sister penance, seeing how Marisol might call this “the right thing to do,” Mel offered her olive branch first: “I’m sorry. Between worrying about the stuff with mom and the demon wolf and Niko… I’ve been cranky.”

Maggie scoffed around thick curls of smoke, but got a quick reprimand from Macy. After thinking for a few minutes, she let out a long clear breath. “Sometimes I can’t stand all the secrets. It’s really starting to mess with me. Like… Mom had sisters, and she never said anything to us. They don’t even live outside of town. Who does that? Did they hate each other? Why?”

A looming silence. Mel swallowed thickly. “We will never be like that.”

Macy blew an impressive cloud towards the ceiling. “I feel robbed enough to have met you guys so late.”

“When I got pissy during the fight… It was like, my powers just disintegrated. But when when Harry was fixing my leg, and you were protecting us… I felt like I could have blown up Harbinger myself… so long as I had my sisters with me.”

They sought each other’s hands across the rug.

“New rule.” Maggie’s voice took on a tone of deep conviction. “No fighting demons while fighting each other.”

They pinky promised on it, laughing together as the joint reached its natural conclusion and was dropped into the ashtray, a whiskey glass Mel had taken from the bar.

Then a rapid, hard knocking on their front door startled the sisters upright.

“It’s almost midnight,” said Macy quietly.

They crept downstairs together while the knocking kept up, and Mel winced at the volume as she looked through the peephole, and then cracked open the door.

“Detective Morris?”

“Hi,” he said, a little breathless. The whites of his eyes seemed to be bulging, giving his expression a frenzied edge. “Have any of you had any contact with Detective Hamada in the last few hours?”

Mel opened the door wider, stomach hitting her feet. “No. Why? Is something wrong?”

Morris’ eyes swept what he could see of the foyer, as if he expected to find Niko hiding behind the door. “Not sure. She was supposed to meet me at a scene. Nobody’s seen or heard from her for a few hours. Her wife says she was having dinner with your girlfriend?”

A sudden jolt of panic hit Mel’s chest. “Wait, have you checked on Perry?”

“Yeah, she’s at her apartment. They left the restaurant maybe six hours ago.”

“That sounds serious. I hope she’s okay.” Maggie reached through the door, putting her hand over
Morris’ even though it was a somewhat awkward reach.

Morris jerked his arm back after just a second, and he raked the fingers through his hair with a deep sigh. “Okay. Thanks, ladies. Here’s my card, in case you hear from her. Contact me immediately.”

“Of course.”

As the door closed, Mel tried to fight the pull of angry tears against her eyes. Her instincts were screaming a red alert.

“There’s a third body,” announced Maggie, her voice small. “I didn’t get much, but Niko disappeared from the scene.”

When Harry apparated behind them, his face drawn with the burden of the bad news he carried, Mel almost froze time just to avoid hearing the words:

“We figured out why the weapon was missing. There are two wolves. And this other one has the detective.”

Mel dug her nails into her palms to quell the urge to break the glass of the front door. Eyes slipping closed against the onslaught of dread, she asked, “How do you know?”

“The accompanying message of the next victim simply says, ‘What will the Three give to have her back?’”

Macy sighed, low and exhausted. “A ransom note.”

Chapter End Notes

Hate speech is so stupid I'm not even sure how to write it?
who trusts pretty girls anyway?

Chapter Summary

The Charmed Ones find some new friends. Sigmund can't hide.

Chapter Notes

Thanks for reading, kudos, comments : .. )

THISCHAPTER GOESFULL GRRM (nocharacter death tho). Here's the thing, ya'll. I wanted to write a fic that would fix-it for the long term, and this is where the "off the rails" tag begins to apply. This chapter is a beast because I don't really like it, but I've written it maybe six different ways and landed on this route. I hope you're still with me at the end.

chapter mood: "Babylon" by SZA
apartment flashback tune: "River" by Leon Bridges

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Elders reminded Mel of the United States government, in a lot of ways. Almost all of them bad. They would meddle, make demands, request favors, and then lie and obfuscate and straight up deny fault in the face of the consequences. They would just walk away.

In the case of the missing Detective Niko Hamada, at least, the government was in rare form compared to the Elders. Her disappearance had hit national news given the natural clickbait elements of the case: serial killer on the loose, intrepid detective gives chase, and then she goes missing, and all of that with no suspects. The fact that the news had decided the main image they’d use of Niko was one from her 30th birthday didn’t help (or did, depending on one’s opinion of involuntary virality). She looked angelic in a glittery cone hat, hair perfectly straight and chin-length, smiling from ear to ear with one toned arm slung around someone who got cut out of the frame. Mel suspected Greta based on the single curl of blonde hair visible in some versions of the photo.

The tearful wife had certainly not been afraid to hit the spotlight in the mornings and on primetime shows, a performance that Mel had commented on in a fit of frustration, only to get a firm scolding from Macy for judging how Greta reacted to this. She didn’t know. For all Greta could tell, her wife had been abducted by a violent madman, or worse, was already dead.

But they knew. The Charmed Ones, Harry, and the Council knew.

The sisters couldn’t divine across dimensions yet, but the Elders had done some sort of whatever they did and narrowed the location down to a Norse realm called Mimir’s Well. The whole realm. Somewhere. According to the Council, like most Scandinavian things, it was very cold there, but habitable for mortals. They could not discern whether Niko was still alive, or so they said.

Turned out, Charity had neglected to mention that Fitela’s cloak theft had been alongside a brother,
Sigmund, who the Council had lost track of centuries ago and assumed dead. Maggie had had to physically restrain Mel from launching a fireball at the Elder in response to the confession. She’d certainly let her know her feelings verbally instead, and now Charity had been more or less avoiding them ever since. The Elders refused to offer any additional assistance, but would gladly take Sigmund’s cloak and the weapon back if they would be so kind as to retrieve it. Mel had half a mind to forget the Council altogether once this was finished.

Adding to the complicated road to actually making a plan, police had turned up at their house more than once, even going so far as to obtain a warrant for a basic search of the premises.

“I know you know something about this,” Morris had said to Mel as uniformed officers fanned out into the house behind her. “And I’m gonna figure it out.”

“Detective… I understand that you’re upset—”

“Upset?”

Mel tried not to wince as the man’s face came within inches of hers, every pore and blemish in perfect definition. He smelled a little bit like alcohol, which was worrisome, but she stood her ground.

“If I find out that you had so much as a whiff of information that you didn’t share with me, or you’re involved to the extent of so much as a fucking Facebook ‘Like’, I’m going to spend the rest of my career making sure we put you behind bars for the rest of your life.” This was, of course, a different man entirely than the one who’d first visited their house, all smiles and attempts to keep things casual. Jimmy Morris, the distraught and lost edition, snarled and yelled and got up in faces, a walking trap for “assault on a police officer”. She tried not to hold it against him; Morris was doing what he’d been taught, aggressive policing, out of want for anything else productive to do. He just wanted Niko back, too.

The sisters did their best to keep track of what the intruders were doing, following investigators from room to room. Macy and Mel occasionally used their powers to quietly slide magical items out of wandering hands. One of the technicians found Maggie’s knife in her bedroom, and when Mel spotted the short woman holding it, her breath hitched. She’d never been entirely clear on whether humans could see the swirl of magic in metal like her crossbow bolts or this knife, but it looked like she was about to find out.

“Interesting,” said the tech, who had brown eyes brimming with suspicion as she held up the blade to the light. “Hopefully not for any type of sorority hazing?”

Mel tried not to glare at her from the door, but was sure she’d failed.

The tech maintained eye contact as she misted the blade with a chemical, and then wiped a cotton swab over it. She looked disappointed when the swab didn’t indicate the presence of blood. The witch had to admit she’d been nervous for a moment there, unsure what could have been on the knife when Charity let Maggie take it.

“Zelda, anything?” called one of the unis from the hall.

“No yet,” she replied, singsongy. Even though the police were certainly in full red alert mode, agitated and unamused, the technician ‘Zelda’ seemed even more hostile than anyone else, except for maybe Morris. She huffed and muttered to herself as she looked around the sisters’ house, seemingly at random, ignoring anything any of her compatriots were doing in terms of a grid search or collecting evidence. Mel watched carefully from a distance as the woman searched, and it didn’t take
long for her to notice something particular about the way Zelda was searching. She surreptitiously called Maggie over to her and froze the visitors.

“Watch that CSI lady, the one with the hair.” Mel allowed another two seconds or so to pass, the investigators continuing their movements none the wiser, then she froze them again. “See it?”

A look of almost-recognition crossed Maggie’s face, her lips pursed in thought. Mel saw the moment the realization clicked, and she couldn’t deny the little flutter of pride in her sister. “She’s only wearing one glove.”

“She’s only wearing one glove,” echoed Mel encouragingly. “And…?”

“Is she…?” The younger sister tilted her head. “Let me see it one more time.”

Mel let go, this time allowing about five seconds to pass before freezing again.

“She’s touching magical things with her free hand, and everything else with the gloved hand. Except there’s no way she’d know what was what unless… unless…” A huge, triumphant smile spread across Maggie’s face, and with the freeze still in place, she ran down the stairs calling for Macy.

“Wait, I just have to remember where I…” There was the sound of the phone camera “shutter effect” from the attic. “Coming!”

The sisters convened in the living room right behind the technician, and after a deep, centering breath, Mel released only Zelda. It took a couple seconds for the woman to even realize something was amiss, and then she whirled around, and—

Mel almost lost her freeze when the technician disappeared. Or so she thought, until she noticed Zelda’s coveralls float to the ground, and a truly unpleasant noise broke through the air, something between a dog’s whine and an angry kazoo.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” yelled Macy, holding out her palms. “No screaming! We’re not going to hurt you!”

The sight might’ve been cute if not for the shock of it; sitting there in the pile of blue fabric was a fluffy gray fox, normal sized (thank Spirits) and with its ears pressed back tight against its skull. Sure, it had five tails, but Mel still felt like she could take it in a fight.

Thankfully, the fox stopped wailing, and instead spoke with Zelda’s voice, “I knew it!”

“You knew it? We’re the ones that—what are you, anyway?” Despite the situation, Mel had to resist the urge to reach out and touch the soft-looking fur on the fox’s head, focusing instead on the small, sharp teeth. It really was a cute little thing, which was somewhat refreshing for magical surprises.

“Yokai. Kitsune.” The fox narrowed black eyes at them. “And you—witches?”

Mel shrugged and gestured to the investigators trapped in the time space continuum around them.

“Then it was you!” The spirit sprung back into human form, coveralls and all, apparently for the sole purpose of shoving an accusatory finger in Mel’s face. “You’re the one.”

“Me?” protested the witch. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Our empath detected a powerful magical intervention in Niko’s life last year. They sent me here to investigate and make sure it would stop.” Zelda’s eyes had narrowed to slits, her expression
darkening. “You had no right to change her timeline without her consent.”

Of all the ways Mel had imagined her day going, even after the cops showed up, this hadn’t even been on the radar. She stared back, jaw clenching, as she tried to even begin to formulate questions about everything those three sentences implied. Her power wavered under the weight of it, some of the officers slow-motion resuming their movements before she stopped them again, gulping a few huge breaths.

Luckily, Macy was able to tag in: “Okay, we’re gonna need the SparkNotes on this.”

“I work for the Kamakura Coven. Keiko Hamada, Niko’s mom, was a friend of the warren, and her family is under our watch. We thought she was in trouble, and looks like we were right.” Zelda lowered her arm, but her glare only deepened. “You witches have a lot of nerve.”

“Excuse me?” blurted Mel, breath sputtering. “We did the spell to protect Niko.”

“And that worked so well!” snarled the kitsune. “She lives over a portal to Hell. You think she’s safer not knowing, not under your protection? Obviously not.”

“Then help us!” interrupted Maggie, drawing the other women’s eyes to her. “Help us get her back. We can argue about the timeline spell later. Just help us. If you’re supposed to be here to protect her, then we’re on the same team.”

The kitsune’s eyes flashed to their fox form black, a snarl rising in her chest.

“Please,” said the youngest sister quietly. “Please.”

After a brief staredown and with a frustrated huff, the spirit relented. She pulled a card from her boot and handed it to Mel, holding on tightly for a moment so she could search the witch’s eyes before letting go. “Meet me there tonight.”

Zelda had written on the back of the card in blue ink, “Lost and found.” Mel turned it over and found the name, phone number, and email address of an insurance agent. Odd. Worrying her bottom lip, Mel absently brushed a thumb over the printed ink, about to ask for clarification… and then the words and numbers broke apart, swirling like bits of black glitter before settling down again. The insurance company logo had been replaced with what looked like a crest, a shield shape behind the silhouette of a crow. Underneath, it read:

A MURDER FOR THOSE WHO KNOW

2774 Main St, 2nd floor

“Clever,” muttered the witch. A muscle over her eye twinged with sudden exhaustion, and she sent Macy back upstairs before concluding with Zelda, “We’ll be there.”

When she let go of the freeze, Zelda resumed searching as if nothing had happened, but she was wearing two gloves now.

Exhaustingly, the arrival of a new magical creature hadn’t even been the last surprise of the afternoon. At some point, a vaguely familiar voice floated into the house from the front door, and Mel poked her head around the living room wall to see Rachel standing there, dressed in a charcoal pencil skirt and white blouse, her red hair tamed back into a bun. She almost laughed at the absurdity of it, because what was Niko’s friend Rachel doing in her house right now?

“Mel,” greeted the redhead cautiously. “So, um, Perry asked me to come down here and… make
sure that things are going all right. I’m an attorney.”

The witch cocked an eyebrow. “You’re… here to help us?”

“Yes, I mean, I’m a public defender, nothing fancy, but I know a thing or two about police on the warpath. Plus, Perry vouched for you, so.”

That Perry. Recent events, obviously, had provided the perfect cover to avoid having A Talk with Perry about their last little exchange. When the search had started, the friend group had rushed over to Greta and Niko’s house (evidenced by Greta’s Tweet of a picture of them all making posters), and although Perry invited Mel “as a friend”, she’d given a work excuse and avoided it. Everything had been happening so quickly since then, she honestly hadn’t even thought of Perry and their whole… situation… until this very moment.

“Thank you,” Mel breathed after a too-long pause, during which Rachel began to frown. “How did you guys know they were here?”

In lieu of a response, Rachel held up her phone after tapping a few times, and then turned it to show Mel the live feed of the local NBC station outside of their house, covering the search. The chyron at the bottom of the screen said, “HPD conducting search related to Hamada disappearance”.

“…Oh.”

“Anything I should know?” Rachel went on, her voice pitched low to avoid the nearby officers’ ears. “If I know first, I can be better prepared to help you.”

The witch took a steadying breath and looked Rachel directly in the eyes. “No. Nothing.”

As it turned out, Rachel’s arrival served an almost immediate, pivotal purpose. Although Macy had cast a glamour over the Book when she heard the police knocking, and despite the sisters’ earlier attempt to cleanse them from sight, the officers had still spotted three triquetras in the house. One in the kitchen, stitched onto a pot holder hanging from an under-cabinet hook, another embossed into the top of a small storage tin sitting on a bookshelf, and the final one in Marisol’s bedroom, carved into the inner door of her wardrobe cabinet. Apparently, Morris had told the search party to be on the lookout for it, and he knew Macy had told Niko that she’d never seen it before.

That was when the Charmed Ones met Rachel Jackson, Esquire. Properly. Mel didn’t even have to offer an explanation for the presence of the symbol, because PD Jackson put her body between the police and the sisters as the cuffs came out, demanding an arrest charge and supporting facts. White allyship in action. The officers technically didn’t have to provide the latter at this point, but Morris and Rachel seemed to have at least a passing familiarity with each other, and he stopped the unis to answer first.

“This symbol has shown up at every crime scene, drawn by the killer. He makes a reference to three in his first message, he’s left three victims. Then three sisters just happen to insert themselves in our investigation?”

“Did they?” snapped Rachel, arching an eyebrow. “Or did you visit them first?”

Morris scoffed, and his jaw kept moving, but he did not answer that. Instead, he went on: “They collect artifacts, and our first two victims smuggled them. Detective Hamada was last seen with that one’s girlfriend. They lied about knowing the triquetra.”

The redhead’s back straightened, her head tilting in an exaggerated look of confusion. “Detective, this is a serious case, and you’ve got a lot of eyes on you, I know that and can appreciate the weight
of the pressure on you right now. But you get reckless, start throwing out these tales, taking the investigation away from facts, and this whole thing is going to come crashing down on your head. That’s not going to help any of us find Niko.” Rachel gestured to the Charmed Ones. “You had enough for the warrant for the house, but for your sake, I want you to take thirty seconds to consider whether you would be able to call up a judge right now, knowing what you know, and get a proper arrest warrant. If you can’t, then I want you to put those bracelets away and finish your search.”

After a few-second standoff, Morris nodded, and the officers put the cuffs away. Mel let out a breath she didn’t know she’d been holding. Eventually, every surface had been scanned by at least six sets of eyes, and the police drew their search to a disappointing conclusion.

“I’m watching you,” said Morris in lieu of a farewell, the bags under his eyes taking on a new shade of purple as the day waned. “Count on it.”

And that was how they lost an entire day of problem-solving the real issue.

October, 2017

“Your left, or my left?”

Niko hesitated. “Your left.”

Sucking in a breath, Mel shifted her grip on the couch and turned it as directed. Mercifully, the small adjustment in angle created some magical bubble of space in the front door of their apartment, and the couch nearly toppled on top of Niko as the detective stumbled backwards. Mel recovered her grip and flashed an apologetic smile, but her girlfriend just grunted and guided them to the spot in the living room where the couch would live. They promptly collapsed onto it, and Mel allowed herself a moment to appreciate the subtle veins sticking out in Niko’s arms and neck after the exertion.

“Only the rest of the entire apartment to go,” joked the detective after a bit, not panting but still sounding a little winded.

Well, joking in the sense that they both began laughing, if only to stop themselves from crying, because they really did have the kitchen, guest bedroom, office, and bedroom to furnish and fill with boxes to then unpack. The third floor had seemed like a good idea for their first apartment together at the time, something about the heat rising from the apartments below during winter, but Mel had half a mind to just order everything on Amazon so the delivery person would have to take it up the stairs. Like they could afford that. The two bedroom apartment was part of a newer complex, clean and tucked in the corner of the grounds, where they had a view of a forested area to one side, and the main road on the other. It would be a bit of a financial squeeze to come up with her half of the rent until she started her professorship, but Marisol had offered to help out with any outstanding balances if she needed it before then. They’d qualified for the apartment based on Niko’s new detective income alone, but Mel wasn’t about to start their relationship on unequal footing. Even if that meant getting some help from mom.

Niko rolled over and draped her sticky shoulders over Mel’s lap, ignoring the half-hearted slaps of protest that landed on her arms with a defiant smile as her eyes slipped closed.

“You can’t take a nap after every trip,” sighed the shorter woman, tangling her fingers in silky brown hair.

“Can’t I?”
“The lease will be over before we even get unpacked.”

Niko hummed back without any sort of clear meaning, dead weight against her girlfriend’s lap.

“You’re getting old. We need to work on your stamina.”

That got the detective’s attention. Her brown eyes opened to slits. “I’m sorry, I thought I heard — did you say, ‘old’?”

“And ‘work on your stamina’.” Mel smirked down at the affronted expression on Niko’s face.

“I’ll show you gotdamn stamina,” growled the taller woman, sliding off of Mel’s lap and down to her knees in front of the couch.

“Oh, baby, I would love that, you don’t even know, but I am so sweaty right now — ”

“Hush.” It was Niko’s turn to smirk as she hooked her arms under Mel’s legs and lifted her clean off the couch, shrieking and giggling as she locked her ankles around the detective’s slim hips.

“Nik, if you fucking drop me — ”

“Stop squirming, then.” Niko nipped at her girlfriend’s collarbone, and then smiled into the kiss Mel leaned forward to give her as her wriggling slowed and stopped. “Could an old girlfriend do this?”

“Probably, depending on her workout schedule. You really shouldn’t be so ageist.”

“Is this really the attitude you want to take when you’re at my mercy?” Niko gave her thighs a squeeze. “Relying on my stamina?”

“Fine, let’s see how long you can hold me here, my virile and young girlfriend.” Mel moved her hand down the side of Niko’s head, trailing fingertips across her cheekbones, nose, and lips, then down the column of her throat to her chest, covered in a soft, sweat-soaked t-shirt.

Though she hadn’t vocalized this yet, she’d been surprised at her own enthusiastic acceptance of Niko’s offer to get an apartment together. The thought of cohabitation used to make her roll her eyes and bring up a dozen anecdotes of people she knew who got screwed by losing deposits or paying fees for breaking leases because of bad breakups. But when the detective had nervously shown her the listing on her phone, huffing through the question so quickly Mel almost hadn’t understood it… she’d responded without hesitation, like reflex. Because Niko felt a lot like gravity, like a pull that would never end, not unless the world stopped spinning and they all flew off into space.

Moving in together? As natural as the change of seasons.

When she felt the first tremor in Niko’s arms, Mel quickly changed her mind. “Okay, okay, I get it, you’re big and strong, you can do the lifty thing. I want you to keep some strength in these puppies.” She patted taut forearms pointedly.

Somehow, Niko blushed and turned her head away at the implication, even though they’d been having sex for more than a year and a half. Regularly. The detective set her back down on the couch, draping her tall body over Mel’s to hide her face in her neck. Niko could be fucking her as hard as she could one minute and hiding under a pillow the next if Mel tried to give her a compliment or ask what she wanted. It had gotten better over time, at least—the long term prognosis looked good.

“Whatcha thinking about?” the detective eventually prodded, puffing the words into her neck.
“You. Age 70. Probably ladykillin’ in the nursing home, huh?” The joke tumbled out of her mouth before she could stop it, her brain defiantly throwing out a test balloon.

“Wellll… maybe. Hopefully ladykillin’ just one other old bitty.”

There it was. The sentiment hung heavy between them, pulling at Mel’s chest and seeping warmth into her limbs.

She didn’t used to think so much about her life outside of the road to tenure track. She didn’t used to dream about the way her lover’s laugh lines would one day become permanent, didn’t used to ponder how dapper a partner would look with gray streaks around her temples. And then… Niko Hamada. Tall. Dashing. Sweet and loyal, almost to a fault.

There was also fear lurking around those thoughts. They both knew Niko had said these things, though maybe not the same words, to another woman before Mel. Had offered her forever. Hadn’t yet promised it, technically, but still—that was the intent. Thinking too hard about that made Mel feel disoriented and untethered, the stab of panic before a fall.

But somehow, like always, Niko seemed to know what was rampaging through her mind. The warmth of the detective’s palm on her cheek guided Mel back to the moment, and a thumb brushing over her skin grounded her there. She looked down. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” Niko shifted, sitting up but keeping their legs tangled over the front of the couch. “We should talk about… that, when you’re ready.”

“Maybe not when we have a giant U-Haul of all of our worldly possessions downstairs?”

“Probs not.” Niko leaned forward for a quick kiss, practically beaming as she pulled away. “I just… I’m so excited. We’re gonna fight about wall colors and curtains and the right way to fold towels, and for some reason that makes me stupid happy.”

And Mel couldn’t help but smile back, for the moment forgetting those simmering, dark thoughts, because the look her girlfriend was giving her was like warmth of the sun on her face after a cold morning. She untagled her legs and stood, glancing over her shoulder to reply casually, “I brought the curtains from my room.”

“No… baby, the orange ones?”

“The orange ones. They’re going up somewhere in this apartment, so just start preparing yourself.”

Niko groaned and Mel flicked her shoulder before hurrying towards the door, snatching the keys as she went. The taller woman easily caught up with her by the time she’d taken two steps out the front door, long arms coming to wrap around her waist from behind and swing her up one more time, around and then back down.

“Fine. But I get to put my ugly blanket in the living room,” she growled, releasing her waist but holding onto one hand.

Now it was Mel’s turn to groan as they headed down the stairs again. “The one your brother brought you from China?”

“Like a waterpainting in plushness. The tiger is really very regal next to the lake.”

They shook on it before Niko threw open the back of the U-Haul again. Eight hours later, and they had an apartment consisting almost entirely of boxes and furniture with more boxes on top, and Mel
was exhausted. Judging by the way Niko was practically slumped on her side while eating a slice of pizza, the detective wasn’t faring much better. They drank Tito’s straight from the bottle, eating pizza straight from the delivery box, as they lay draped over various furniture-box sculptures. Since their Internet wouldn’t be turned on until the next day, Niko had plugged in their Crosley. All of their records were still boxed, but somehow they’d forgotten to take out the Leon Bridges vinyl from some previous night, and the soulful tones of his voice laced the darkening living room with an auspicious air.

One of the last boxes they’d brought up, transporting it in Mel’s car to make sure it wasn’t crushed, was a shoebox full of old photo albums of the Hamada family. Marisol had hers at the house, but Niko’s mother had died of breast cancer not long before they’d met. Mel popped open said box and pulled the first album, its thick cover sporting a white and blue floral design.

“What’re you doing?” asked the detective, already chuckling a little. “Gathering intel?”

“Is this you or Sora?” Mel turned around the first page of the album and pointed at a baby with a perfectly round head, chubby cheeks, and thick dark hair. It was smiling widely at the camera, wearing a tiny kimono in what looked like a Sears photo set.

“Sora was bald until he was like three, that’s how you can tell.” Niko sat up and shifted closer to look at the album with her.

Mel couldn’t stifle the little gasp that escaped her when she saw the first image of a young, late 20s Keiko Hamada. The little orange numbers in the bottom-righthand corner of the picture said MAR 07 1991. Keiko stood on the end of a pier holding a fishing pole. She had 80s-style permed hair and wore a fishing vest over a one-piece swimsuit with an open-mouth smile, as if she were laughing when the photographer snapped the image. She was beautiful, and present-day Niko Hamada looked exactly like her. “Wow. I don’t think I’ve ever seen an old picture of your mom. You two are twins.”

Niko tilted her head as she regarded the image, sighing softly. “Yeah… used to bother me when I was a teenager, people would tell me that all the time. But it’s weird now, it’s like… when I look in the mirror, I see her there. And I know I’m never going to forget her because of that.”

The shorter woman kissed her cheek. “Sorry for bringing it up.”

“No, no… It’s reality. She’s gone.” Niko turned the page and smiled; they’d reach the point where Sora was beginning to make his appearance in the form of Keiko’s pregnant belly. “And it is what it is.”

“You know, I don’t think I’ve ever asked you about…” Mel suddenly chickened out, and she cleared her throat to cover her flailing.

“My dad?”

She nodded, grateful for the save. “Yeah. I’m just curious, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

The detective frowned, and Mel reached over to smooth out the lines with her fingertips. When Niko leaned into the touch, she moved onto the taller woman’s lap, her legs slung perpendicular over Niko’s as she wrapped her arms around broad shoulders. “I do want to, it’s just… it’s just not a lot to tell. He was a married guy, U.S. military, and he knocked my mom up twice before he just disappeared. Not even the Army could find him. No pictures, no secret box of love letters, and my mom would barely ever tell us anything about him.”
Mel massaged the fine hairs at the nape of Niko’s neck as she spoke. “I know a thing or two about deadbeat dads... I’m sorry. That sucks.”

“I vaguely remember this, like… big guy, looming over me. I must have been four when he went missing. I don’t remember having any type of good feeling towards him. Sometimes I think Sora went into the Army and I became a police officer because we’re just… still chasing him. Looking for some kind of connection.” Niko grabbed another one of the albums, seemingly knowing exactly what she was looking for, and thumbed open the page to one where she was maybe ten years old.

They both chuckled at the sight of it—Keiko, Sora, and Niko in matching neon bright windbreakers, smiling at the camera from another department store studio. The pink, yellow, and blue combo was brutal on the eyes, as was the high ponytail with matching neon blue scrunchie on Niko’s head.

“This is—this is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.” Mel took out her phone and immediately snapped a picture of it. “That is aggressively 90s of you.”

“Yeah, we were all in on the vibe.” Niko kissed Mel’s temple, relaxing out of her stormy mood. “As far as I’m concerned, this is my family. Mom was always a little over the top and a little all over the place towards the end there, tarot card readings and metaphysical stuff, but she was always a great mom. I’d mostly like to meet my dad someday so I can hit him with all the teenage angst he got to miss out on.”

“I’ll drink to that.” Mel took a swig of the vodka.

Niko carefully laid back after taking her own gulp, sliding an arm around Mel’s shoulders so they rested against a chair-like pile of stuff, watching the glow of headlights from outside ebb and flow under their window.

Despite spending the majority of her life known more or less for anger and brooding, Mel could feel her hold on those outlooks growing tenuous. She’d spent an entire day doing the world’s most un-fun task, moving, and yet she didn’t feel anything but content, the ache in her muscles serving as evidence of a day well spent. Anger suddenly felt so very far away. Here she was, U-Hauling with her dreamy cop girlfriend, starting her first professorship in the spring semester, and her mom and sister were happy and healthy. All was well.

Mel let her eyes drift closed as the detective’s heartbeat thudded comfortingly under her ear.

Ultimately, the problem was simple: Sigmund wanted the sisters and/or the Book of Shadows in exchange for Niko. They didn’t need a detailed ransom demand to figure that part out. The Charmed Ones could go running into the Well and attack, but that left the very real possibility that Niko would die. That was his ploy.

They needed something else to trade. But what to get the cursed wolf that wants it all?

Mel stared at the card Zelda had given her so long that the letters rearranged themselves back into the insurance company information. Her heart thuddled between her ears as her brain threw out wild guesses about what this could mean. Nothing about it suggested Elder involvement, but it was still magic, which somehow made it feel instantly… dangerous. A peek outside the Cave.

The challenge was immediately obvious. 2774 Main St was a one-story building, and it actually did turn out to be the office of the insurance agent whose information comprised the non-magic part of the card. The volume of news crews in town had dropped a little since the first 48 hours had passed, but two anchor-cameraman duos still strolled past the building as Mel, Macy, and Maggie watched
from Macy’s car. The outsiders paid no attention to the insurance office, glowing behind closed blinds even as the clock pushed eight. For about fifteen minutes, they observed zero people going in or coming out and, though unsure if that was a good or bad sign, they finally unclipped seatbelts and approached the nondescript mirrored glass front door.

Inside, the space didn’t seem like anything special. A half-wall separated the entryway area from the cubicles and frosted-glass offices beyond, and the carpet was that mottled blue that came in squares that every business used for a quick, easy floor option. Nobody sat in the cubicles, but a couple offices had their lights on, shadows moving beyond the glass.

An older woman with silver dreadlocks smiled up at the sisters from behind the reception desk. “Good evening! What can I help you with, ladies?”

Mel took a deep, calming breath as a rush of adrenaline threatened to make her voice shake when she replied, “We’re looking for your lost and found?”

The woman’s smile twitched, but she said nothing as she reached forward and pressed a purple button on her phone. There was a low, consistent buzz to Mel’s right, and the woman directed them towards a door marked as a unisex restroom. She raised an eyebrow, but the receptionist just waved at the door again. *Might as well.*

Behind the door, the sisters found a stone and metal stairwell. The air changed as soon as they stepped through, going from the mustiness of the office to something thin and almost vibrating, the energy of it skating across Mel’s skin as they ascended. An archway glowed with white light at the top of the stairs, and she sucked in a breath before stepping through it to find… a bar?

Mel blinked against the light and the dozen or so women now staring at the sisters with varying levels of surprise, and some with hostility. The space itself honestly didn’t look that much different from *The Haunt*, though perhaps darker and with more red and black decor and more tables. She didn’t immediately spot Zelda, and that sent a spike of adrenaline through her veins.

One of them, who’d been leaning against a bar table, pushed back and called out, “You must be the Veras.”

Mel met the woman’s green eyes, taking in the labret piercing and box braids inlaid with gold. Her dark stained lips were curled into a smirk, which wasn’t exactly welcoming, but didn’t seem like preamble to an attack, either. “We were sent here to meet someone named Zelda. What is this place?”

“This space belongs to our order,” replied the apparent ringleader as she stalked a little closer. “Are you three really the Charmed Ones?”

“Yes, and we’re kind of in a hurry,” answered Macy, strong and clear. “Now tell us who you are and what this place is.”

The stranger gave Macy an up-and-down, but halted her approach. “This space belongs to our order. We’re a collective of like-minded magical beings. My name is Jada.”

Even though she was trying to give off extreme HBIC energy, Mel couldn’t help the wash of awe that filled her belly. She’d yet to be in the presence of so many other witches at once, and the sudden feeling of community, of shared experience, almost drove away her deep anxiety over Niko’s kidnapping, just for a moment. She wasn’t even sure she’d ever stopped to consider just how many witches might exist in the world, let alone in town (portal to Hell though it may be).
The revelation seemed to be affecting her sisters as well, if the slack-jawed looks on their faces were any indication.

“How many magical orgs was Mom in?” murmured Maggie, brows knitted.

“Marisol was one of our founding members.” Jada had closed the distance between them by now, and she extended a hand adorned with half a dozen glittering rings. “Take a seat, Veras.”

Some of the witches scattered when Jada chose a low booth along the back wall of the bar. Only one other sat with them, a young woman who couldn’t be more than seventeen, with platinum blonde finger waves and a dark, truly wicked smile. Jada ignored her, but Maggie eyeballed the almost-peer warily and did a little dance to sit on the other side of Macy instead of next to her. Another woman brought them drinks they hadn’t asked for, though Mel noted that each one was the sisters’ favorite.

“We have empaths too, you know,” husked Jada, winking at Maggie.

“You know she’s under 21 then?” replied Macy without missing a beat.

“Oh please. What’re you going to do, report us to the liquor board?” A flash of metal glinted from Jada’s tongue as she threw the challenge, face tilted in a smirk.

Mel tried not to smile, accepting her Tito’s and Sprite without protest.

“Since you’re here, I’m guessing your powers were unbound,” began Jada around sips of her beer. “It took you long enough to find us.”

“Yeah, well, but Mom didn’t exactly get a chance to walk us through Witchery 101. I’m sure you heard,” snapped Maggie, though she was still side-eyeing the blonde stranger.

“Ah. Fair enough.” Jada gave her an appreciative nod. “You’ve met your whitelighter and the Elders, then?”

“We’re familiar.”

Jada scoffed. “They’re fun, huh?” She didn’t wait for a reply before pressing on, “Your mother was an impressive witch. Once in a generation, really. I’m not surprised her daughters fulfill that prophecy. She was also really tired of the Elders’ rules and regulations.”

“I know the feeling,” muttered Mel, chewing through an ice cube.

“Magic can do so much more than be a CYA tool for the Elder Council. We can do great things and protect humans and magical beings alike. The Council just hides up there in their clouds, using threats and manipulation to keep their power. Marisol knew that, understood the responsibility we should be recognizing. The humans are a train wreck. Trump, hate crimes, rapists and child molesters getting the public opinion pass and walking free.”

The middle Vera found herself steadily leaning forward as the stranger spoke, her pulse racing as Jada put words to her own feelings with cutting precision. Her affection for Harry and Charity had effectively neutralized most of her objections to the Elders’ rules, but that had seemed okay when they were here main source of magical tutelage and information about her mom, as scarce as the latter was. What had started as a vague question mark had, in just seconds, evolved into the most promising opportunity of her short witching career to get some real training and, she dared to hope, answers.

Her brain ricocheted between thoughts and questions, simultaneously wanting to make the witch tell
her everything and also needing to keep track of her reason for being there.

“We are the S’Arcana, or Sisters of Arcana. Our purpose is to do what we know is right to protect this world. Even if the Council calls us criminals,” Jada was explaining, her mouth curled with mirth, presumably at the dumbfounded look on Mel’s face. “I’m half whitelighter, half witch, or what the Elders call an abomination.”

Macy made a strangled noise.

S’Arcana. There it was. The thick layer of politics and mystery crap that had been standing in the way of their magical discovery cracked open. Mel licked suddenly dry lips, breathing slowly to gather her words. “Do you know what happened to our mom?”

Jada’s dark eyes searched her face, but she looked and sounded genuine when she replied, “No. But it wasn’t an accident.”

Mel nodded, visualizing herself tabling the yards-long list of questions she had about her mother, because right now there was a need much more acute. “I came here because we need help, and the Elders are ignoring it. Can… will you help us?”

“For the daughters of Marisol Vera? We’ll do what we can.”

“You’ve seen the news about the missing detective?”

At this, the young witch next to them tilted her head, eyes narrowing, but Jada continued to ignore her: “It’s pretty hard to miss.”

“She’s… Niko is… It’s my fault she’s missing. She was taken.”

“You were right cousin, it’s quite exciting here,” said the young guest suddenly, surprising Mel with her prim, unplaceable accent.

“And who are you, anyway?”

“Prudence Night. I’m on a solstice exchange program with the S’Arcana.” The teenager extended an elegant hand to shake. “I’ve never met a time witch before.”

“An exchange program? What, like from Hogwarts?”

Prudence made a face that indicated very clearly that Harry Potter jokes would not go over well with her. She retracted her hands. “The Academy of the Unseen Arts.”

The table looked up as Zelda appeared in the entryway. Mel almost didn’t recognize her out of the coveralls, but there was no mistaking that glare. The kitsune instead wore a pair of gray joggers and red hoodie, her black hair tucked back in a ponytail. Her eyes narrowed as she approached the table and sat down. “You. What happened to Niko? Where is she? What did you do?”

“Zelda, be nice.” Jada’s voice shifted lower with command, and Mel didn’t miss how it made the kitsune shrink a little.

“We were trying to track down and vanquish whatever was killing those people, and it turned out we were chasing two killers, not just one. We defeated the one called Fitela, but now Sigmund the Wolf has Niko, in Mimir’s Well.” It felt exceedingly odd to talk to people that weren’t her sisters this way, and despite everything, her body tensed as if expecting them to call her crazy. “He… He took her to get to me.”
“Sigmund,” breathed Jada, tapping her nails on the table. “What a dick.”

“You know him?”

“ Heard of him. No one’s been able to snuff out that curse ever since the brothers got their hands on those cloaks. What does he want?”

“Us. My sisters, our power.”

“Can’t really blame him for that,” drawled Prudence, back to smirking in that self-worshipping teenager way. “Your strength is… enticing.”

“Do I—do we need to be worried about you, too?” interrupted Macy, apparently just as much not a fan of Prudence Night as her youngest sister.

“Powers dilute when you take them by force. What’s the point?” sighed the teen, looking down at the table longingly, as if she was just so put upon by not taking the Charmed Ones’ powers. Mel was going to keep one eye on that one at all times regardless.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what to trade for Niko instead. Can you help us?”

Jada hummed thoughtfully. “We can try… but that’d be a big thing to trade. I don’t know that we have anything an interdimensional demon wolf would want, much less over the Charmed Ones.” She shook her head. “I don’t think that’ll work. The other wolf, you defeated it?

“Yes. The three of us, an Elder, and a whitelighter. We killed him.”

Prudence snickered.

“Sigmund’s more powerful than Fitela, but if that’s all it took…” Jada chewed her lip, eyes fixed on an imaginary speck on the table. She had an easy confidence that made it difficult not to pay close attention when she spoke, but Mel didn’t get the sense that her leadership in this space was borne out of the same stuff as the Council. Her energy evoked something coiled, an unspoken promise, if only you tried it. “Cuz, how’s your glamour?”

“Impeccable,” answered the teen without hesitation. She gave Mel a languid, predatory smile.

It felt... strange to be in the attic of the Vera-Vaughn house with magical peers other than a fussy whitelighter or arrogant Elder. Jada, who’d teleported them there, looked weirdly at home, her myriad metal jewelry ringing true with the artifacts and tools littering the shelves and table. Prudence, wearing her solid black schoolgirl’s uniform dress with the curved white collar, did not look so natural. And Zelda—well, her glowering at Mel didn’t help the tension in the room.

Mel kept a particularly close eye on Prudence as she reverently stroked the dark vellum cover of the Book of Shadows, but the young witch didn’t seem to even be able to listen to their conversations as she thumbed through the yellowed pages with dinner plate sized eyes, lips curling around words she seemed to find particularly intriguing.

“The Elders think only witches, warlocks, and gods are worthy of life and powers. It’s a shame,” mused Jada as she slung herself over a chair. “You’re lucky Z doesn’t like you though; she pranks compulsively if she does.”

The kitsune shrugged, but made no effort to rebut that. She sat perched on a trunk off to the side of the room, shifting between versions of the other women—Macy, Prudence, Mel.
“Stop that,” said Maggie when Zelda took her form and stood up, mirroring the teen’s cross-armed look. “It’s weird.”

“I’m just practicing,” said Fake Maggie in Zelda’s voice. She cleared her throat and repeated the words in Maggie’s on the second try.

“Is this is how you did it? Invoking the Morai?” Everyone turned to face Prudence, who was almost lovingly dragging her finger across the spell. “With Nancy?”

“It’s Niko,” replied Mel flatly. She tried to ignore the way Zelda shifted to mimic her, though with a distinctly darker look on her face. “And yes. That’s how we changed the timeline.”

“This is an incredibly complex spell,” continued the blonde teen, brows knitting. When she looked back up at the sisters, there was something new in her eyes—if not respect, then at least a level of appreciation. “Impressive.”

“Why’d you do it?” asked Zelda, crossing Fake Mel’s arms.

Real Mel opened her mouth to answer, and then closed it. The question unexpectedly hit her particularly hard between the ribs, pinging around her brain. She looked at Macy, who nodded and offered a small, sympathetic smile. “Because she’s the love of my life, and I thought it would save her from all this.”

“Witch and mortal. The classic, tragic love story,” replied Prudence, closing the Book. “One of my schoolmates is in much the same predicament.”

Zelda scoffed. “Witches. Think you can just spell your way out of everything.”

“Hush, Z,” interrupted the whitelighter-witch, sitting up a little straighter. “Typical, the Elder and whitelighter would let you do that. If you’d have come to us, we would have told you not to do the spell.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” snapped Mel when Jada didn’t go on, just kept watching her with inscrutable green eyes.

“You know how there are so many stories of old crones doing horrible things to the people they love? Plagues, mutilation, poison. They were considered dark witches like us, of course.” It was Prudence who answered, her tone almost matter of fact. “You’re a powerful light witch, Mel. You don’t think the force of your feelings for this human has any effect on the universe?”

“That—no, that sounds really… Rapey? Like she doesn’t have a choice?”

“She has free will. That’s why we have love potions and spells, but your love… It’s palpable. It would’ve been better to change your timeline, rather than hers. Anyone with even basic divination skills would sense it on her. Your soul calls for her.”

“That’s why Fitella took Niko, and not your girlfriend,” clarified Jada. “He felt your connection.”

“How do you know I have a girlfriend?”

“It’s on your Facebook.”

For some reason, maybe hysterical exhaustion, that made Mel snort a laugh. It was ludicrous.

“What does any of this have to do with getting Niko back?” sighed Maggie.
“Nothing, really. But unless you plan on spending the rest of your life celibate, seems like we’re helping you out with a little heads up.” Jada pushed off of the table and moved to the middle of the room. “But speaking of helping your friend… shall we get started?”

Everything ached.

Not just the deep throb of pain; that was certainly there, but this ache was something *more*. It brought to mind the agony of nights awake as a child, driven to tears by no injury but the body moving, plates and tendons stretching into the next form. Her bones felt like they might crumble to dust from the force of it, her muscles tensed and locked beyond her control. The ache didn’t leave room for much else in her pulsing skull; she might have wondered where she was, why her skin pricked with icy cold, why she could *smell* the snow against her face—delicate and clean.

Occasionally, she became aware of another presence. Someone watching, nearby. Her ears picked up the occasional grunt or footstep, but if it was a person, she wouldn’t know. They said nothing. They left her where she lay.

The first time she opened her eyes, the sharp stab of light to her brain forced them closed immediately again. Minutes, hours, maybe days passed before she tried again. At first, she saw nothing but brightness. Then, slowly, a horizon where cerulean met pristine white. Judging by the angle of the horizon and the direction of her aches, she was laying on her back, head to one side. She tested her muscles. That seemed right. She kept her eyes open until they burned, rested for awhile, and then ripped them open again. When her head lolled to the side, she could see a waterfall, thundering and wide, emptying into a large, gray-blue pool, but no river. She had the passing thought more than once that it was beautiful, misting rainbow in the sunlight. It might’ve been beautiful. She wasn’t sure.

Eventually, something appeared on the horizon—a reddish dot, nothing more, but soon it lumbered close enough that she made out a shape. A bear? No… A wolf. Loping steadily towards her. She closed her eyes again, the *ache* ratcheting up tenfold, and must have lost consciousness. When she came to again, eyes cracking open, the thing was standing over her. It made a sort of chuffing noise and flopped down, doglike, leaning on an elbow with its giant head up as it kicked its back feet out. She stared back at it, unsure what else to do, but… despite the uselessness of her limbs, the vibration of constant aching, she wasn’t afraid. Shouldn’t she be?

Whenever her eyes slipped closed, she saw images, scenes of what must have been memories, but they came through muffled and hazy, floating along the edge of her consciousness as if just dreams. A young man with eyes just like hers in the passenger seat of her car. A blonde woman smiling at her under an archway of roses. She couldn’t place their names, just the feelings that associated themselves with the pictures. Brother. Wife. A scruffy man with a kind smile seemed to be a friend. Sometimes, the times right before her eyes would snap open again, she saw another woman, fierce and beautiful, with flowing black hair. That vision soothed her aches for a few precious seconds once she jerked back awake. She had no idea who she was, no placement for the face like the others, just a vague sense of *comfort* associated with those brown eyes.

Then one day, the wolf brought her something. It came and went seemingly at random, but she’d not sensed the presence of any other living creature that might be taking its attention. There were no birds, no bugs, even; just cold and the constant, thundering sound of moving water. When the wind blew, all she scented was the red wolf, who smelled like pine needles decaying into the forest floor. Yet when it came back this time, it was carrying something that it plopped onto the snow in front of her. The gift hit the ground with a wet slap, and she had to blink several times, confused or, perhaps
more accurately, disbelieving.

She couldn’t remember her name, but she could clearly name the thing in front of her. Elk. Very, very dead. A giant, ragged hole where its throat should have been.

The wolf nudged it towards her. The carcass left a flowering red stain in the snow as it rolled.

When the scent of the blood hit her nose, she thought she might pass out again. Like iron and life. Except instead of losing consciousness, the next breath lit something in her belly, and for the first time, she was able to move a body that for too long had been unavailable to her, and once the motions began, she fell off the other side, unable to control the movements. The body heaved itself upright, and then hands and fingers were digging into a thick hide, easily parting the flesh to tear at the soft, bulbous shapes inside. The body ripped its hands back out gripping a deep red organ. Her mind had just a moment to react with panic and disgust before the body leaned forward and sank teeth into it, and a taste like nothing before spread across her tongue. Coppery, yes, but underlined with… sweetness. The liver melted on her tongue. The body fed until she slumped against the hollowed creature, belly full and limbs singing with warmth. The wolf trotted off again.

After that, the body slowly became hers again. She slid off of the dead creature and dropped back into the snow, tasting viscera on her lips and feeling it covering her chin and neck. Vaguely, her brain suggested this was an undesirable state of being, but she was too concerned with trying to stand. Her knees wobbled and her thighs shook as she rose, but after what seemed like years of trying, she found herself totally upright. It was a win without reward, and the simple act left her so exhausted that she soon fell back to her hands and knees, and then her face collided with snow again.

When she woke up this time, it wasn’t because of the wolf, even though the beast had returned, standing stiffly a few yards away. Her eyes had blinked open because of something catching her nose—a new scent, earthy and sweet. It brought to mind images of a puffy purple flower she couldn’t quite name and sandy stone after a torrential rain. The stronger the smell grew, the more agitated the wolf became, until it was pacing back and forth in front of her, leaving a trench in the snow.

As three small dots appeared on the horizon, she pushed herself upright and squinted against the light. Three women, arranged from tallest to shortest, left to right. It took a long time before their faces became clear, and she felt a strange rush. She knew them. Didn’t she? One of them, the middle one… she was the source of that enticing scent. That was the one from her dreams.

Three. That made her mind twinge with memory, but it fell short of a full story. Three.

By the time the visitors arrived within a reasonable distance and stopped, she’d made it up to hands and knees, head down as she caught her breath. Energy was seeping back into her body, whether from the meal the night before or the instinct in response to strangers, she didn’t know. When she lifted her head and hauled herself up to put one foot flat on the ground, her hand resting hard on her other knee, she noticed the women looking at her with concerned expressions.

The wolf stepped in front of them, blocking her view. “Charmed Ones,” it greeted, its voice rumbling like the waterfall behind them. “You came.”

“We got your messages,” said the tall one. Her voice was strong and clear, ringing with confidence. “Pretty boring, Sigmund.”

“So you know who I am. And you killed my brother.”

“You should’ve turned yourselves in as soon as the human freed you. That skin doesn’t belong to
What are they...? She heard the words, knew what most of them meant, but... whatever it all meant when put together, it kept leaking out her ear before she could get a good grasp.

“What did you do to her?” asked the one from her dreams, voice thick and warm brown eyes focused on her.

“I made her strong,” answered the wolf, raising its head higher. “Like me.”

The tallest one took a step forward, and she noticed how the wolf’s hackles raised. “Tell us what you want.”

“I want your powers. Voluntarily, and I’ll let you take back your new and improved friend. If I have to take it from you, she dies.” The wolf shifted closer to her, and she took a step back.

“Why do you want our powers? No one will accept you. They’ll hunt you down. Even we have almost been defeated a few times,” said the smallest one, arms crossed. “What’s the point?”

“I’m a young god,” snarled the beast. “And once I have your powers, I’ll turn every Elder, witch, and warlock into one of us—they won’t want to kill me then. They’ll bow to me like I deserve.”

The three women exchanged looks, almost bored, and the smallest one continued: “Let us check her first. Make sure you’re not trying anything funny.”

Sigmund narrowed golden eyes. “I’m not gonna fall for that, witch.”

“Well, we don’t trust you, either. We’ll stand right here, and Mel will go.”

After a long pause, the beast relented with a nod of its great head. It remained in place as the one from her dreams—Mel—moved closer, tension ratcheting up with each step, that heavenly scent growing stronger, and then...

She snorted and shook her head. The woman finally reached her, hands extending out to her body, but suddenly underneath the scent she knew so well was something else... polished metal and green seas. Someone else.

Even though she hadn’t used her voice in what felt like a lifetime, she managed to say out loud, “You’re not her.”

The wolf howled, and then She was gone, replaced by a stranger with glinting metal in her hair and face, grabbing at her hands and saying something about leaving. The other two women transformed as well, one with blonde hair, the other into a gray fox that almost disappeared against the disturbed snow.

She slapped away the stranger’s arms and surged forward, knocking her into the snow and pushing a palm hard against her throat hard. The woman’s hands scratched and tore at her skin, but she barely felt it, bearing down with every ounce of energy. Behind her, she could hear the wolf snarling and barking, accompanied by the snap and crackle of lightning and fire. The woman’s hands began to weaken, her eyes rolling back, and she shifted her whole body weight over her shoulders to—

“Niko, stop!”

She froze, hand leaving the imposter’s neck as she turned to seek the owner of that voice, the real one. Niko. That was her name, right? Niko. She was Niko. Her eyes settled on the source of the new
She, and what must have been the real versions of the other two women, had appeared near the pool, with the blonde stranger and the gray fox. Purple fire burned in Her eyes.

The plan had been going swimmingly, and then it hadn’t. From where they’d apparated on top of the falls, the Charmed Ones were close enough to clearly see what was happening, but not enough to hear. Jada never got to the point where she could give the signal; it has gone too wrong too fast.

At first, she thought maybe they’d been mistaken this whole time, and Niko wasn’t taken by Sigmund. The little spot near Mimir’s Well had just two occupants: a reddish wolf and a black bear with a hawk-shaped crest of light fur on its chest. She should have known, should have understood from the breadcrumbs of magical hints along the way to this moment, but it wasn’t until the bear shrank back into Niko’s form, just for a few seconds before shifting again, that her brain processed the reality. He’d turned Niko. Somehow, she hadn’t anticipated that, and the implications ballooned like a mushroom cloud, hazy and toxic and far-reaching.

Maggie gripped her forearm tightly before she could step right off the falls, panicked and furious and wanting nothing more than to go to her—

And then everything had gone wrong.

When Jada, glamoured as Mel, had moved next to the bear, it had nearly knocked her head off. The illusion blinked away instantly, and then chaos. Zelda turned immediately to her fox form, and Prudence seemed to have enough wits about her that she threw the summoning crystal down, part of a later piece of the original plan, and with a sharp pull on her bones, the Three teleported to the newly minted battlefield.

“You!” Sigmund slammed his paws into the snow, executing a hairpin turn that had him charging towards the true Charmed Ones.

Maggie lit the faeflame again, keeping it alight on a medieval style torch they’d brought from their collection, and Macy lunged forward, throwing the wolf off its course, but not quite knocking him over.

Snapping jaws nearly reached the eldest sister’s hands before Mel managed to freeze the thing, allowing Macy to jump aside, and just as her powers broke under the onslaught of Sigmund’s resistance, a bolt of red lightning struck the wolf’s side with enough force that the beast finally collapsed to one side, whining and shrieking as electricity lanced through its body. When Mel looked back for the source, Prudence stood smirking at her, skin crackling with red static, and then Zelda barreled forward to sink teeth into Sigmund’s neck, now in a bear form of her own. As strange as it was to see, the wolf was much bigger than the bear, and easily threw the spirit off of him, Zelda flipping back to a fox, just as Macy prepared another throw. Mel lended her freeze as the beast slammed into the ground, but they were only able to hold it for a second or two before it was up again, sprinting towards Maggie.

The youngest Vera drew up a barrier, but Sigmund broke it apart with one hulking shoulder, and his jaws were opening, huge tongue rising in a snarl, as Maggie raised her hands to shield the oncoming attack—

The Veras had been taking a walk through a nature preserve north of Hilltowne that day the wild dog found them. Mel remembered coming around a curve and seeing the thing, big and dirty and skinny. Even though she wasn’t old enough to necessarily put words to it, she knew this wasn’t like
the dogs that she got to pet on the sidewalk. Marisol had stiffened, tightening her grip on Maggie’s stroller and coming to a quick stop. Most times, she remembered her mom scaring the dog off with a shout and a swing of a big stick, whacking it across the nose as it lunged for her. But sometimes, when the memory drifted in as she fell asleep or daydreamed, she remembered her mom shouting words that were strange to her ears, not English, not Spanish, and the dog had yelped under the strike of a glowing purple whip. When it was over, she’d knelt before four-year-old Mel and told her that if something bad happened and Mom wasn’t around, it was a big sister’s job to protect her sibling.

Mel raised both her hands how she remembered her mother doing it, not waving, but drawing a five-pointed star in the air. At the end, her fingertips began to glow purple, and she whispered the words: “Impetus tuum devorabitur vocatio mea.”

The purple cord from her memory leapt to life, arcing across the air to wrap around the beast’s legs, drawing it to a violent stop just short of closing its jaws around Maggie. It roared and snarled at her, but the more it struggled, the tighter the rope became, and the easier it felt for Mel to keep up the spell.

“Macy, get her!” she shouted, jerking her head towards her little sister.

Prudence got there first, hooking two arms under Maggie’s to drag her to her feet and help her back to where Zelda, Macy, and Mel were standing. The time witch froze Sigmund with her free hand and looked around for Niko. She spotted the bear leaning over Jada, the flat of one huge paw pressed into her throat, and she called out, “Niko, stop!”

The bear shifted back to the detective and her brown eyes seemed confused as she looked at Mel. Jada wriggled out from under Niko and sprang to her feet, blood trickling from a cut on her temple.

Macy put one hand on Mel’s shoulder, and Maggie mirrored on the other side. Mel felt her power surge, and without thinking so much as willing, she blew out a breath, and a cloud of pinkish dust floated over to the detective. She watched the glittering bits of magic enter Niko’s mouth and nose, and then she dropped, unconscious.

That just left Sigmund. Mel sucked in air to prepare for the faeflame spell, but suddenly Jada had grabbed something from Maggie and was tearing across the snow towards the restrained wolf.

“What’s she doing?” asked Macy, letting go of Mel’s shoulder

“She took my knife,” said Maggie, and that was the only warning they got before Jada struck Sigmund in the head with a blue lightning bolt, rendering his muscles taut, and then she was slamming the dagger into his neck.

“Redi ad periculum tuum.” Jada jerked the knife back against the sharp edge, splitting Sigmund’s throat and tendons open as she went. The wolf collapsed, and then stilled, and then it wasn’t a wolf anymore, but a man with a long nose and black hair. Red blood, one hundred percent human, soaked into the snow as he made a series of gut-churning gurgling noises before growing silent. His eyes were fixed on the sky, pupils just pinpricks. Jada wiped the knife on her pants.

“I guess, uh, that’s one way to do it,” offered Zelda, back in her human form.

While Jada worked on getting the cloak off of Sigmund’s shoulders, Mel ran to Niko’s prone form and pulled her shoulders into her lap, not caring about the snow biting at her knees through her pants. The sleep spell would last for a couple hours, but she had to feel the warmth of her skin, the beat of her heart.
“This must be the weapon,” said Jada, pulling a long sword from Sigmund’s belt. A handle inlaid with rubies and gold balanced out a broad, long blade that glinted silver-white in the bright sun. The whitelighter-witch regarded it with obvious interest, her fingers skating along the flat of the blade.

Macy reached Mel and put a hand on her shoulder. “We should get out of here.”

Mel barely heard her. She hadn’t realized until this exact moment that this was the first time in so very long that she’d been this close to Niko, holding her, the familiar weight against her chest. The detective had three long, jagged tears in the front of her shirt, and fully healed scars underneath, even though it had only been a few days since she’d disappeared. Her brain was misfiring, restarting, and struggling to comprehend this meant, and all she could do was grip the detective tighter, desperately clinging to the pulse thudding under her hands.

“Mel,” said Maggie, gently but closer than she’d been expecting. “Mel. Come on, let’s go.”

When they arrived back at Vera Manor, Jada helped Macy and Mel carry the unconscious detective to one of the guest bedrooms, and Zelda stayed with her as the witches went out to talk.

Mel felt like she’d aged a thousand years in the matter of just a few hours. She truly wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and sleep for forty-seven days, but with recent events… the rules of the game had changed.

Everyone seemed a little deflated as they gathered in the kitchen around leftover pasta, pantry snacks, and alcohol.

“That was… What happened back there?” began Macy from where she sat at the table.

“The bear sniffed through my glamour,” answered Jada with a shrug. She had an entire bag of puffy Cheetos propped against her chest, sitting on one of the island barstools.

Mel frowned as the words processed. “Don’t call her that.”

“It is what she is,” offered Prudence without much sympathy.

“What does this mean? Can we cure her?”

Both S’Arcana gave her a “bless your heart” sort of expression.

“So… she’s a…? Forever?”

“Wearebear,” finished Prudence. “Might be cute sounding under other circumstances.”

“We can’t just dump her back with Greta, not like this.” Macy was looking at Jada, chewing her lip with a clearly difficult thought. “Do you all know anything about…”

“Wearebear,” repeated the blonde with a languid smile. “And yes. As a dark creature, I’ve studied them extensively at the Academy.”

Jada seemed to pick up on where Macy’s mind was headed, and she brushed orange powder from her shirt before venturing, “You want to keep her here?”

“Just until she’s processed all this. I have no idea how we’re going to get her through it, but if she goes back out there, someone is going to kill her or we’ll have an outbreak. What if she hurts Greta, or Morris?”

“It doesn’t work like that,” said the whitelighter-witch with her trademark calm. “This isn’t the
movies, it isn’t full moons and feral attacks. You did notice she didn’t turn into a wolf, yeah?”

Macy narrowed her eyes and scoffed. “I am exhausted, and I’m sure you are too, but if you don’t drop the attitude about things we need to know, I’m going to throw you into the ceiling and keep you there until I fall asleep.”

Jada held up her hands in the universal gesture of surrender, and a smirk played across her lips. “Fine, fine. In terms of need to know and given the short tempers in the room, it’ll take her about a week to get back to full strength, in this case meaning she should have regular control of her powers. How long it takes her to come to terms with her new reality is up to you three, I suppose. The more she fights it, the less control she’ll have.” She looked at her cousin, arching an eyebrow. “I’m going to leave Prudence here with you to help.”


“Zelda and I will take care of that,” replied the whitelighter-witch, suddenly looking leonine. She stood up, straightened, and a flash of blue light indicating her glamour came over the room. In her place stood Niko Hamada, sporting Jada Shield’s smirk.

“No,” blurted Mel. “No way. That’s fucked up, by any standards.”

“Do you have a better idea?” asked Jada-Niko in an alarmingly accurate voice. “I may be an abomination, but I’m not a monster. We’ll keep a respectable distance from the wife, but we have to do enough to get the humans off of this. Once things have calmed down, if she wants to, she can hop right back into her life.”

“You should also keep her a secret from your Elders,” added Prudence. “They’ll put her down.”

Mel felt a cold flame blossom in her stomach, and she managed to tear her eyes away from Jada-Niko to glare at the teen. “Excuse me?”

“She’s a dark creature now. The Council won’t risk her infecting other humans. Believe me or not, but whatever they do to her will be on you. It’s a shame, really. The Dark Lord understands the beauty of such unholy beasts.” The blonde snapped her fingers, and a leather weekender bag appeared at her feet. “Do you have a room for me?”

Macy took the new houseguest upstairs, and Maggie excused herself to check on Zelda and Niko, leaving Mel staring at the glamour version of the woman she’d tried to hard to keep out of this life. The irony sat sour on her tongue, and she had to look away. Luckily, when she looked back up, Jada had changed back to herself, her long braids pulled over one shoulder.

“She’s a lucky one,” said the whitelighter-witch after a long time, sliding off of the countertop. “To have you looking out for her.”

“Yeah, so lucky she got turned into a were creature.”

Jada gave another shrug. “Bad things happen to everyone. It’s just a matter of degrees.” She cleared her throat. “I’m not going to be able to keep up a glamour tonight, so we’ll work on the detective’s grand return tomorrow, yeah?”

“Sure. And thank you.” Mel held out a hand to shake. “We couldn’t have gotten her back without your help. Thank you.”

When the S’Arcana had disappeared, Mel slumped against the counter, head in her hands. She only had a few precious moments of peace before a soft sound alerted her to a new visitor, and she turned
to greet, “Harry.”

The whitelighter was watching her with already-suspicious eyes, his gaze flickering around to the piles of empty chip bags and dirty plates. “Did you have a party and not invite me?”

“Just haven’t had time to clean.” Mel straightened up and shifted, trying to focus on looking just normal tired, and not wolf-vanquishing tired. “What’s up?”

“I… Where are your sisters?”

“Sleeping.”

Harry didn’t look particularly convinced, but he let out a breath and continued anyway. “The Council… They can no longer sense Sigmund. We don’t know what that means for Miss Hamada, but, uh, I thought you should know.”

Shit-shit-shit. The time witch coughed to give herself a second to gather a response that might work on the whitelighter. Truthfully, it didn’t take much trying. Her body was exhausted beyond anything she’d ever felt before, and her mind felt like thick pudding, opaque and unstable. It didn’t take much pretending to put a look of devastation on her face. “What does that mean?”

“He may pop up again, but… We won’t know where to find her until he does.”

Mel nodded, crossing her arms over her chest. “Thanks, Harry. For telling me.”

The whitelighter took a step towards her, hand raised as if to touch her arm, but then he shrank back, eyes turning to the ground. “I’m sorry, Mel. This… I wish I could do more. I know how much you care about her.”

Well, fuck. A day late and a dollar short, Harry. Mel put on her best grateful smile.

Chapter End Notes

:: sweating :: In the original Charmed, I don't think there were any humans who were viable long term love interests? Because they kept dying or whatever? I wanted to keep in the spirit of that, or else this could've just been a normal fix-it where a human is saved.
Detective James “Jimmy” Morris had had a rough few days. The disappearance of his partner had rocked the entire department, and he’d survived on vending machine snacks and 15-minute power naps since then. There wasn’t much in the way of evidence, and only partial witnesses. The crime scene investigator who had reported Niko missing had gone dark over the last twenty-four hours too, but he was much less concerned with that creep’s absence. Laurel. What kind of name was that?

Niko Hamada, “no middle name”, had come up in the force quickly, a shining star of an investigator who some of the boys resented for her skill and rapid success. Hamada’s naturally bashful personality had led to some lonely years to his understanding, not quite taken seriously enough to be “one of the boys”, but forever overqualified for their respect. After his previous partner’s retirement, Morris had taken her on as a newcomer to the homicide unit, and they’d not left each other’s sides since. He’d helped and watched her improve and grow over the last couple years, and the feeling he had towards his partner was not unlike the warm affection he felt for his kids, even though she was only about a decade younger than him.

Hamada was open, humble, and honest, three traits that were not often attributed HPD officers. She could also nail a bullseye with a handgun from fifty feet away, and he’d once watched her win a grappling match with a man almost a foot taller than her. You just wouldn’t know it by the way she sometimes let their fellow officers get away with stupid shit, but he couldn’t blame her for picking her battles carefully. He’d personally witnessed how her various identities made her job difficult. She’d been called every slur from Gran Torino for being Asian, lots of “dyke” and “faggot” screamed in her face, and then of course just your usual for a female cop—more than a lifetime’s worth of “cunt” and “bitch”, rape threats, and every type of lewd comment under the sun. Some of these things came from their own ranks, not just the suspects they hauled in to the station. Through it all, she just kept working in her brilliant and professional way, like a damn saint. “You can call me all the names you want,” she’d say. “But we got you dead to rights.”

Hamada had made him better, no matter how much he denied it, and she’d been the best partner he’d ever had. He would lose his job or work himself into an early grave before he let her case go unsolved.
His exhaustion and anger peaked in the form of a shouting match with the FBI field agents who had shown up to offer assistance. Treasury officials had already been up his ass since finding all that cash at the first scene, and the arrival of more feds with nothing but an extra layer of complication to the case to offer had been his breaking point. After he’d calmed down a little, O’Doule sent him home for 24 hours on orders to sleep and “get a grip.” Instead, he’d smuggled out his department laptop to a nearby diner and sat in a window booth, reviewing unsolved murders from across the United States. Whatever it took.

And the diner was where he was when he noticed a commotion outside, a group of people and news crews in the middle of the street. He glanced up at the small TV mounted over the open cooking area and nearly fell out of his booth, his hands slamming against the table so hard the whole restaurant grew quiet. The BREAKING NEWS chyron was superimposed over the confused, pale face of none other than Niko Hamada, her back to the diner signage. He was out of his seat in a flash and barely remembered making it outside, hoped he hadn’t knocked over any of the old biddy waitresses, only focused on the thick of people in front of him.

“Move! Move! HPD!” he shouted, holding up his badge even as he shouldered through the crowd. It felt like an eternity before he burst through the edge of bodies and finally came face to face with his partner for the first time in almost a week. “Niko?”

Hamada looked at him with hazy, unfocused eyes. “Morris?”

“Somebody call 9-1-1,” he shouted at the crowd. A sea of cell phones greeted him, their owners just standing there while some of the news anchors babbled through the live feed. “Call 9-1-1 right now! And get those cameras back, Jesus Christ. Give her some room.”

Morris caught Hamada as she stumbled, and then he couldn’t help himself, despite knowing he shouldn’t, he pulled her into a tight hug, letting out a breath as her arms tightened over his back in return. Hamada was thin, he could feel that much, but she didn’t recoil from his touch or indicate that she was in pain. He pulled back enough to check her over, noting a split lip and black eye, but no obvious other injury.

“What happened?” he asked as far-off sirens sprang to life. He shifted so that she could sling an arm over his shoulder.

“Laurel,” she hissed, leaning all of her weight against him.

By the time the emergency response vehicles showed up, Morris had led her over to the diner’s outdoor seating so she could get off her feet, chasing away the people eating there like they were seagulls. Witnesses said she’d shown up at the edge of town, walking along Main Street like a zombie. She wasn’t wearing what she’d had on when she’d disappeared, clad in a white shirt and gray sweatpants, and her clothes and skin were streaked in blood and dirt. The diner owner had been nice enough to bring her a thick wool blanket to wrap around her shoulders against the cold of the day, and the crowd of gawkers and media grew steadily with each second. Shop owners all along the street had stepped out of their front doors to watch.

“Niko!” a voice was shouting from somewhere nearby, and Morris looked up to see a firefighter sprinting towards them, shoving onlookers out of the way.

Morris held up a hand as she reached them. “Wait, wait. She could be injured.”

“I’m an EMT,” replied the woman curtly, drawing up to a stop with a frustrated huff. “Stephanie Hinke. I’m also a friend.”
The detective did recognize the name somewhat, so he moved to the side to let the firefighter work. She set down a medical kit and knelt in front of Hamada, her eyes shining with tears.

“Hey there kid,” she said around a sob. “We were real worried about you.”

Hamada nodded, looking up at her blankly. “Steph. If you want to hang out, you can just call.”

“Okay, too soon,” laughed the older woman as she patted Hamada’s knee. “Greta’s on her way to the hospital. Does anything hurt? Can you stand?” Hinke watched the injured woman like a hawk as she rose to wobbly feet. An ambulance was backing through the crowd towards them, the low beep-beep-beep heralding its imminent arrival, and the crew jumped out as soon as they’d gotten close enough.

Morris insisted on riding in the ambulance with his partner, and they made it to Hilltowne Memorial Hospital just a few minutes later. The entirety of the police department, up to the Chief, arrived to show support, turning the halls and waiting area into an impromptu station, the air filled with radios crackling, chattering, and beeping. The officers formed a human tunnel to make sure the stretcher got to the exam room without incident, and medical staff launched into the flurry of activity, checking heart rate and pulse, drawing blood, testing for injury and reflex response—while Morris felt as though he’d been dipped in concrete, frozen to the spot, and unreasonably worried that if he took too long to blink, his partner would disappear again.

Hamada’s wife, Greta, arrived within a few minutes, bursting through the door so violently that she almost took out a nurse, and then rushing over to the edge of the bed. The sharp clicking of her heels against the vinyl flooring grated strangely against the muted murmuring from the medical staff and softly beeping machines. Morris had only met Greta Luanne Hamada-Smith a handful of times, a noticeably low rate for partners who had been working together for so long, and Hamada certainly didn’t talk up her wife all the time. He tried to push down his own misgivings as the pretty blonde leaned over his partner, brushing sweat-slicked hair away from her forehead with what looked like genuine affection. Hamada was staring back at her with a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes.

“Holy fucking shit baby, I’ve been so worried about you,” Greta was saying, her face a mess with tears. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

“I’m fine,” croaked the patient, wincing as the IV port went into her arm.

“I knew you would make it back to me.” The blonde kissed her wife’s forehead. “I never had any doubts.”

Hamada nodded weakly, but her eyes flickered to Hinke and Morris. “He kept me captive. I thought I was a goner.”

“I prayed every night. It’s a miracle,” Greta continued, taking deep, audible breaths. She seemed more upset than the injured detective. “Thank God you’re alive.”

A case manager asked to speak to Greta outside, and once it became apparent that Hamada was not in immediate danger, the other medical staff began to thin out and leave the room. The quiet was comforting, the heart monitor noises just reminding him that Hamada is alive.

“Niko fucking Hamada,” said the firefighter quietly as she stepped to the side of the bed and sank to her knees. “I can’t believe you’re here, you’re okay. I mean, I hoped, but… You’ve been gone for six days. I think there are social media people offering giant rewards for tips on your killer.”

“Takes more than some creep to kill me,” she replied, a weak smile on her pale lips. “Did they sedate
me? I feel…”

“Just a little bit. There’s still a chance you go into shock over all this, so say something if you start feeling.” Hinke smoothed an imaginary wrinkle in the blanket. “Can you tell us what happened? Where you’ve been?”

Morris shuffled around to other side of the bed. He knew that even if Hamada wasn’t up to it, she’d push through anyway because they asked. This wouldn’t count as an official interview, and technically he was still on paid leave for the next 19 hours, but he could sure as Hell get a head start on investigating this if he could. “Where is Laurel?”

“I killed him,” she sighed. “That’s how I escaped.”

“Where did he keep you?”

“Abandoned hotel. Route J. I walked maybe… thirty minutes before I got to town. I got free, waited for him to let his guard down, and I took his knife and cut his throat.” Her words sounded mechanical in Morris’ trained ears, or perhaps more accurately, felt like it was in an uncanny valley of almost-truth. Then again, Hamada had just been through something he couldn’t even imagine; a little weirdness to be expected.

“Jesus,” sighed Hinke. “And you’ve been within city limits this whole time. Fuck.”

“We looked there. The old Hilton.” Morris raised an eyebrow. “There was nothing.”

Hamada just shrugged and let her head fall back against the pillows.

“Maybe he moved her,” Hinke offered quickly. “Is his body there?”

“Yeah. Go get him.”

Morris popped outside the room to relay the information to O’Doule so that they could get going on retrieving the corpse and gathering evidence from the old building. When he got back, Hinke had left, but Greta was back, assuming the same kneeling position next to the bed. The detective moved a chair over, and she accepted it with a grateful smile and without losing hold of Hamada’s hand.

When the doctor reentered, he paused at the foot of the bed. “Everything looks fine—heart rate and pulse are within reason, no fever, no injuries beyond the facial laceration and hematoma. Anything else bothering you?”

Hamada shook her head.

“So we can leave?” asked the blonde cheerily.

“I want to keep her here for twenty-four hours pending the results of the blood tests. Nothing you’ve described makes it sound like there’s too much to worry about, except there’s a lot of nasty stuff in abandoned buildings, so it’s worth being safe. Once we’ve got one set up for you somewhere private, the nurses will take you up to a room for the night. You’re welcome to stay with her, Mrs. Hamada-Smith.”

Greta chewed her red-stained lip for a moment, glancing first at Morris and then back to the doctor. “Do you think she’ll be released before tomorrow night?”

“Probably. Big plans?”
“Just getting a timeline. Her brother finally got leave, so he should be here in a couple days.”

Morris frowned and opened his phone to Chrome as he leaned back against the wall. Niko’s return was already splashed across the main page of Google News, with plenty of cell phone pictures and videos of her on the street. But he was looking for something quite different, his mind vaguely recalling a commercial he’d overheard at the dinner. He pulled up the schedule for CBS’ 60 Minutes and noted the synopsis for tomorrow night’s episode, which apparently hadn’t been updated since the news broke: *Wife of missing detective Niko Hamada joins us to talk about the state of the investigation and her hopes for the future.*

Oh, yeah. *That* type of thing was why he didn’t like Greta Hamada-Smith.

Maggie leaned back from where she was standing over Prudence, who sat with her legs crossed, eyes closed, and her hands held up near her head with palms facing the ceiling. “What’re they saying now?”

“She’s doing fine. Everyone’s crying and so happy, blah, blah. Something about moving her to another room. The humans are buying it, but maybe we should have messed up Jada’s face a little more.” Prudence slowly frowned. “This blonde is the wife?”

“Perfect brows, really shitty personality? Like a Pinterest board that blinks?”

After a beat, Prudence actually smiled and shook her head slightly. “I suppose. She’s pretty.”

“Pretty fucking awful,” muttered Maggie. “Tell Jada to be careful with the nice stuff, they’ve been fighting.”

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue. Jada says she’s already not a fan.” After a few seconds of silence to relay the message to Jada-Niko, Prudence opened her eyes and ended the astral connection to her cousin. “The cop seemed to buy the hotel story. I bet they’re there right now.”

Retrieving the frozen corpse of Sigmund had not been a fun after-breakfast task that morning, but they’d collectively decided that the only plausible story was fairly close to the truth. They weren’t sure if Laurel had any kind of paper trail, but he was guilty, so they framed him for the crime. The irony was not lost on the Charmed Ones.

“Oh, okay,” breathed Macy from where she’d been watching across the room. “So-o-o, we’re just tricking the whole world on live TV, this is fine. No pressure.”

From against the wall near the attic window, Mel tried her best to look engaged. The S’Arcana were doing them a big favor, and she wanted to contribute, she truly did (and probably needed to), but Mel had been unable to focus on anything for more than two minutes with Niko downstairs, locked away in the room farthest down the hall. Zelda, true to her stated backstory, had hardly left the detective’s side overnight, though she occasionally popped outside to let the sisters know their charge was still sleeping. Mel’s sleep spell had apparently been stronger than she intended, and Niko was going on twelve hours of unconsciousness. All the better, suggested Jada before heading out on her grand undercover operation, letting the new creature’s energy recoup and body recover.

Mel couldn’t bring herself to go into the room. The thought filled her stomach with lead. She’d stood outside the dark, wooden door for a solid half hour in the dead of night, her anxiety ricocheting off the walls of the silent, still house, until it reached a deafening crescendo. *You did this.* Then... she’d left at the sound of someone stirring. The plan had seemed so sensible until she thought hard about how Niko might react—how *any* person might react to wake up snatched from her life, subject to an
entirely new reality she’d never asked for. How was she supposed to deliver that kind of news, or deal with the emotional aftermath? Reality was now almost everything she’d ever feared for Niko, just short of death or eternal damnation. This had to count as serious bodily harm.

And it was all her fault.

“Mel?” Maggie’s inflection suggested she’d said her sister’s name more than once.

The time witch cleared her throat and turned from the window to face her sisters and Prudence, all of whom were looking back at her like she was an injured prey animal about to flee. “Hmm?”

“You didn’t hear that?” continued the younger Vera with furrowed brows.

Mel almost asked what she meant before it became very, very obvious—the sound of a groaning bear, muffled slightly by the floor, but still easily audible. Niko was awake. “What do we do?”

“And you… going to go down there?” asked Macy in a cautious voice, glancing between Mel and the door. “I’m sure Z could use a hand.”

“I can’t.”

Prudence scoffed and rolled her eyes, giving the middle sister a sharply disapproving look. “You witches are unbelievable. All this work, and you just…? You don’t want to deal with the consequences anymore? Because it’s a little late for that, wouldn’t you say?” How someone so young could be so strikingly absolute, Mel wished she knew.

“I’ll go,” snapped Maggie. She grabbed the protection crystal from the table and headed downstairs. When Macy gave Mel a worried look, the middle sister sighed, crossed her arms, and followed with shuffling feet.

The rumbling groans were accompanied by the sound of chains clinking as the witches paced down the stairs and hallway. Maggie did look a bit nervous at least, but Mel felt like her stomach might fall out through her toes, or empty its contents against her will. As they came to The Door again, she had to focus on her breathing through the rush of adrenaline and flight response. She stayed one step back as her younger sister reached for the door handle and turned, pushing it open without moving inside the room at first.

Zelda was standing a safe distance from the bear, arms up as though trying to absolve herself of any blame for the state of the room. “She’s not in the mood to listen to me.”

The bear was tied in the same position they’d tied Niko, on its back, legs somewhat pulled out towards the posts, and one large cuff around her neck. It didn’t look comfortable, but at least the enchanted chains were working.

“Hey, hey,” crooned Maggie, stepping towards the bed with her hands down at her sides, a little crouched. Her head bobbed awkwardly as she tried to catch the creature’s eye, the protection charm keeping her safe from the occasional wayward flailing paw or chain.

Desperate for something to pass the time and distract her overheated brain, Mel had Googled “different kinds of bears” during her sleepless night, partly to scroll through some cute videos of bears waving, and partly to actually research Niko’s bear form. It hadn’t taken her long to decide on a moon bear, evidenced by the tan “V” shape over the chest, breaking up the otherwise midnight black coloring up to a tan muzzle, and frill of thick fur on either side of the neck. In nature, these were smaller bears, which apparently translated out to a magical form that was maybe eight feet tall, its massive and furry skull whacking against the headboard as it struggled, feet hanging off the edge
of the bed.

Luckily, and this was somehow appropriate for Niko if she thought about it long enough, moon bears were on the herbivorous side of omnivorous, which had instilled a hope that they wouldn’t be hunting deer in the park for her. She wondered if it was a Patronus-type situation, hence not turning into a wolf, but had been too unwilling to deal with Prudence’s hoity attitude about pop culture references to ask.

And now, seeing the bear form again so close, in her house, she found herself also unwilling to move into the room.

“Niko,” continued her younger sister, who had no such qualms. “Niko, it’s okay. Look at me. It’s me, Maggie. Do you remember?”

“Maggie… Vera?” Niko’s voice sounded hoarse in the bear’s mouth. “What—where am I?”

“I need you to take a deep breath. Good. If you don’t calm down, you’re going to hurt yourself.” The petite witch picked up the cup of water on the bedside table. “Breathe.”

The bear let out a low, miserable moan, its head flopping away from her. “Why am I tied up?”

“Just to keep you and everyone safe. We’re here to help you, and we’ll tell you everything. It’s okay, Niko.” At the moment the detective’s name left Maggie’s lips, the bear crumbled back into human form, and suddenly the scene looked a thousand times more devastating, with the same reasonable-for-a-bear chains looking huge and cruel on a human.

“Don’t,” said Zelda quickly when Maggie went to undo one of the detective’s wrists. “Not yet.”

Niko was now just limp on her back, sobbing softly, her skin looking rubbery even in the bright morning light. The cuffs had worn angry red marks into her delicate human skin.

Though her eyes looked watery too, Maggie shuffled forward to sit on the edge of the bed and held up the glass of water until Niko finally looked back at her. After a brief hesitation, she sat up and scooted towards the smaller woman, looking all of five years old as she accepted the glass and held it with two hands to chapped, broken lips, obediently handing the cup back to Maggie once she was finished.

“Do you… Do you remember what happened?” asked the youngest Vera, her voice pitched louder for the observers to hear. “How you got here?”

“I remember being cold,” Niko replied with a sniffle. “I remember… a wolf. Wait.” She put a hand to her forehead, expression shifting from pained to confused. “Did I get attacked?”

“You did.” Zelda cut in as she moved to stand behind Maggie.

“Aiko?”

The kitsune nodded and said in a thin voice, “Surprise.”

“What attacked me? What are you doing here? I… what?”

Maggie and Zelda exchanged a look. After making sure they took any reflective surfaces out of the room, Prudence had warned them that Niko wouldn’t be aware of her bear yet, would just remember those times as being in her own body. The were curse was a part of her now, as entrenched and essential as DNA, and her brain wouldn’t even register the shifts until they vocalized it to her or she
saw her reflection, not just her paws or snout under her own eyes. Why would a brain flag alarm at
its own body, after all?

“The wolf,” answered Zelda simply. “You’re at the Vera house. We’ve been waiting for you to
wake up. How are you feeling?”

“Fine, I’m just a little achey. Can you… can you take these off?” Niko shook a wrist to accentuate
her point with the soft clink of the chain. “I should probably get to a hospital or something?”

“Oh boy,” muttered Maggie, and then both she and Zelda glanced up at Mel. This drew Niko’s gaze
to her too, and the detective’s eyes widened.

Over the course of this staccato conversation, Mel’s heart rate had been steadily rising alongside the
sound of her own blood rushing between her ears. Niko was here. Niko was looking at her. There
was a split second where she wished the detective would shift back into the bear so she could think.
She felt like gravy was trying to crush her into the ground, unable to breathe, and as Niko’s mouth
opened… She turned and ran away from the doorway, ignoring Maggie’s confused calls after her
and the sudden unhappy sound of a bear again. Down the stairs, across the foyer, and out the door
she went, until she blinked and found herself in her car, turning over the engine and gripping the
steering wheel as if she might fly off the face of the Earth if she let go. She would’ve pulled onto the
street if not for the tears clouding her vision, and her fists slammed into the wheel in frustration.

She had fucked everything up.

All the pain, the anxiety, the denial of the last year, and yet here they were. She should have known
from that first night, the dinner party. She should have taken action immediately, broken things off
with Perry—now barely a footnote in her thoughts—and just left Niko alone. They never should
have translated the second message. She never should have had dinner with Niko. Never had been
the promise of the Morai, if only she could leave it well enough alone. Mel had fucked that up at the
first opportunity.

Her phone buzzed and, assuming it was Maggie or Macy, she answered it with a half-shouted, “What?”

“Uhh… Mel?”

The witch pulled the phone from her ear to look at the screen, and she almost chucked it out the
window of her car at the name there. “Perry… Hi.”

“Hi. I, uh, just wanted to make sure you heard… they found Niko. She walked right back into town.
I guess some CSI dude kidnapped her to cover up the murders.”

Dragging a hand down her face, Mel sucked in a steadying breath to reply, “Yeah, yeah I heard. It’s
really great. Have you seen her yet?”

“Uh huh. I went to the hospital and visited her room. She’s like, wildly chill about being held
hostage for five days, but, I guess that’s Niko for you.”

‘Wildly chill.’ Mel held one hand over the receiver and allowed herself an audible groan of
frustration, then put it back to her ear. “Mhmm. That’s fantastic, Per. I’m really glad Niko’s okay.”

A pause. “Hey, uh… I know we haven’t talked since, you know. I was wondering if, maybe… we
could meet up? And talk about that?”

In her periphery, Macy finally appeared on the front porch, looking down at her car with hands out
in a clear “what the fuck?” Mel put on her seatbelt. “Where are you right now?”

“I’m at home.”

“I’m coming over.” The witch hung up and threw her car into reverse, avoiding Macy’s eyes as she drove away.

Perry buzzed her up to the apartment immediately, and the trainer looked uncharacteristically disheveled when she opened the door, green eyes clearly apprehensive. “Hey, bab—Mel. Hi. Come in.”

Mel shuffled into the bright loft space, letting Perry take her coat and accepting the glass of water shoved into her hand moments later. The trainer was very into feng shui, and the rise of Marie Kondo had only fueled the flames of her minimalism, which Mel secretly thought was a sign of control issues when coupled with her obsessive workout schedule and diet, but that was neither here nor there today.

“I… don’t feel like this is going to be a good conversation,” admitted the trainer after the silence reached awkward lengths, her face a textbook expression of “kicked puppy”.

“Perry…” Mel resisted the urge to take her hand. Wrong signal. Instead, she clasped her own hands tightly together in her lap, the pressure helping to ground her to the moment. “What do you think I’m going to say?”

“That I’m a little needy and I freaked you out.”

The moment she had had to consider getting back together with Perry to carry on that timeline, Mel had come to a decision: She couldn’t. And if there was any lesson to be learned from all of the shit she’d just landed herself and NIko in… now was the time to take care of it. Though harmless and fun, Perry wanted something that Mel didn’t have to give, no matter how much she had told herself she could when this all began. She wasn’t a plaything for Mel to tolerate while dealing with her own problems.

“See? That’s… that’s why I like you.” The witch almost smiled at the adorable tilt of Perry’s head, the puppy still seeking approval and listening carefully for instructions. “I do. I like you, and I think you’re a catch even without all the muscles.”

Perry probably thought she was being sneaky, but she definitely preened at that.

“You’re sweet, and you’re funny, and you’re self-aware. But you did… scare me, because you said those words, and honestly I wasn’t expecting it.”

“Yeah, but just because I feel that way… Does it mean we can’t be… we?”

“That’s the thing. I don’t think an I love you should be a surprise. That means I haven’t been paying attention to you like I should, and… I don’t want to hurt you.” Mel finally did take the trainer’s wide hands in her own small ones. “That’s why I have to be honest, and I don’t know how else to say this without using these exact, overused words, but while I do care about and love you, Per, I’m not in love with you.”

“—in love with you,” Perry finished the sentence with her, miserable.

“You met me at a very strange time in my life, and you took care of me. You sent Rachel to my house to help us not get arrested, you’ve always tried to get me to eat better and drink more water. But I need to call this off, and it’s hard, and it sucks, and I need to do it before I hurt you any more.”
The trainer let out a long, ragged breath, cheeks reddening. She wouldn’t meet Mel’s eyes, but didn’t pull her hands back. “I understand.”

“Okay. Do you want me to leave?”

“I think so, yeah… but…” Perry pawed at her eyes, sniffling harshly. “Did you just break up with me using a Fight Club line?”

In spite of everything, Mel let out a weak laugh. “I thought you’d appreciate that.”

They shared a long hug in the entryway, murmuring the empty things you do about “getting coffee sometime” and “we’ll see each other again”. When the door closed behind her, Mel took a few seconds to close her eyes and breathe. One thing down. A million other fixes to go.

As she was driving back to her house, a quick snapping sound to her right indicated a certain whitelighter had caught a ride.

“So the detective has returned home safe…” began Harry, forcefully casual.

“You’re gonna make a girl crash, appearing like that,” replied the witch quickly. The sisters and their guests had talked about how this was supposed to go, to keep their stories straight and not give anything away, even by mistake: Deny, deny, deny.

“I was just at your house, and your sisters didn’t seem particularly surprised.”

“It was on the news. You’re kind of late to the punch.”

“Seems… that she reappeared not long after Sigmund went off the radar.”

“So do you think he kidnapped someone else? Maybe the wrong person?” Mel could feel Harry’s incredulous expression.

“Don’t know.”

“Hmm. Seems like the Elders should work on that. Kind of hard to take them seriously when they lose track of a giant demon-wolf.” Ha. She was getting in the groove. Harry didn’t know it, but he’d already lost this round.

“It’s just all… very strange.”

“Try being a human and finding out you’re a witch, and things like Tartarus exist,” she countered dryly as she pulled back into her spot in front of the house. “Did you want to come back inside?”

“I think I’ve worn out my welcome for today.” Harry waited in his seat until the witch looked over and met his eyes. “Melanie… I know you and your sisters, even your mother, have had misgivings about the Elders and us whitelighters. But you know me, Harry. Your whitelighter. If there had been a way for you to rescue the detective, and you’d told me about it, I’d have done my best to help. I just want to keep you and your sisters safe.”

Mel unbuckled her seatbelt and leaned over to give him a kiss on the cheek, hoping the overly affectionate gesture would knock him off-balance. “Thanks.”

It apparently worked, because he just coughed and disapparated after a stammered goodbye. Mel wasted no time bounding back into the house, greeted almost immediately with a furious-looking Maggie.
“You ran?” she shouted down from the landing.

“Sorry, sorry,” Mel replied quickly as she moved towards and then up the stairs. “I’m so sorry. I panicked.”

“Yeah, no shit, and she’s been a bear since you left. Prudence had to put her out again, and then Harry showed up, and—”

“Maggie.” The older sister gripped her younger sibling’s upper arms with both hands as soon as she came within reach. “I’m sorry. I didn’t handle that well, but I’m back now, and I’m in it. I just had to do one thing. I broke up with Perry.”

“What, like… right now?”

“Yeah. She called me, and it needed to be done.”

Frowning, Maggie batted her arms away. “Okay, fine. I guess if that’s how you’re gonna unpack this, fine. But you need to go talk to Niko if you’re in a productive mood. Have you seen Twitter?”

Mel checked her phone and saw #FindingNiko was the top trending hashtag for the United States. One of the featured Tweets under the tag was from CBS, stating that the detective and her wife would be on tomorrow’s edition of 60 Minutes. Jada was going to love that. Her Niko glamour was more reliable and much stronger than Zelda’s, so the kitsune would sub in for quiet nights once they released “Niko” from the hospital, but Jada had to do all of the public appearances and heavy lifting, like police interviews. “Cool, cool, cool. And Harry didn’t see any of our guests?”

“The charm worked like… a charm.” Maggie shrugged about the wording as they moved back down the hall to the guest room in question. Tasked with figuring out how to avoid getting found out by an overly eager whitelighter, Macy had discovered a spell in the Book that would sound an alarm before anyone apparated from outside, in. Harry had apparated just outside the room, but thanks to the warning, Prudence had already glamoured the bear as a lumpy comforter before tucking herself in the closet, and Zelda snapped into her fox form to hide under the bed.

Luckily, he’d only peered into the room from outside of it, and their tactics appeared to have worked. For now, Zelda was off taking a nap in her room, and Prudence sat in a chair near the bed, reading the Book. Macy leaned against the nearby window, arms crossed, and she looked pissed when the other two sisters entered.

“I’ve already heard it,” interrupted Mel when her older sister went for the scolding. To Prudence, she quickly said, “Can you wake her up?”

“I’m sorry, Niko. I did it for you.”

That was what Mel Vera had said to her when she’d been half-unconscious on the bar floor, bleeding profusely. Things had happened so quickly after the words were said that she more or less forgot about it, until she found herself being held captive (?) in the Vera house.

After Mel had sprinted away like Niko was a damn lagoon monster, and as the detective devolved into full blown panic, Zelda had left the room and returned with a surly teenager, and then… and this was getting annoying… she’d passed out again. When she woke up, it wasn’t like being drugged or hungover — it was just a hard and fast fall from unconsciousness to wakefulness, like getting shocked back to life. Her eyes opened to find the three Veras, Zelda, and that somewhat creepy looking kid with platinum blonde hair.
The confusion blanketing the situation wasn’t helped by the fact that she was still held in heavy metal chains. It was an objectively bad look.

Out of the cold, fed, and well rested, Niko’s memories had come flooding back to her during that first, long sleep. Sora. Greta. Morris. Mel. Wolf. The sequence of events culminated in a blank space where the end of the snowy fight should have been, and the fight itself—had the Vera sisters battled a giant wolf? Had she almost choked someone to death? Whoever that person had been, she didn’t seem to be in the house.

The memories and visuals were there, but she couldn’t put them together in a way that made sense. Why on God’s green Earth would three sisters from Michigan be fighting a giant wolf in the Arctic? And how? But it all felt too real to be just a dream. She could practically taste the elk liver on her tongue, but why would she have done that? Where had Laurel taken her? And why could she smell each woman leaning over her so clearly, as if their scents were as separate as their bodies? Macy, like spring grass and loamy earth. Zelda, clover and red maple leaves.

“Niko?” said Mel, worrying her bottom lip.

“Hello… everyone,” she replied, sitting up slowly. Earlier panic aside, at least now she understood where she was and, with one blonde exception, who the people standing in front of her were. She supposed she should be trying to devise an escape plan, but truthfully her brain only had room for one clear thought: “What the fuck is happening right now? And so help me God, if you answer my question with a question, I will scream.”

The Vera sisters started talking at once, and then quieted simultaneously, leaving them all in an extended, awkward silence.

Finally, the blonde teenager rolled her eyes and said in a clear and confident voice, “We rescued you from the wolf, but there were… complications.”

It was the straightest answer she’d gotten so far, and Niko nodded appreciatively before Mel cut in, “You’re going to want to sit down. This is going to take awhile.”

Macy started her story with Marisol, specifically Marisol’s death, and then her own arrival on the Vera doorstep, the catalyst for some kind of prophecy and the sisters’ discovery of their powers. That much was easy to follow, or as easy as you could follow being told that magic and witches were real and, apparently, they lived over a portal to Hell. All of the women were witches, apparently, except for Zelda, who described herself as “technically a spirit, but a good one”. Niko had always thought of ‘kitsune’ as just an anime thing, never really delving into the lore of it, but before she could ask a thousand questions about her mother getting tangled with Japanese witches and yokai, Macy had pressed on with the story.

Next came words like “whitelighter” and “Elders”, “light” and “dark” magical forces, and then one that made her skin crawl: “Werewolf.”

“Werewolf,” she repeated back to Macy, throat tightening. Her stupid brain was helpfully providing her with ridiculous reference points like Scott Speedman painted blue and Taylor Lautner imprinting a vampire baby. “Like… the kind that… turn people into werewolves?”

“Yes… but no. Not exactly.”

No. Nope. Nope nope. Niko closed her eyes as the room began to spin, another rush of adrenaline hitting her veins. No.
Mel, who had been quiet through this whole confessional, suddenly spoke up, and it was so unexpected that Niko’s eyes snapped open to find hers. “Let me talk to Niko about the rest of this, okay?”

After a small protest from Maggie, the other four women did leave the room, and Niko felt like she could breathe a little easier… but only a little. Once the door shut, Mel stayed across the room, watching her with an inscrutable expression.

“If I untie you, are you going to be okay? I promise we only did it for your safety.”

“Yeah, you keep saying that, and I’m fine, so I don’t understand why these are still on me.” Niko couldn’t help the note of irritation; her wrists and neck were killing her, and the fact that the women had not yet extended her even that small show of trust kept throwing suspicion against everything they said. “I’m not going to hurt you, if that’s what you’re worried about. If you’re really a witch, you’d be a pretty uncool witch if I could, anyway.”

Mel’s eyes widened, and then she let out a disbelieving, short laugh. “I suppose if you’re making jokes… you’re okay.”

“A-ha. That’s the trick; jokes are how I avoid expressing what I’m really feeling.”

“And what is that?”

“If you don’t come over here and let me out of these chains, I’m going to start thinking this isn’t a very friendly situation at all.” She dropped her voice low, keeping the shorter woman’s gaze with every word.

Shuffling forward, Mel leaned down to undo the chains at her wrists and neck, allowing Niko to sit up properly, and then unclasped the manacles around her ankles. Niko didn’t miss the way the metal sparked with purple light as it hit the ground. When she was done, Mel took a half-step back, letting the detective put her feet down and stand.

Perhaps what made this seem like a non-surprise was that she’d been so unable to pin down the Vera sisters before, and for no good reason. They were cagey and totally innocent, somehow. But now? Depending on how this all went, and if everything turned out to be true, Niko herself wasn’t sure how she’d keep all of it a secret. Adding to that, she and Morris had been right. The Veras did know more about the murders than they’d let on, and they were the targets of the messages. Witchcraft just hadn’t been on the radar of what she’d been expecting at the end of all the questions and coincidences.

Steady on her feet for the first time in what felt like years, Niko rubbed her wrists and rolled her shoulders for a few minutes before looking back down at Mel, who was a little pale. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I… I’m just not sure where to start.”

“Well, I’m really good at taking confessions, so how about this: Let’s start with motive. Why did the wolf take me?” Niko threw out the question casually, more curiosity than useful information, but the way Mel’s face contorted with a sudden devastation gave her immediate pause. “What?”

Mel took several deep breaths before the words came: “I don’t know how to even begin to say this, but... “

In response to the waves of tension coming off of the shorter woman, Niko held her own breath. What could be more difficult to explain than “my sisters and I are a coven of witches”? 
“...do you remember the killings on campus about a year ago? Murderer never found, three students dead?” Mel waited for Niko to actually nod before continuing. “So, there’s a version of reality that existed, that no longer exists… where your partner wasn’t Morris. It was Trip Bailey.”

“Bailey? He’s been dead for…” She frowned, remembering the officer’s funeral, his mother sobbing beside his casket. “What do you mean, ‘version of reality’? What does that have to do with the students?”

“I’ll get to that. A demon killed those students. We killed the demon, but Trip figured out that we were involved somehow, and he followed us to try to figure it out. A piece of shrapnel from the spell hit him in the head, and that’s how he died.” The shorter woman dropped her eyes. “Our Elder made it look like Trip was the murderer instead, so the police would stop looking at us. You were… really upset, and I couldn’t tell you the truth, and it was killing me.”

A high pitched noise grew between Niko’s ears, the periphery of her vision darkening. She could practically hear the giant hole in the story around which Mel expertly shimmied her tale, avoiding falling directly in to the key piece of missing information. Motive. “And why would you care that much about what I thought in that story? And what did you do to fix it?”

“Niko, we were together in that timeline. For about three years, by the time I…” Mel swallowed thickly, a couple tears trickling from her eyes. “Things got so bad, and I couldn’t stand lying to you anymore. You almost died investigating Trip’s death, and I had to keep you safe. So I changed time.”

“No, it’s not…” Mel took a deep breath and wiped at her cheeks. She did look genuinely upset, and despite her efforts to stay suspicious and angry, Niko couldn’t deny the twitch in her hand, wanting to reach out and comfort the other woman. Mel’s scent swirled with something heavy and sour the more upset she got. “Look, it’s not like time travel, and I couldn’t use it to save Trip, or I would have, trust me. Instead, I erased myself from your timeline. Made it so that we never met, except… I still have my memories of the old timeline, because we cast the spell.”

The pieces of this macabre puzzle came together in spite of Mel’s winding retelling of it. She found herself flipping through every word and facial expression the Vera sisters had been throwing her way. The pity, the sadness, care and concern. Because they already knew me. Three years. Three years, nearly half of her relationship with Greta today, spent with someone else. Her emotions thudded against her skull, and the news became more difficult to bear than the existence of things called whitelighters and werewolves. “That’s absurd.”

“No, Niko—”

“Hold on a second,” snarled the detective. “If all of that is true, then why the fuck have you and your sisters been messing with me for the last few weeks, huh? You expect me to believe that just, what, you magically had this whole entire relationship with me that I don’t remember? And you still wouldn’t leave me alone? Being all sympathetic and nice and helping with the investigation, are you fucking kidding me?” Her volume spike at the end, hands clenched into fists at her sides.

“That’s kind of… exactly what I’m saying.” The shorter woman winced and turned her chin slightly down. “I know this is a lot to process all at once, but we need you to understand what is happening so I can show you one more thing. It’s why the rest of it matters, why I can’t call an ambulance or let you just go home right now.”

“Tell me. I’m done playing twenty questions, and don’t think just because you’re Perry’s girlfriend
Mel held up a mirror. Just a simple, square mirror with a thin gold frame. Niko looked down and saw a long, white-tan snout leading up to wide-set black eyes... furry ears... She snatched the mirror out of Mel’s hands and put her nose right up to it, gasping as the condensation from her nostrils billowed across the mirror, from the bear.

“Don’t panic.”

“Oh, I’m fucking panicking.” Niko dropped the mirror when she saw the bear’s mouth move, ignoring Mel’s impressive catch before it hit the ground, and shook her head. “No. Nope. That’s— no, let me see another one.”

This time, Mel produced her phone. She put the Camera app in selfie mode. Niko tried to tap the screen to make sure it wasn’t just a video, but then she finally saw it—her fingers weren’t fingers at all.

“Ohhmygod I’m panicking, what the fuck?” Niko reeled backwards, short bear legs tripping over the bed, as if this body manifested purely by her own awareness of it, because moving around hadn’t been so difficult thirty seconds earlier. Now, she could feel the thick fur, see the snout at the end of her vision, and everything else made sense, the scenting and the scared women. “I’m a bear? This whole time? You guys didn’t think to fucking lead with that?”

“Breathe. Focus on me.” Her voice was firm and calm as Mel got on the bed, standing, and Niko realized for the first time just how much taller she was than Mel, or how much more than usual, in this form. Her ears were brushing the ceiling of the Victorian room. “I’m sorry, Niko. I’m sorry I couldn’t stop this, and that I can’t fix it now.”

“This is why you said that in the bar.” Niko pressed herself back against the wall, worried she might fall over with out it. “You said, ‘I’m sorry Niko, I did it for you.’ Jesus, you’re bad a keeping secrets.”

Mel had her hands up, but wasn’t touching her, just standing there on the mattress like a port in a storm of Niko’s absolute meltdown. “I know, I know I am. When did I say that?”

“When you were coming to. After you hit your head.” She shook her own head in a last, desperate hope that maybe she was dreaming or hallucinating. “Can’t you do the—the time thing and change me back? So we never met again?”

“I can see if it’s possible.” Mel’s face fell, and despite everything, Niko felt a stab of regret at her words. “I don’t know if it works with curses.”

“Am I—am I like this forever?”

“No. You’ll be able to control it. You can control it now, if you focus. Look at me.” Mel waited for the bear to comply, and she reached up a small hand to touch the hawk-shaped patch of light fur on her chest. “Breathe. Focus on your body.”

Niko heard a pitiful rumble escape her throat, but kept looking at Mel as instructed. As much as she was open to the idea, maybe even expected it, she felt no threat from the woman—witch—in front of her. Her eyes slipped closed as she took in a lungful of that scent: dahlias and rainy sandstone under the sweet, artificial cloud of her shampoo and soap. The unpleasant undertone from before was gone, and so was the fear and shame from Mel’s face. She followed the shorter woman’s breaths, deep and slow in, quick and fully out, until her line of sight began to shrink down. The sensation was slightly
painful, her bones cracking and muscles shifting back into human shapes and sizes, but unlike anything she had felt before—and somehow totally natural. The entire time, they kept eye contact, and though the exercises calmed her breaths, the intensity of that nearly ruined her progress.

Something deep in her bones, the same faraway voice that led her to bits of evidence and hiding suspects, told her that Mel was being truthful, as absurd as rewriting time sounded. It was all absurd. But the part about them, about a connection that was broken… Even without the correlating memories, and with what little she knew of Mel “in this life”, the idea that they’d come together in some version of reality made sense. Still, the most important question remained unanswered: Was it worth whatever was happening to her right now?

When she came back to her body, she blinked and realized her eyes were back at the proper height compared to Mel’s.

“There you are,” murmured the smaller woman, her frown easing into a smile. “We can work on that until you feel really comfortable with it, and I promise, I’ll answer any questions you have. How do you feel?”

Niko cleared her throat, a little embarrassed at having gotten so angry. “I’m, uh, a little hungry. I don’t have to eat… raw animal parts, do I?”

“Not unless you want to,” joked the witch weakly.

“I don’t. I’d kill for some pizza.” Niko followed Mel off the side of the bed back to the floor, and when the shorter woman turned, they were standing closer than she’d expected. They paused there, inches apart. “I’m not done freaking out about this,” she murmured.

“Neither am I,” agreed Mel with a sharp exhale. “Come on. We have pizza in the freezer at all times.”

She followed her apparent-ex-girlfriend out of the room, only to nearly run into her back when she unexpectedly stopped. The other housemates had been caught just beyond the door in an awkward formation that couldn’t mean anything but eavesdropping.

“Everything okay?” asked Macy with clearly artificial cheeriness. “You guys… have a good chat?”

Niko glanced at Mel, who had closed her eyes and looked on the verge of peak frustration, and then back at the older Vera. “You mean about how we used to date except we also didn’t date at all? And I’m a bear now?”

“Right. Yes. That.”

“I dunno,” the detective shifted her eyes to Maggie and grinned. “Was she nice to me?”

“Never,” laughed the youngest Vera, a little watery-eyed.

Morris stood with his arms crossed in the Hamada-Smith kitchen, trying not to interrupt the squabble happening in front of him. Greta had barely allowed him in the house as it was, and besides, why get involved when the lawyer friend was making all the points he wanted to?

In the living room, a TV crew had set up shop and rearranged the furniture into a prime interview setup, the bright lights making the room’s sparse Scandinavian aesthetic look even colder than usual. Support staff hurried to and fro seemingly at random, and Morris wasn’t convinced that it wasn’t just for show.
“G, come on,” Jackson had been pleading. “I’m not even this type of lawyer, and I know it’s a bad idea.”

“She’s a victim. Why should we be worried about what she says?”

“Because she killed a guy, cut his throat, and that is still up in the air.”

“Kidnapped, held hostage—you wouldn’t have done that to get out?”

“Just, legally speaking, it’s smarter to not. At least until she’d back to one hundred percent, I mean Jesus, it’s been one day.” The redhead was still talking to Greta, but had her eyes on Hamada, who was just standing across the kitchen island looking nonplussed.

“I mean… they’re already here,” said his partner calmly. “And I know why and how I did what I did. No reason to be shy about it.”

Morris narrowed his eyes. Hamada was not one for spotlight chasing. He felt a pang of worry, more than anything, that she was maybe in denial or otherwise more out of it than they thought. When he looked up, he caught Jackson’s eye, and they exchanged dubious looks.

“Mrs. Hamada-Smith, 5 minutes,” interrupted a PA, who then promptly scurried on by.

“What do you think, Morris?” Jackson threw the hot potato to him, looking desperate for an assist.

“Hamada,” he waited until she looked at him. “You should be resting, not doing this.” Greta scoffed, but he ignored her. “You hate this type of stuff.”

“I know.” Her expression was appropriately warm towards him, but again, her eyes… He couldn’t really put words to it. She went on, “But Greta and I talked about it for a long time this morning, and it’s something I need to do.”

He still frowned as Hamada followed her wife into the living room to take a seat on the meticulously cleaned gray cloth couch. The younger detective still looked a little pale and thin to his eyes, but wardrobe had put her in a striking, plunging neckline black dress with ruffled sleeves, and the television-ready makeup and simple sideswept hairdo almost made up for the subtler signs of weakness.

As the interview began, another PA ushered Morris and the attorney into the guest bedroom and left them there to watch along on a laptop. While the initial sequences ran, Jackson scrolled through her phone, shifting on the bed in clear agitation.

“Hey, uh,” he said when the first commercial break started. “I just wanted to… say I’m sorry, for before. With the Vera girls.”

Jackson looked up at him and locked her phone. “You were really going to arrest them based on the symbols? Today’s crimes brought to you by the letter M and number three?”

He took a deep breath and counted to five. “That’s why... I’m apologizing. You were right. Probably saved us a lawsuit, too.”

“I’m going to chalk it up to extraordinary circumstances, but if I ever see you pull something like that on one of my clients again, and that apology will come with a settlement.” The redhead’s smile shifted from somewhat predatory to a genuine one, but he knew her threat wasn’t an empty one.

“That’s fair.” Morris grinned back in spite of himself. “I’ll be better.”
They turned their attention back to the UltraBook as the host introduced their friends’ segment, leading into a reel with the backstory of the crime and some seemingly unnecessary pictures of Hamada as a child. Cute, but off message and a bit gratuitous, in his opinion. It led into, for reasons unknown, a close up of Greta’s pensive face, zooming out to include both Hamada and her wife on the familiar couch.

After a few introductory softballs, the interviewer hit her with a very serious: “So. How do you feel?”

Hamada tilted her head and let out a long breath. “Uh, grateful, definitely. It’s surreal to be here right now.”

“And the killer? He kidnapped you for…”

“To stop me from solving the murders. My partner and I, we were starting to put together a real case, and Laurel wanted to stop it from getting anywhere near him.”

“Did he threaten you? Was there a ransom?”

“Of course he threatened me. Would’ve killed me if I didn’t convince him that I might be useful alive to trade, if my partner found him.” Hamada cleared her throat, and Greta reached over to give her hand a squeeze. It earned her a smile from the detective, and the interviewer went on to ask the blonde how she was feeling.

Morris huffed. “This is stupid. She should be sleeping for five days, not doing this.”

Jackson met his gaze, hands wringing in her lap. “Yeah… Seems a little off. But, after a trauma like that? Nothing is surprising. I’d be curled up in a little ball on the floor. She’s always been a little bit like that though, you know?”

“Oh, do I.” He leaned back against the headboard of the bed and crossed his arms. “Getting an admission of negative feeling out of that woman is like getting a teenager to hug you without rolling their eyes.”

“You have kids?”

“Three. Oldest sixteen, youngest three. I like a healthy refractory period after each one.”

Finally, Jackson laughed, and she put her phone away completely. They passed a bowl of popcorn the PA brought them back and forth as they watched the rest of the program.

Mel couldn’t help but closely watch Niko’s expressions as the CBS interview played. Besides a couple parlor tricks from the witches and some fox-form time with Zelda, Niko hadn’t really seen serious magic until her own face, her own voice were giving an interview while she sat in Vera Manor. Much like with the rest of the news they’d had to deliver to her that day, Niko had not been thrilled to find out someone was out there living her life as an impersonator, but she also appreciated their thought: It would allow her to go back one day, when she was ready, as if nothing happened and make her own decisions from there.

Now that the worst hurdle—breaking the news—had been cleared and the sisters had had some time to research their charge’s requirements, Prudence and Zelda had left the house to wherever it was that spirits and dark witches lived in Hilltowne. In the end, neither had been as unpleasant as she initially thought.
Jada hadn’t been lying about Zelda’s pranks, apparently a fox spirit thing, and more than once Mel had come across salt and sugar shakers switched or a bag of powder propped over a door. They were juvenile and harmless tricks, though perhaps annoying when she salted her first morning coffee, but Zelda’s giggling fox form was irresistibly cute and forgivable. She did make Zelda clean up the messier pranks, though, even if she could do it magically. It was the principle of the thing.

Prudence, though unwaveringly macabre and sharp-edged, was also unexpectedly spiritual, though the young witch would never call it that. She had deep convictions related to her Dark Lord and the traditions of the Church of the Night. It gave her a strong sense of personal priorities (off-putting as those sometimes were, like the time she’d told them about how she tried to offer herself as a sacrifice to be cannibalized by her friends and family) and an appreciation for the oddities of the magical world, making her a fun sort of Wikipedia for their random witchery questions. Even Maggie had engaged in some playful banter with the blonde witch.

One important thing they’d learned from Prudence was that weres required calories sufficient for their animal form, and in Niko’s case, that was currently manifesting in the gallon tub of ice cream she’d nearly finished by herself. She looked piteous and miserable despite the sweet treat, her eyes glued to the television.

“That’s a nice dress,” she commented flatly. “I look good in that.”

Maggie and Mel exchanged worried looks. The youngest sister prodded, “Are you okay?”

“I mean…” Niko laughed, a bark of a thing that really held zero humor. “There’s a witch impersonating me on national television, I can turn into a bear, and all I can think of is how happy I am to not be sitting with Greta right now. I’m great.”

Macy, who was the only one sitting next to the detective on the couch, put a tentative hand on her shoulder. “Do you want to turn it off?”

“You guys don’t have to act like I’m gonna break. This is fine.” Niko shoveled another scoop of vanilla ice cream into her mouth. “It’s allll fine.”

Greta was going on about how scared she’d been during her wife’s disappearance, and even the interviewer seemed a little bored. She looked stunning in a simple blue dress that made her eyes even brighter, with a red lip and understated makeup.

“When I can still get drunk?”

Mel looked back at Niko and raised an eyebrow. “Maybe? That… I didn’t ask. Witches can get drunk.”

The newly minted werebear put the nearly-empty gallon container to one side in order to better sit up, muting the television. “Okay, maybe I’m not fine. I think this is starting to sink in. I think I’m about to freak out.”

Within seconds, Macy had levitated a bottle of whiskey and glass from the bar cart over to the coffee table. Niko ignored the glass and took several long pulls on the brown alcohol, enough that Mel winced reflexively.

“Okay,” she said around a gasp when about half of the fifth had been emptied. “I’m good. This is fine. Yep.”

After a long, awkward silence, Maggie ventured: “Do you… want some weed?”
“Absolutely, yes. Whatever you got.”

“Okay,” interrupted Macy. “Hold on, I’m a little worried about the possibility of a drunk and high bear in the house?”

“You can just chain me up again or whatever,” muttered the detective, glaring at the whiskey bottle as Macy’s face fell.

“Why don’t you go get the weed, and you go get some more alcohol?” Mel quickly suggested to her sisters, thankful that they agreed and left without protest. She moved from her chair to the couch, giving the detective some space, but close enough that she could keep her voice low: “Niko. I’m not going to ask if you’re okay, but I don’t know how else to prompt you to tell me what you’re feeling.”

Niko crossed her arms, but didn’t lean away. “Robbed.”

“I get that. Robbed of what?”

“My life… lives.”

Mel had to consciously resist the near overwhelming urge to touch Niko in some way, a palm on the knee or shoulder, anything to try to soothe away the look of defeat on her face. “You can go back to it, mostly. We just have to make sure you’re really confident about controlling your shifts. You can only turn people as the bear, so everything else can be normal.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Cheeks already reddening from the alcohol, Niko finally turned to face her. “Did I leave Greta before… you and me, or…?”

Oh. The witch swallowed thickly. “You left her for me. We…” She paused to think of a better word for cheated. “We had an affair. You never married her, for whatever that’s worth.”

“Okay.” Her voice broke on the simple word, her energy suddenly shrinking from anger to something… else.

“You know that I don’t… I would never expect anything of you after telling you all this. You know that, right?”

“I know. Thank you for saying it, though.” A deep sigh, and while her brown eyes turned down, Niko’s hand reached out to take Mel’s smaller one, the grip gentle and cautious. “You didn’t ask me about the timeline change, did you?”

“No. I didn’t. And I’m sorry for that too.”

Niko nodded aimlessly a few times. Her palm was warm and rough and alive against Mel’s hand, which two days ago had seemed like a pipe dream. She couldn’t even think of pulling hers away. The detective cleared her throat before her next words. “I have been… miserable. And that’s not your fault, it’s mine for not doing anything about it. But I’ve known you in this life for all of three times that we met, and I feel more than… Fuck, you did all these things to me, to my life, and I’m not even mad at you. Not even a little bit. I feel more right sitting here with you and your sisters with a bear in my chest than I ever did at home with Greta. It’s stupid.”

Mel didn’t move, barely breathed for fear that she might startle away this moment. It was something delicate and raw, a dewy butterfly in the seconds after chrysalis.

“So what I’m saying is…” Niko sniffled. “I wish I could have spent the last three years with you, instead of whatever life this was. And that’s weird to admit. Honestly it’s weirder to me than the rest
of this magic stuff. What... were we like, together? Did I... was I good to you?"

“You were so good,” replied the witch with conviction. “And we were good together, before my mom died and everything went haywire. You were good with Mom, and Maggie, and then Macy, and... losing you was devastating, but I thought it would keep you safe.”

Surprisingly, Niko’s face shifted into a half-smile. “Yeah, I could’ve told you there’s no keeping me out of trouble. Woulda saved you a lot of work, sounds like.”

_Of course_ Niko’s take on the whole thing would be to comment on causing disruption in Mel’s life. _Of-fucking-course._

“Where’s your sister with the goods?” said Niko quickly, wiping at her eyes and trying to smile.

Mel lifted her free hand to the taller woman’s shoulder, a neutral place, and waited. After a second or two, Niko leaned forward, giving up on smiling as the first sob wracked her body, and Mel wrapped both her arms around the detective grieving two lives lost. The detective slumped against her, hands twisting in the fabric of her sweatshirt, face pressed into the crook of her neck. She stroked Niko’s hair and made soothing, shushing noises, quite unable to formulate words herself. Internally, her veins sang with _relief_ at the feel of arms she’d missed so much folding across her waist, tugging her closer. She was so _tired_ of fighting herself, and there was nothing sexual about this, that wasn’t what it was... But _comfort_. Like walking into a place that unexpectedly feels like home.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered against the top of the detective’s head.

Niko made one of those laugh-sob noises and pulled back enough that they could look each other in the eye. “Big scary werebear, huh?”

“Oh, look at that—you said it out loud.”

“Werebear. It’s cutesy. Couldn’t have been like a tiger or a lion...?”

“Please. You’re a cinnamon bun.” Mel got a real smile out of the detective at that, bashful and accompanied by a squeeze around her hips. “Tell me that’s a lie.”

“Some things stayed the same.” Niko loosened her arms only enough to put her palms over Mel’s hips, glancing up at her eyes with a familiar, questioning look.

She nodded, pulling back one of her own hands to run her thumb along the jawline at her eye level. “I also know about your fake glasses.”

The groan Niko let out almost made her think the bear had returned. “That was codeword classified.”

Apparently encouraged by the sound of their chuckling, Macy and Maggie appeared in the foyer with their assigned mind altering substances.

Mel tried not to frown as Niko pulled away from her to greet the sisters, and she could take some comfort in the way the detective stayed close on the couch.

As it turned out, werebears _could_ get drunk and high, and though like with the food... It just took a lot more. A _lot_. Macy and Mel helped Niko wobble up the stairs and into the room, encouraged that she hadn’t shifted to the bear while under the influence, least of because they’d never be able to move her. The older Vera gave Mel a pointed look before leaving the room, but left nonetheless.

“Hey,” she murmured as Niko flopped onto the mattress on her stomach. “No throwing up in this
room. Bathroom’s down the hall.”

“You’re so sweet,” replied the detective with dim sarcasm as she closed her eyes. After a pause where Mel thought she’d fallen asleep, her hand snaked out from under the covers and took hold of her sweatshirt. “I’m sure there’s a thousand more things we need to talk about, but… will you stay here? Just tonight?” At Mel’s distressed expression, she hastily added: “For sleeping. If it makes you feel any better, I’m not in any shape to consent, so that’s not even on the table.”

The witch looked at the door, then the bed, and then at Niko’s languid, faded expression. The house was silent outside the door. So she relented, and the detective scooted to the other side of the bed to make room. They lay facing each other, about a foot apart, hands clasped between them, and Mel slipped into sleep seconds after her eyes closed.

Chapter End Notes

Niko’s interview outfit based on Ellen Tamaki killin it on insta: https://www.instagram.com/p/Bs6w8WsBJqr/

Just more word vomit: In my head, the flashback in Chapter 5 marks the end of major relationship events (they’re just happy and boring for awhile) and lands the flashback timeline about nine months before Marisol’s death, so then the old timeline would just pick up when the show opens. Chapter 6 marks where Niko now knows about both timelines, and therefore instead of flashbacks, I’m going to have some fun with a different third character POV in each chapter.
ain't that what the adults do?

Chapter Summary

Harry wasn't born yesterday. Mel and Macy uncover a key puzzle piece. Jada would really like to find some time to sleep.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a love letter/apology to Jada because while I am still not enamored with the show's portrayal of the S'Arcana, I am 200% on board with Jada Shields (as a character) after re-watching some episodes outside of my initial rage at Niko's erasure.

chapter mood: "History" by 88Rising (Rich Brian)
Mel's Last Played on Spotify: "Drew Barrymore" by SZA

Sighing, Jada Shields crossed her arms as she waited, knowing the heat of her stare would wake the two in front of her eventually.

After a 48-hour stint as Returned Hero Niko Hamada, she had been looking forward to a quick check in at the Vera house, and then some time to unwind and rest. The wife, Greta, was insufferable, and the whitelighter-witch wasn't sure if she thought more or less of the detective after that experience. On the one hand, Niko had been with this one for the better part of a decade. On the other, she had let this go on for the better part of a decade. The whitelighter-witch and Zelda had agreed on rules of engagement with Greta—no sex, no nudity, no divorce—but that last one turned out to be the most difficult to keep. Zelda had relayed a little bit of news from the Vera house before slipping past her into the Hamada-Smith home, but Jada still hadn’t quite been expecting what was in front of her back at “Save Niko HQ”.

Truthfully, she’d been fairly impressed with how the humans reacted to Niko Hamada. People seemed to genuinely like her, their faces alight with joy and relief at her safe homecoming. At times Jada almost verged on feeling bad that Niko herself wasn’t there to bear witness, so to speak, to the depth of support and love for her, but then again, she was doing the detective a massive favor by beginning the process of her new life… and Niko presently looked very comfortable regardless.

When Jada had last left the Vera house, the bear had been under a magically induced sleep. And now, it was still sleeping, but under something else magical.

Shame, she thought with a tiny flare of jealousy.

Mel Vera was a brilliant witch... but she was also distractingly hot. Jada had tried not to think about her like that, she truly did, but eventually there was just no sense in denying it. Alas, this was not a timeline where Jada could reasonably throw her hat in the ring. Not while the aforementioned Mel Vera slept tucked against the chest of a giant black bear, both hands fist ed in the thick, admittedly soft-looking fur. Her entire body rose and fell as the beast breathed deeply in sleep. One of its huge paws rested protectively over Mel’s back, wide enough to cover both shoulder blades and keeping
her from rolling off as the witch’s legs dangled to one side. The whole effect was admittedly quite cute, but now that she was here, Jada wasn’t quite sure what to do, what with the old adage about sleeping bears and all.

Mercifully, only a few more seconds passed before the sleeping figures began to stir and wake. Jada took a step back, tensing, and waited.

The witch noticed what was happening first, her body suddenly tightening, eyes snapping open. She looked first at the bear, then Jada, who was holding a finger to her lips in the universal “quiet” signal, and then back at her eight-foot heated body pillow.

“Easy,” whispered the whitelighter-witch. Jada wasn’t sure at what point the Veras had decided to remove the bear-sized chains she’d so painstakingly enchanted for them, but she personally would have preferred keeping them on for another day or five as she eyed the inches-long claws and teeth. Not that she wasn’t 100% sure she could take a baby werebear with her eyes closed; it would really hurt to get torn open by those things regardless.

Mel cautiously slid off the bear, sitting next to it on the bed. After sparing Jada a warning glance that seemed too pointed and scolding, like she was the empath and not her sister, Mel began gently rubbing and patting the bear’s round belly. “Niko. Niko, wake up.”

The bear disappeared as the detective came to, Mel’s hand dropping to smooth skin as bleary human eyes opened like nothing had just happened. “Mel? Hi. I feel like shit. That fourth bottle was stupid…”

Jada saw the moment that Niko’s nostrils caught her scent, and the bed creaked as the bear was back, up on its hind legs and stomping towards her with a bellow. The whitelighter-witch took a half-step back before remembering she was Jada Fucking Shields and planted her feet, one arm swinging up to draw a barrier between herself and the oncoming predator. Its snout smashed into the invisible wall, prompting a very unhappy growl and whine as its big body heaved to one side.

“You,” snarled the bear. “You tricked me.”

“Niko, cut it out,” called Mel loudly, arms crossed. “She was helping us, remember? The trick was for Sigmund. That’s Jada. She’s been impersonating you. We talked about this. Take a deep breath.”

The bear blinked a few times, another rumbling growl dying in her throat. “Right. Jada.”

Although Jada had glamoured as hundreds of people in her life, something about looking back in the face of Niko Hamada, as she resumed her human form, was off-putting. Perhaps it was because she’d never held someone’s face for so long—to the point that she no longer expected to see her own in the mirror. There was a distant camaraderie there, coupled with a strange twinge of competition. Jada had walked several miles in Niko’s shoes, and the were had to be wondering whether she did it better, or why no one seemed to notice a whole new person under her skin.

“Sorry,” muttered the detective sullenly. “For this, and that first thing.”

“I had it under control. You wouldn’t have hurt me.”

“Sure.”

Mel padded forward and put a hand on Niko’s shoulder. “You were the bear when I woke up. Sleeping through the night without shifting is probably another milestone to use before we consider your power under control.”
Jada knew she shouldn’t, and she really wasn’t trying to make Mel’s life more difficult, but she kept a direct stare with Niko, and they openly sized each other up while the witch spoke. Her mouth curled into a smirk of its own accord, and Niko seemed to visibly bristle, lip lifting to show teeth—

“Oh come on. That’s enough, both of you,” sighed Mel when she realized what was happening. “Jada is helping. Except, Jada, right now you are not helping.”

Niko huffed, but backed down, and Jada let her shoulders relax. Mel’s hand had remained on the detective’s shoulder through the interaction, and the tiny gesture, probably subconscious, but clearly showing choice, reminded Jada of her earlier conclusion. Shame.

“The speed of your shift is impressive,” conceded the whitelighter-witch after a short silence. “All power and no form, though.”

“How did you get in here without the alarm?” asked Mel before Niko could respond.

“I came in the front door. It wasn’t even locked.” Jada laughed and shrugged as the witch spluttered nonsensical excuses. “Listen, this is fun and all, but I’m not here to bust your balls. Anything you wanted to tell or ask me before I sleep for the next twelve hours?”

“How’s Greta? You haven’t…?” The detective crossed her long arms. “You can’t trick people into—”

“Oh Goddess no,” replied Jada sharply, holding up her hands. “I may be a dark magical being, but I’m not a fucking rapist. And I’m not breaking up with her for you either, so don’t even go there.”

Mel dropped her hand from Niko’s shoulder, but stayed leaning into her space just a little. The two did look good together, standing there with no idea of what they represented for the future of magic. Mel, Charmed One (no big deal), small but fierce, unyielding, and somewhat impulsive. Then Niko, an eight-foot, self-healing bear in a pinch, still broad and tall in human form and annoyingly noble, even-keeled and inquisitive. Snaps for representation from Jada and the S’Arcana, but the Elders… she would’ve paid a steep price to be a fly on the wall (even literally) when the head of the Council, the Chancellor, found out. Her opinion of that warlock could be summed up in a word that rhymes with “grass mat.”

“Well… thank you… for helping.” Niko’s voice creaked and wavered with all the effort it clearly took her to say the words, and the whitelighter-witch tried not to smirk.

“Divorce.” Both taller women looked at Mel, whose eyes were glued off to the side on the floor. “Divorce her. You said break up.”

“Right,” replied Jada with a shake of her head. Good luck to them and that drama. “Anything else for me?”

“Is there any way I can switch out with you and Zelda to see my brother?”

Mel and Jada exchanged looks. The whitelighter-witch answered: “Not a bad idea, since he knows you better than anyone. He’s in town tomorrow night. I can get a message to Z so we can arrange it, but… your shift control…”

“She can work on that today, when Maggie gets home,” offered Mel. “As long as it’s a one on one meet up, I doubt your brother is going to trigger the bear.”

Jada hummed mild disagreement, but had had just about enough of these two for the day, so she left it at that.
When she apparated back to her apartment, Prudence was burritoed in a blanket on the couch, asleep with the TV playing Riverdale. After taking a pause to snap a picture of the adorable moment for blackmail, Jada paused on a frame of the red-haired boy reacting to something traumatic and carried her sleeping cousin, blanket and all, to the guest bedroom. After brushing aside a small tower of books, she turned out the lights as the teenager rolled over and burrowed deeper under the comforter, until just the red and black of her satin headcover peeked out from the edge.

Jada passed the fuck out as soon as she wrapped her braids and hit the pillow.

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After Mel left for work, Niko had a few hours by herself in the big, creaky Vera Manor. It had a very Disney’s Haunted Mansion vibe to it, but the sisters had insisted no ghosts could live there; they had protection spells for that, apparently. Maggie would be coming back in a few hours, after classes and some Kappa House meeting.

The detective tried not to snoop while passing the time, but then again, the sisters had a huge head start on knowing her … so she ended up casually thumbing through stuff in the attic, avoiding The Book and focusing instead on some of the academic papers and books Marisol Vera had written or co-authored during her tenure at Hilltowne U. The subject matter alone made her suspect she would have liked talking to Marisol, and it was a shame she’d lost memories of the Vera matriarch. *Effects of U.S. Imperialism on Women’s Body Image Satisfaction in Central America*. Another good one was *Still Chicana: Interviews with Second Generation Mexican-Americans Living in Border States*. She wondered how a single mother of two would’ve gotten it all done, but then remembered Marisol Vera had also been a witch.

Something about that thought gave Niko pause, thinking about her own single mother of two, and she turned back to the Book of Shadows with narrowed eyes. As soon as the question formed in her mind, the tome snapped open, pages fluttering by like hummingbird wings, and she stepped up to the look at the page where it landed.

**Kamakura Coven**

Founded during the Kamakura Shogunate in the 1200s, the Coven consists of dark and light witches residing on or south of the Kyoto ley line. Unlike North and South American warrens, the Kamakura count non-witch creatures in their register, including yokai such as tengu and kitsune, as well as an assortment of human and semi-human thralls and associates, banned under Elder rule. The Elder Council once included a representative of the Kamakura Coven, but after long disagreements over the principles of absolute secrecy and the Elder supremacy doctrine, the Coven voted to withdraw from the Council and revert to self-rule in the 1700s, simultaneously enacting a policy of Coven isolationism. Kamakura and their brethren are considered largely responsible for the nightmares and spirituality that has resulted in the superior Japanese horror movie content in modern human history.

*Current matriarch: Kazue “The Mamushi” Ito*

*Membership: 23*

Niko rocked back on her heels, sighing and racking her brain for some semblance of an associated
memory. Her mom was from Kyoto, sure, but so were millions of other people. Keiko had been almost strictly superstitious, but so were many East Asian people, right? When she’d joined the Japanese Student Association in college, all of five kids at Hilltowne U, Niko and her fellow first generation kids certainly commiserated on that point about their parents. But in the end, it didn’t really make a difference whether Niko was skeptical at the time. Now, she knew her mother had been right, likely speaking from experience rather than pure belief when she warned of bad spirits in the night. The sisters had a Pentagram in salt on the floor a few feet away from her feet, for chrissakes.

A bit creeped out by the revelation, the detective closed the Book and headed downstairs to the kitchen. She’d eaten a pound of bacon and six waffles for breakfast, but now it was just past noon, and the bear was hungry again. Once she was back in her own life, she’d need to give the Vera sisters a free grocery trip to make up for eating them out of house and home. Still, a girl has to eat, so she selected a bag of Chili Cheese Fritos and proceeded to demolish it while metaphorically chewing over questions of whether her brother deserved to know any of this, or whether it would do any good, possibly even cause him harm. But if there was anyone in this world she couldn’t lie to, it was Sora. That would come to a head eventually.

Niko was chugging water from the kitchen tap when the front door opened and Maggie shouted out in greeting. She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, straightening up to call back, but instead froze when the alarm the sisters had told her about went off; someone was coming. Separated from Maggie by a wall, Niko shouted that she was in the kitchen and ducked behind the counter just as something began to materialize in the connected living room.

A man’s voice, British accent: “Hello, Maggie.”

“Harry,” she heard the youngest Vera return, a little nervously. “What’s up?”

Niko filed back through the trove of information she’d had to absorb over the last 48 hours—Harry, whitelighter, works for the sisters and the Elders. A friend, mostly.

“You and your sisters have been rather quiet lately,” he ventured, footsteps circling the living room towards the foyer.

Maggie’s keys clanked onto the buffet table in the entryway. “Well yeah, because nothing’s been going on. No news is good news around here. We deserve a little peace and quiet.”

“You know, what’s interesting about that is, I just found out that the body the police recovered, the kidnapper of Detective Hamada, was killed with your dagger.”

A pause. Niko felt the bear stirring in her chest, agitated at her rising fear, and she tried to keep her breathing quiet even as her heart rate rocketed up.

Maggie answered breathlessly, “That is interesting. You can tell something like that?”

“Such a weapon leaves a residue undetectable by humans, but a quick pop to the morgue overnight, and I could sense it on the wound before I even found the body.” Harry’s voice took on a layer of sarcasm, a tone Niko knew very well: the sound of an interrogator who knows the answer to a question before it’s even asked. “Now, how did a magical blade in your possession cut this man’s neck?”

“You’re the magical things expert here, you tell me,” countered Maggie with impressive conviction. “I don’t know why you’re still poking around this, the wolf thing is over. Done.”
“Oh, I highly doubt that,” replied the whitelighter, his voice unsettlingly low. “In fact, I think there’s someone—”

“Wait, Harry, don’t—“

That was all the warning Niko got before there was a short “whirly” noise, and then the man appeared directly in front of her. She tried to fight her reaction, but with the combination of Maggie shouting in distress and the closeness of a magical being she had been told to avoid for her own safety, Niko shifted. The change was almost immediate, her line of vision rocketing upwards to her bear height, until she towered over the stranger.

“Oh my,” said Harry softly, eyes like saucers. “Detective Hamada… I am so, so sorry.”

“Harry, leave her alone,” shouted Maggie as she ran in from the foyer. “Don’t you dare.”

“Stand back, Maggie.” He kept his eyes locked with Niko’s as she huffed and growled at him.

“Don’t touch her.” The youngest Vera’s voice vibrated with power, and Niko startled as a bolt of electricity hit the whitelighter in the shoulder, knocking him backwards a few steps. He looked more surprised than injured, as he recovered his gaze finally turning to the witch.

“I have to report her,” warned the whitelighter thickly, brushing some static from his jacket. “She’s a dangerous—“

“I’m right here,” snarled Niko. “And there’s only one person in the room in any danger from me.”

An electric moment of indecision passed, each of the three magical beings faced with their own choice. The witches hadn’t told Niko what would happen if this whitelighter found her, but judging by the waves of fear and unhappiness rolling off of Maggie, she could tell it was bad. They also hadn’t indicated whether an attack was appropriate or not, so for now, the bear waited to see what Maggie did first.

“You’ve helped us under the table before, Harry, please,” the witch was saying, moving towards him with her hands together as if in prayer. “Walk away or help us. We could really use a whitelighter right now.”

Standing stiffly, Niko carefully watched the warring thoughts play across the whitelighter’s face. He was handsome, in an old timey white guy sort of way, and she might’ve called his features kindly if not for the way this interaction was going. She didn’t entirely understand what a whitelighter actually was, except basically a servant (slave?) of the witches and warlocks who made up the Elder Council. Some kind of magical sherpa for witches with training wheels, magical beings themselves, but not witches either. More importantly, she didn’t quite understand where their loyalties lived in this scenario. She had a suspicion that she was about to find out.

Finally, Harry sucked in a deep, long breath, and his shoulders slumped a little as he looked at Maggie’s begging expression. “You, Maggie, and your sisters know that I care for you. Deeply. My mission to guide and keep you safe is secondary, because I consider the three of you family, and you don’t need a mission to protect your family. But this, this here—” He gestured to Niko, and she growled in response. “I need you to trust me when I tell you that it’s different. This is a whole new playing field of unlawful magical activity, as far as the Council is concerned.”

“Just… Harry, if you tell them about Niko or take her right now, Mel will never forgive you, or me for that matter. Just give us a few hours. Niko has her shift under control, nothing bad’s gonna happen before they get home.”
“Yes, it looks quite under control…” Harry eyeballed Niko pointedly. “I’m sorry, Maggie, but I must at least inform—”

To Niko’s surprise, Maggie reacted immediately, suddenly tossing the chains that had previously held the werbear around Harry instead. She hadn’t even seen where the witch had been holding them, but such small mysteries had come to be expected around the Veras. Unfortunately, her aim wasn’t quite true, and a quick jerk to the right freed Harry from the almost-binds. Niko caught just the flash of his expression, hurt and angry, and then he pushed Maggie to one side, and she saw red.

Maggie shouted something, but Niko was already swiping at the whitelighter, just barely catching his jacket with her claws, and then a blast of white energy threw her backwards, smashing her upper body into a kitchen stool and reducing it to splinters. One sharp piece drove into her side, breaking past the thick hide with a flare of pain. As she tried to get her feet back under her, Harry raised his arm for another strike, and then the apparition alarm went off a second time, and a shower of blue sparks interrupted the chaos.

Jada leapt out of the curtain of light, eyes glowing blue as she returned fire. Her lightning bolt sent Harry skidding backwards on the wood floor even as he raised his own hands to block it from reaching his core body. Niko finally managed to roll to four paws, and she squared up behind the whitelighter-witch, who turned her head to nod a quick acknowledgment over her shoulder.

But when the embers and smoke cleared, the two women gearing up for the next move, Maggie stood between all of them, both arms up with palms out as a shimmering, translucent barrier grew from wall to wall, ceiling to floor from her fingers. The wisps of smoke on their side of the protective spell broke apart and traveled along it, as if illustrating in no uncertain terms that there would be no casting through this wall.

“Whitelighter,” greeted Jada around an audible smirk. “Causing trouble again?”

“S’Arcana,” Harry gasped, eyes narrowed at her. His once perfectly-coifed hair now sat askew on his head, parallel to the sudden tilt of his bowtie.

“Harry, if you have ever cared about us like you say you do, walk away right now,” said Maggie from the middle of the room. “And don’t say anything to the Elders.”

Niko had enough wits about her to have a moment of awe at the youngest Vera. All of five foot and some change, the ‘baby’ forever in her sisters’ eyes, and yet here she stood—like a protective goddess, the tips of her hair lifting with the force of her power as she held the room split in two impenetrable parts. Niko wasn’t sure if the expression showed on the bear’s face, but she smirked with a sort of pride she wasn’t sure she had a right to feel.

“Okay, okay,” conceded the whitelighter after a small eternity of staring each other down. Maggie didn’t drop her barrier. “Maggie… I’m begging you, be careful. The S’Arcana will not hesitate to manipulate you to get what they want. Her included.”

“You’re one to talk,” snarled Jada.

Harry ignored her, keeping eye contact with Maggie. “I’m showing you I care by leaving for now, and all I ask in return is to give me a chance to tell you our side of things.”

“Fine.” Maggie nodded sharply, and dropped her arms.

As soon as she did, Jada moved. Niko almost started as the whitelighter-witch literally beamed across the room in a bolt of blue light, so fast that even Harry wasn’t ready for the enchanted chain as
it swung around his chest once, twice, and then the manacles at each end spun together. Jada caught the pieces and clamped them around Harry’s wrists.

“Jada, what are you—”

“You can’t trust him not to say something, not about this,” said the whitelighter-witch curtly, giving a tug on the chains that brought Harry to his knees. “Just until your sisters get home.”

Harry spluttered and coughed through his protests, until the S’Arcana wrapped a dish towel around his mouth. Then it was just perturbed, vaguely British noises as Jada attached the chains with rope to the heavy dining table. Niko let herself relax, finally, and focused on her body, her human body, to make it so. A few seconds later, and she was back on two feet, so to speak, with her own hands waving in front of her face.

Maggie looked worried, arms crossed, but after staring at Harry for a few more seconds, she nodded.

“That was an impressive barrier,” complimented the whitelighter-witch, raising an eyebrow. “Nice work.”

“Like any of you could actually hurt me,” joked the shorter woman weakly. “Charmed One, remember?”

“Fair enough, killer.” Jada gave her a lopsided grin. “What happened, anyway?”

“Harry knew. He went to visit the body and found out we used the knife. I don’t think a glamour would’ve even worked, and he knew she was here.” Maggie had moved into the kitchen, getting herself a glass of water. She did look a little pale after the exertion of the spell. “How did you know to come here?”

“Part whitelighter,” reminded Jada with a wink. “I sensed you needed some help.”

“I mean, we didn’t need help—” Niko was trying to say, but she clicked her jaw shut upon realizing how pathetic it sounded.

“Harry’s never been like this before. He’s never been so… aggressive about things. We disagree all the time. This is a different level.” Suddenly, Maggie almost dropped her glass of water, her eyes fixed on Niko’s torso. “Oh m—fuck, Niko, your—”

Jada looked down, following Maggie’s gaze, and chuckled. “Hey, uh… There’s a hole in your side.”

Niko had totally forgotten about the injury, but as soon as she looked down and saw it, the pain of the chunk of chair leg stuck in her belly hit her square in the gut. It looked much bigger jutting out from her human form, and as her muscles tensed, she could feel the way it bored deep enough into them to restrict the movement. “Oh.”

Jada moved to her side, brown eyes inscrutable as she examined the wound. “This is what we call a learning opportunity, Officer Hamada.”

“Detective,” wheezed Niko hotly.

“Take it out.” The other woman rolled her green eyes as she said it, putting out a hand to tap the offending splinter. Just the small bit of pressure made Niko dance off to one side with a sharp breath.

“What? No, isn’t that what you’re not supposed to do?” The detective felt again a little foolish, her voice strained and her head a little fuzzy. Blood was dripping steadily down around the invasive
object, soaking into her jeans.

“Why would I tell you to do that if it’ll make it worse?” Jada was using the same tone Niko used when Sora argued with her for no discernible reason. Something about it helped calm her down, and she wrapped one hand around the offending chair leg. The whitelightewitch raised her eyebrows. “Pull it.”

Niko sucked in a sharp breath and did. Her flesh tore along the jagged wood, deep red blood flowing out after it in a stream. She couldn’t help the strangled groan that escaped at the sensation, and though she remained standing, her eyes slipped closed at the effort not to pass out, only to open again at Jada’s voice.

“Look. Trust me, it’s pretty cool, said the whitelightewitch, smiling earnestly.

Niko looked down to watch as her body began to rebuild itself, sinew and blood sliding back into place, lastly covered by bright pink, fresh skin that soon gave way to a scar slightly lighter than the skin around it. The pain went away completely, leaving just a ghost of an itching sensation over the spot.

“You’re going to have to be careful if you’re injured around humans. Might be difficult if you keep detective-ing, but that’s up to you,” said Jada in a surprisingly earnest tone. “You get shot, blood’s gonna show on your clothes, but the bullet will fall out of the wound.”

“If I can… then how…” Niko cleared her throat and thumbed the bloodied hole in her shirt. “How can I be killed?”

“Old age is a good one. By human weapons? Not easily. They’d have to remove your head or sever your spine. Instant death only.” Jada’s expression darkened. “Unfortunately, that type of ability also leaves you open to… pretty intense torture. All the more reason to be careful and keep your head down. For what it’s worth, if you find yourself in a desperate spot, you can always call for me. Try not to do it on Friday nights, though.”

Niko grinned reflexively at the whitelightewitch’s quick wink, the only person she’d ever met who could get away with winking twice in one conversation.

Maybe Jada Shields wasn’t that bad. The detective sensed genuine concern behind her words, if not for the detective personally, then for her as a fellow misfit magical creature, perhaps. Honestly, Niko couldn’t really pinpoint a good reason that she distrusted Jada in the first place, except for first impressions and a vague sense of competition with her over nothing in particular. Jada was striking and confident, much in the way Niko liked to sometimes pretend she was. The fact that she was then pretending to be Niko was too meta for her brain to handle after such an eventful afternoon, and she came back to the moment.

“Thank you,” she said, finally truthful about the words, and they shook hands. She tried to ignore the way the whitelightewitch gave her palm a healthy spark before releasing, and they chuckled together regardless.

Niko then turned her attention back to Maggie, who was watching them with a feline smile, arms crossed. After clicking her tongue, she just said, “Wow. Brotp, guys.”

Jada rolled green eyes and cleared her throat, stepping away from the detective. “Do you want me to stay?” She gestured with her chin at Harry, who wasn’t yelling anymore, just defeatedly kneeling near the table, bow tie drooping.
“That’s okay. Mel and Macy should be home soon. Are you switching out with Zelda again?”

“Tonight. But, call me if you need anything. Niko, you can stay at my place with Prudence, or let Zelda know if you want to stay with her. Up to you and your sisters, but I wouldn’t recommend having Niko anywhere near here once you let that whitelighter go.”

Maggie nodded, offering another thank you, and the whitelighter-witch disapparated.

Whatever had happened at the house where Paula Garcia died falling down the stairs, it would be near impossible to say, at least from visual inspection. The home had burned to the ground. Her husband perished in the fire. A cruel and brutal ending for both. The lot where the house once stood sat out of view of the gravel road leading to its long dirt driveway, the pile of ashes rising out of the trees in a quiet clearing nestled in rolling hills, an impromptu and forgotten tomb outside of Hilltowne proper.

Macy kicked at a charred piece of wood, and it disintegrated under the toe of her shoe. Mel had picked her up from the lab for their semi-secret mission, knowing each step along the road to answers about Marisol’s death met with increasingly dangerous encounters, like a game leading up to a boss battle, and therefore electing to keep Maggie out of it for now.

“I’m not getting anything,” sighed the older sister. “Big ol’ zilch.”

“Me either.” Mel paced carefully through the debris, avoiding bits of metal as her hands hovered low, gliding parallel to the ground, but she didn’t sense so much as a dusting of magic. It had to have been a mortal fire. The only parts of the house still standing were a blackened, broken toilet and half-crumbled chimney. She checked the toilet just in case (nothing), and then regarded the chimney warily. “What did the article say about the fire?”

Macy pulled said news story up on her phone again. “The fire marshall called it accidental, concluding that a faulty chimney let embers fall on the leaf-covered roof. He’d gone to sleep without putting out the fire.”

“Chimney.” Mel peered at the ghostly structure. “Can you knock it—“ She yelped in surprise when the brick column burst away from her in pieces. “Fuck, can I get a ‘timber’?”

Her older sister shrugged, smirking when Mel turned to look at her. “I really wanted to do that.”

Mel scoffed, but directed her attention back to the newly-flattened rubble, coughing a little bit at the ash and dust that resulted. They dug through the pile with sticks until Macy reached down and picked up something shiny. “What is it?”

“A coin.” Macy turned it over in her hands, brushing the surface with her thumb. “It’s a half dollar. Doesn’t feel mag—wait.”

The younger Vera hurried over to peer at the coin, gasping when she saw it: Kennedy’s profile was winking from the engraved surface every few seconds, and magic pulsed through the item only when it did, like a slowly dying wind up toy.

“Maybe the S’Arcana can help us with this?” wondered Mel aloud.
“Maybe. Or we can take it to Harry—as far as he knows, this is totally unconnected to the other stuff.”

“Yeah, but not while Niko’s in the house.” Mel handed her sister the handkerchief they’d brought along for just such an occasion, and Macy wrapped the coin before pocketing it.

“I have an idea,” said the taller woman with narrowed eyes, observing the ruins of the home. She raised both hands and paused long enough to shoot her sister another smug look. “Timber.”

Mel scurried out of the frame of the home, and once she was clear, Macy murmured: “Peni-ha an mui hendin.”

Mel whistled appreciatively as a cloud of dust rose from the ground, reassembling into a ghostly, swirling impression of the house as it once stood, a modest two-story with an exterior staircase against the back wall, from the ground to what had once been a second-story porch with what must have had a killer view of the trees… so to speak. The time witch gave a small clap. “Nicely done. What is that?”

“You’re not gonna believe this—Elvish. Sindarin.”

Mel cackled at that, but supposed there were less believable things she’d come to find out were true. They moved around to the staircase under suspicion and did their best to assess it for clues. It didn’t seem too steep, and the steps were reasonably deep. Handrails ran along either side.

“Okay, so you’re Paula, and you’re here—” Macy cautiously moved up half the swirling, cloudlike steps, visibly proud of her spell’s fortitude. “You’ve lived in this house a long time, but you’re getting up there a little bit in age. You go slow, hold onto the handrails. How does a healthy woman in her mid-fifties just fall? Aneurysm? Heart attack?”

“We need to get ahold of the ME report,” concluded Mel as she followed her sister.

“Good thing we have an in with a certain strapping young detective,” Macy joked with a nervous chuckle. “Or at least someone masquerading as one.”

As far out in the country as they were, Mel expected a lot of silence… but instead, the night air overflowed with noise, bugs and birds and the gentle wind through the trees. With the new year come and gone, nature was beginning to stir, the days growing ever so slightly longer. She sucked in a lungful of the clean, cool air as they moved up to the balcony and looked over the last view Paula Garcia had seen before she died. Their aunt, but really nothing more than a ghost.

“I’d like to see the entire file on her. Find out more about who she was, maybe what she was like, if we’re lucky,” said Macy quietly, unknowingly vocalizing her sister’s thoughts. “Even a picture.”

Mel nodded, leaning against the ash and magic railing. Her eyes had adjusted shockingly well to the dark, and they landed on something unnatural in the treeline. “What’s that?”

Macy tried to follow her eyes, but shook her head after a few seconds. They headed down the stairs, the older sister letting the house collapse again as they walked away, and Mel led her a couple hundred feet or so into the woods.

“It’s a… deer stand,” announced Macy when they came upon it. “That’s not suspicious… not in Michigan, at least.”

“Yeah, but if you’re sitting in it, you have a perfect view of the porch, and anyone who was on the porch would be able to see you. Probably so she could keep an eye on her husband while he was
hunting. People die falling out of these things every year. What if Paula saw something out here that made her run down the stairs?"

“That would be an easy trick if all you had to do was glamour as an injured husband.” Macy bumped her shoulder. “Nice catch, sis.”

Mel grinned, cheeks flushing as they walked back to the car. For Maggie, having an older, protective sister was old hat, except now she had two—but Mel hadn’t quite figured out her feelings in gaining that new relationship for herself. Sure, sometimes it annoyed her, not necessarily Macy herself, but the muddled emotions that still tinged their relationship with a modicum of distance. Right now though, she felt like the look on Maggie’s face when Mel complimented her. Amid all the other shit they had going on at present, this at least was a shining spark of peace.

They drove back in contented silence until reaching familiar territory, back to where there were actual streetlights and other vehicles on the road.

“Sooo…” ventured Macy with a clearing of her throat. “I noticed you didn’t sleep in your bed last night.”

Mel tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, remembering the flip side of big sistering all too acutely at that moment. “Niko’s going through some shit. Remember how we felt, learning all this? And we had each other, plus Harry.”

“Of course, bu-u-ut… This is a little different than the three of us falling asleep reading spells in the attic. I just want to check in.”

As they pulled to a stop at a red light, Mel shot Macy a sideways glance, only to find the expression mirrored back at her smugly. “She asked me to stay, but we were all Leave Room for Jesus and Consent, seriously. She just needed company. Okay, and we woke up cuddling, but that’s because she shifted, so otherwise I would have fallen off the bed.”

“That’s fair,” agreed Macy, but she clicked her tongue. “And good, because Maggie told me the story, how long it took Niko to leave Greta last time. Just make sure you don’t let her get away with that twice. She’s a magical beast now, surely she can handle a conversation with the Less-good Lauren Conrad.”

“Trust me, I’m way past putting up with that again, especially since she’s been pouting about it for months. I guess I’ll just hex her ass if she does it this time, bitter old crone style.”

They laughed and bumped fists, and then the light turned green. Macy turned on CarPlay, and the speakers launched into the middle of Mel’s last played on Spotify, SZA’s most recent album.

“Do you think the S’Arcana had anything to do with mom’s death? Maybe her association with them?” asked Macy after some humming along.

“Maybe. The Council doesn’t seem to appreciate rebels… or questions… or anything, really.”

“What’s this about rebels?”

Mel nearly crashed her car as both sisters startled at the third voice. This again? “Charity, what the fuck? I know you teleportation folks don’t use cars a lot, but surprises are not great at forty-five miles an hour.”

“Oh, re-lax, I’d never let you kill us all in something like a car wreck,” replied the Elder cheerily from the backseat. “Cars. I’d forgotten how calming the rocking is, despite how dangerous—”
“What are you doing here?” Macy twisted around in the passenger seat to look at their unwelcome guest. “Couldn’t wait until we’re home?”

Through the rearview mirror, Mel saw Charity flash the wide smile she used when the sisters were testing her patience. “You two activated an Elder item not too long ago, and I’d like to know what it is and where you found it. The Chancellor himself almost came down here, but I managed to convince him to let me handle it.”

The sisters exchanged a quick glance. Macy replied: “An Elder item? Can you be more specific?”

“Don’t be coy, it’s unbecoming of you, Macy,” said the Elder in a saccharine tone that made Mel’s skin crawl. “What have you two been up to? I’m not above turning you upside down and shaking out your pockets.”

After a silence that went so long Charity started whistling, Mel swung for the bleachers to move the goalposts (she’d never been that great at sports metaphors): “I have a better question: Why was Mom part of a secret group that works against the Council?”

“Oh.” Charity blinked, and Mel silently thrilled in her tiny victory. “What are you talking about?”

“The Sisters of Arcana,” clarified Macy. “Ring a bell, Charity?”

The Elder cleared her throat. “What makes you think it does?”

“Don’t play coy, Charity. It’s unbecoming,” Macy shot back, and Mel nearly held out a hand to high five her.

“The S’Arcana were criminals,” sneered Charity immediately, hotly. “Dark, evil creatures who cared more about power than rules meant to protect us all. They were defeated.”

“Guess not, if Mom was one.”

“Are they here? In Hilltowne?”

She doesn’t know. Mel smirked.

“Ladies, this is a serious issue. If you know about any members of the S’Arcana or where they are —”

“Nope,” interrupted Mel loudly. “Just our mom. And she’s already dead, so. Can’t kill her for it, can you?”

“Melanie, you don’t understand—“

“There’s a lot we don’t understand, because you’re keeping things from us. So tell your ‘Chancellor’ he can just wonder about that until you tell us who killed our mom.” She took in a breath, feeling a little out of control with her own bravado, but powering forward nonetheless.

“We don’t know what happened. We tried.”

“Work harder to find out, oh powerful Elders,” suggested Macy coldly.


Charity’s reaction almost melted Mel’s smugness. The Elder’s eyes narrowed to slits, glowing purple as the car rattled with her angry energy. But Macy stared her down, and eventually the older
woman’s eyes returned to normal, and the car went back to its gentle rocking. With no further comment, Charity huffed and disapparated.

“Ohh I can’t believe that actually worked,” laughed Macy, a bit shrill with nerves. “We stared down an Elder. But why would this Chancellor care about the coin? He’s involved?”

“I think we’re gonna find out soon. One of them has to be. Charity doesn’t know what we have, so maybe the Elder involved really hasn’t told her. Mom was doing her own thing, who knows what other politics they have up there” Mel’s mind whirred with conspiracies that were becoming ever better defined with each piece of the puzzle. Murder. Cover up. S’Arcana. Elders. Marisol.

When they got back to Vera Manor, Maggie stopped them as soon as they came in the door, rocketing through a story about Harry and Jada and something about a barrier—but what really stuck out was, “Harry’s tied up in the kitchen.”

“Harry’s what?” Macy’s good mood was gone as they followed Maggie and Niko into the kitchen, where Harry was, as promised, tied up. They’d used the chains Jada enchanted for the bear, giving him a pillow to kneel on, and he looked pissed as the women approached.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” breathed Mel, a hand to her forehead. “You kidnapped our whitelighter?”

“You didn’t answer your phone!” complained Maggie, throwing her arms out. “Where have you been? I had no idea what to do!”

“Sorry, it was on silent,” lied Mel quickly while also trying to process the walls closing in with Harry and Charity, but from different angles. “I stopped to get gas.”

“And I was running late,” added Macy hastily.

“What do we do?” asked Maggie, frowning. “Jada said Niko can go stay with her or Zelda, but I don’t know how we can hide her from them long term. I mean, obviously Jada isn’t a fan of whitelighters, but they both seemed pretty serious about Harry telling the Elders. I even played the family feelings card on him.”

“There’s no hiding her now.” Mel looked over at the detective in question, suddenly embarrassed about speaking like she wasn’t there. The tall woman was leaning against the bannister of the staircase, dressed in a fitted white t-shirt and a pair of Macy’s sweatpants, which were long enough on her, but slightly baggy. She didn’t look particularly perturbed or nervous—just watched the sisters with sharp brown eyes. Mel cleared her throat before speaking. “Sorry, Nik. Is that… do you want to leave?”

“No,” she replied with a shrug. “Not yet, anyway.”

Macy nodded. “Harry is our whitelighter. We know him. He’ll work with us.”

“You don’t understand, we almost attacked each other. He is really serious about this,” replied Maggie, her voice underlaid with regret. “I don’t think you’re going to be able to change his mind.”

Mel was listening, definitely listening, but she also found herself watching as Niko pushed off the bannister, shoulders rolling, the muscles in her chest rippling under the V-neck of the shirt, and then along her wide back as she pivoted away. When she got caught staring as the detective shifted back around, she blurted, “Did you two have a chance to work on shifting exercises?”

“Yeah, otherwise I would’ve been in a full blown panic attack hours ago. I think the breathing exercises are staying with me, were or not,” replied Maggie.
As if to prove the work they’d put in, Niko showed off a little with an exercise Prudence had written down for her. She held up her left hand, and the fingers began to change shape in a shifting wave that traveled up her arm, across her shoulders and down through her torso to legs and feet, until the bear stood tall in the living room. The overall effect was breathtaking, leaving the hulking bear standing in their living room with ears flicking occasionally.

“Okay, do the thing,” added the youngest Vera, already giggling.

Niko dropped to a sitting position, short back legs sticking out in front of her, and waved enthusiastically like the viral bear video.

“Very nice,” complimented Macy with two claps of her hands, smiling while rolling her eyes. “Cute.”

“And back,” narrated Maggie as Niko reappeared with impressive speed, almost seeming to drop out of thin air as the bear disappeared into it.

Mel couldn’t help the grin spreading across her face as Niko met her eyes with a proudly puffed chest. Even if Niko didn’t remember it, this was exactly the type of nonsense that Maggie and old timeline Niko would have done in this situation, and the familiarity of it sat heavy in her stomach. Where Perry was almost entirely superficial pomp and the occasional sparkle of earnestness, Niko was the opposite: Pensive, but genuine to a fault, with shining moments of swagger and confidence that she deserved to take more often than she did. While the shared strains of self-assuredness had drawn her to both women, it was moments like this that made her fall in love with the detective, who was currently getting up off the floor.

“Okay,” said Macy with a sigh. “Let’s get this over with.”

They shuffled back into the kitchen, forming a semi-circle around the whitelighter, and Macy got him a glass of water before removing the cloth from his mouth. He drank gratefully and took a few deep breaths, just enough to start his scolding: “Ladies, I’m sure Maggie has filled you in, and I must say I am very disappointed that it’s come to this—”

“You’re not taking Niko or reporting her to anyone,” announced Mel without hesitation. “If you do, you and the Elders are no longer welcome in this house, and we’ll figure out our destiny without you.”

“But not alone, right?” Harry shifted his shoulders, hands flexing at his sides. “You’ve made some new acquaintances?”

“Some new friends. Friends who’ve actually told us things without having to pull teeth. That’s what friends do, Harry.”

“The S’Arcana? Criminals, murderers, all of them. They are not friends to anyone but themselves.” The whitelighter next turned his gaze, now pleading, to Macy. “The S’Arcana tried to overthrow the Council, by which I mean kill them all, but they were cast back by the Chancellor, stripped of their powers or executed, per their choice of ending.”

“That’s pretty bleak,” muttered Maggie. “Does the Chancellor get a gold star for that or something?”

“They killed half the Council before he took them down. If the S’Arcana had it their way, magical intervention in mortal lives would become the norm, and—“

“Save it, Minister of Magic,” snapped Mel, raising an accusatory finger in his direction. “You act like magic isn’t already fucking with people every day, like us, like Niko. And don’t give me any of that
stuff about humans thinking we’ve lost our minds, because when the Apocalypse is about to hit, I think they’ll be cool with some witches showing up to save the day.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” countered Harry. His voice took on a calm, quiet edge, forcing them to listen closely to hear him. “But that is not why I’m here—not right now, at least. You can do what you want about the S’Arcana, but the Council will find them again, eventually, and deal with them accordingly.”

“Then make your case, whatever it is you think we need to hear.” Mel crossed her arms.

The whitelighter looked slightly pained, but the time witch kept her anger fueled up regardless. This conversation felt like a Rubicon. “The were curse is incurable. It’s based in ancient, dark magic.”

“We know. But that doesn’t mean Niko is any less of a person. She’s controlling her shifts better and better.”

“For now.”

Those two little words sent a chill down Mel’s spine. “Don’t just dangle that out there, say what you want to say, Harry.”

Harry’s jaw flexed a few times before he answered, “If Detective Hamada were to be captured, fall into the wrong hands... Anything stronger than a were is going to win, and a lot of things are stronger than a were. She has no other way to defend herself. They can turn her feral, torture her until she dies of old age, mad and in unimaginable pain—and further, any notion of total shift control is a myth, a true myth, as in it doesn’t exist. She’s a dangerous creature now, and I need you three to understand that.”

Before any of the sisters could respond, Niko’s voice cut through the air, low and dangerous: “Talk about me like I’m not here one more time.”

The whitelighter turned to her, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Or you’ll what? Prove my point?”

Niko drew herself up to her full human height, stepping forward until she was toe to toe with the whitelighter. Her eyes swirled between her normal brown and the bear’s darker, almost black irises, but her body remained steadfastly Niko. Mel put a hand on her arm, not gripping, but just letting her feel the warmth of her touch, and some of the tension left the detective’s shoulders.

“Everybody take a breath,” said Macy softly. “Niko’s right, Harry—you’re being a jerk.”

“Be that as it may, perhaps you should consider that I am also right. The risk is not just yours to bear, Ms. Hamada, pardoning the quite unintentional pun. Any accidental infection, and another human gets entered into the cycle—what of their choice in the matter, hm?” Harry shifted his weight on the pillow, but met Niko’s stare as he spoke.

“What would you do with me? Kill me?” When the man’s eyes flickered, Niko scoffed. “Imprison me until I just wither and die?”

“It would be your choice. There is a place where the Elders keep weres, technically yes, a prison, but you’d have a fine life there; well fed and sheltered until the end of your days.”

“And leave her whole life behind?” interrupted Mel, loudly.

“I think that objection is a little more selfish than you—”
“Whoa, whoa, time out.” Macy held up her hands in the classic timeout “T”. “Take a breath, everyone. Let’s cut to the chase: Harry, what’s the punishment if we keep Niko from the Elders?”

“For me? They’d kill her and strip my powers. For you? They’d kill her, then strip your powers once the prophecy is fulfilled.”

“I’d like to see them try.” growled Mel.

“So, what? Are you just going to keep me tied up here until someone notices?”

The sisters exchanged looks, Macy and Maggie silently deferring to Mel on this one. The time witch looked back at their whitelighter. “Niko’s under our protection. If you or the Elders come for her, you’ll have to answer to us, and you’ll be dooming the world to Apocalypse if it comes to that. So it’s your call.”

Harry stared back at her for a tense few seconds. “I won’t help you hide her, but… I won’t disclose it myself.”

“Fine.” Mel reached for the chains.

“Yo, Hamada!”

“Hamada lives!”

“Ayy Niko!”

Jada-Niko returned each call with a smile and a little wave, striding with purpose through the station with her partner, Morris, trailing a half-step behind her. Prudence was in her head, helping her navigate the huge building like a seasoned detective would, on her way to the file graveyard. Niko herself had pulled Cecilia Lopez’s file previously, so she got to enjoy the added challenge of playing it like she knew exactly where to find the thing while going off of secondhand directions in real time.

On top of everything, and maybe it was just because she was in a police station, but maybe not—she felt eyes following her. Not the eyes of friendly fellow officers, but something harsher, scrutinizing. She tried to surreptitiously glance around for the source, but there were so many bodies moving in such a big space that nothing individually caught her attention. She’d been at this game long enough to make a conscious note of the sensation for later exploration; there was no such thing as a bad instinct when you were an illegal magical creature.

“Hey, Niko,” greeted a pretty, young officer at the sign-in desk for the storage area. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

Jada paused, trying not to look at the woman’s badge. After a beat, Prudence whispered: “Name is Alvarez.”

“Alvarez,” she repeated out loud, picking up the ballpoint pen attached with a small chain to the desk. “Great to see you.”

She almost forgot to hide her surprise when the officer leaned forward, touching the tips of her fingers to Niko’s forearm and sliding them softly across the skin. “It’s great to see you up and doing
Okay, Hamada. Look at that. Jada cleared her throat and moved her arm, gently, as to not let the woman down too harshly. She went for her best estimation of how Niko’s nervous smile would look in this situation and signed her name to the register in her practiced forgery of the detective’s signature. Morris signed in behind her, receiving maybe ten percent of the friendliness that Alvarez had been directing at Niko. Jada briefly wondered how she could get this woman’s number for herself, later, but alas—she was on the clock.

Row 13, Bay 45, second shelf. Luckily, Jada’s eyes set upon the white banker’s box labeled “Lopez, C” quickly, and she let Morris pull it down for her.

“Why did you want to look at this again? The murders are in the books,” he was saying as he helped her carry it back out of the climate-controlled storage room.

“The Veras said we’d be even for your almost-arrest if I took another look. Lopez was their aunt, so her surviving husband is their uncle. I figured making sure that I give their family a fair shake is the least I can do.” Jada-Niko opened the door for him, flashing a small smile to Officer Alvarez as they passed. The patrolwoman still looked mildly disappointed, but waved goodbye nonetheless.

Morris followed her all the way out to her car, loading the box into the back. “I can come home with ya, keep you company while you work. Carry the box some more.”

Jada-Niko gave him an honest smile, the first of her foray into the station today. “I appreciate it, but I’m kind of liking the peace and quiet. Gotta let this Mikael Blomkvist mind get to work.”

They hugged, and Morris went back into the building. Jada was sliding into the driver’s seat of her car when a hand stopped it from closing, and she looked up into the puffy face of a red-haired man in his late fifties.

“Cap,” greeted Jada, taking her hand off of the keys.

“Good to see you out and about, Hamada,” rumbled the man from under his mustache. “What’re you doing picking up files?”

“Just bored. Doctor says I should be cleared to return in a couple weeks.”

“And the shrink… also says you’re good to go?” O’Doule tilted his head as he looked down at her.

“Haven’t done that yet. I’m getting there, promise.”

“Okay, kid. It’s just… You’re taking this really well. Too well. I served, I know your brother does, and I know you aren’t a rookie yourself. Trauma has a way of sneaking up on you. Talk to the shrink, and don’t lie your way through it. That’s an order.”

“Fair enough.” Jada accepted his hand to shake, and he did that fatherly thing where he shut the door and tapped on the roof a couple times before walking away. Finally alone, Jada turned the engine and sat, breathing deeply. That feeling of being watched hadn’t left, and she focused on it, trying to discern a direction. Her eyes flickered between the side and rearview mirrors, but nothing she could see seemed out of place.

Jada finally made it out of the parking lot only half a dozen more waves at other officers later, pulling a few blocks down and around the corner, where Zelda waited in her own human form, twirling her keychain impatiently.
“Tag,” greeted the whitelighter-witch as she stepped out of the car, moving around to the trunk to retrieve the file box. They both hopped in the backseat, behind darkly tinted windows.

“Any issues?”

Jada hesitated. “Not… exactly. I caught a weird feeling in the station. Someone watching.”

“Like, a bad someone?”

“Maybe. Just… look alive out there, okay?”

“Always, boss.” Zelda chuckled at the look Jada gave her; the kitsune knew she hated that title.

“What else?”

“You gotta call the police department therapist and make an appointment soon. The captain thinks we’re being too chill about everything.” Jada let go of her glamour as Zelda shifted into Niko, like they were passing a hot potato.

"Fiiine.”

“Just do it. I’ll buy you those trick cards you wanted.” Before the spirit could ask, she added: “Not the exploding ones.”

They said their goodbyes before Jada disapparated from inside the car back to Vera Manor with the file, landing in the attic.

“Alvarez wants to climb you like a tree,” announced the whitelighter-witch, smirking at the detective.

“Yeah… She’s been trying for awhile,” Niko muttered, self-consciously rubbing the back of her neck.

“Well hey, don’t be afraid to let her know about your single friend looking for a good time when you’re back in the office.”

Prudence made a disgusted noise at her cousin as she got up from her cross-legged position on the floor. “She is a six at best, Jay.”

Jada chuckled, letting it trail off as Mel Vera appeared at the top of the stairs, her hair mussed and face reddened, clearly just up from a nap. All the whitelighter-witch managed to get out was a weak, “Yo.”

Mel spotted the box almost immediately and beelined for it, murmuring half-hearted greetings as she went.

Turning back to Niko, Jada distracted herself with planning: “So, Sora tonight?”

“Yeah. How’re we doing this?” Niko stood a little straighter, her embarrassment about Alvarez gone.

“He’s renting a car, so he’s going to meet you at The Haunt as soon as he lands, should be there around nine. Greta has a gala fundraiser thing tonight, so she’s all sad you’re missing it, because of course she is, but you’ll have at least until midnight before she bothers you again. I think it’s best that someone is in the bar with you, just in case.” She saw Prudence open her mouth and cut her off, “Twenty-one and up, please. This is a human bar.”

The teen crossed her arms, but relented.
“How about you and Macy?” asked Mel, eyes still glued to the file box as she thumbed through the papers inside. The Lopez file was thin since the death had been ruled accidental, but Garcia’s death had been investigated by Michigan State Police, and they’d have to stage a more detailed caper to get their hands on that physical box with a stellar excuse to avoid suspicion. That, or find a way to disable the cameras so Jada could just pop in and out.

“Sure,” agreed the whitelighter-witch, shrugging.

Macy came up the stairs next, carrying something bundled in her hand. “Hey, I thought I heard you up here. Can you look at something for us?”

Jada accepted the twisted handkerchief as her answer, unraveling it carefully to reveal a large, round coin. A half dollar. She kept the fabric between her skin and the item, but immediately noticed the intermittent winking of the dead president’s face. “Where’d you find this?”

“The house, where our aunt died.”

She knew exactly what it was. The Vera sisters were looking at her expectantly. The whitelighter-witch had been pleasantly surprised at how the Charmed Ones more or less let Harry’s warning roll off of them; even Macy, a bit more beholden to the whitelighter than the others, hadn’t changed the way she looked at Jada or Prudence. They’d asked about it, and Jada had explained: Yes, the S’Arcana attempted to overthrow the Council in the early 1900s, and yes, they had included deaths. But important work wasn’t always easy. Macy and Maggie had been less sold on that last sentiment than Mel, whose eyes flashed with an intriguing sort of excitement at the idea.

Letting out a breath, she looked at the time witch, who had paused her search of the Lopez file. “Do you really want to know?”

“I’m tired of this game,” Mel replied. “What is it?”

“That’s a Chancellor’s coin. Tell me exactly where you found it.”

Mel relayed the story, and Jada’s heart sank with each twist. Their hypothesis about Garcia’s death didn’t seem the least bit far-fetched.

“Marisol didn’t tell me much about her sisters, just that they existed. I guess when she was born, completing a set of three girls, there were some who thought that they would fulfill the Prophecy. It was a minority opinion, but when you’re as tight-assed as the Council, that means a lot.” The whitelighter-witch glanced between the two Veras, disappointed that she had to be the one delivering the news currently dragging their faces down into stricken expressions.

“Were they witches?”

Jada shrugged. “I suppose, but… obviously, they weren’t involved like Marisol. Might’ve even had their powers bound so they could be safe and away from all this shit.”

“The same reason Mom bound ours,” finished Macy, putting a hand to her forehead.

Prudence and Niko, neither quite well versed enough in Vera history to follow the conversation in full, had settled for sitting next to each other on a large, brown trunk, both sets of brown eyes watching the back and forth like a tennis match. They were passing a Starbucks cup of cold brew coffee between themselves, and looked for all the world like two old friends listening to tea. Jada spared a moment to be proud of her cousin, who’d never been great at making friends aside from the two fellow orphans who made up her clique, mostly because of her fondness for bullying and the occasional accidental maiming in the name of practicing schoolwork. Jada’s family certainly hadn’t
offered to take in Prudence, so far be it from her to judge the teen’s dedication to the Dark Lord, but at least she could hope her cousin would one day be able to function in the daylight, not just the dark.

Speaking of darkness, Mel had had enough breaths to put the new puzzle pieces into the still-incomplete full picture: “So what we’re hinting at is... Someone who wants to help the Apocalypse happen was crossing their T’s and dotting their I’s by killing maybe-Charmed Ones? And that someone… could be the Chancellor?”

“Or an agent of the Chancellor. The coin carries his will. If he wanted that house to burn to the ground, the coin would make it so. Boom, chimney fire.” Jada chewed her lip, watching for the time witch’s reaction. She didn’t need to pile on with her own opinions about that self-righteous warlock, and if she laid it on too strong, she risked looking too eager for this answer to be the right one. Whatever the next steps might or might not be, the merry band of magical misfits were heading into dangerous territory regardless.

“What does that all mean?” asked Prudence, sounding fed up as she reached the bottom of the cold brew. “Breaking news, the Elder Council is up to some shittery.”

Ah. Her cousin didn’t tend to have the same nuanced view on persuasion that she did.

“We need more information. It doesn’t make any sense; the Council could have just left us to flounder or die all those times they saved us if they didn’t want us to save the world.” Macy took the coin back from her and wrapped it again.

Jada shrugged and tilted her head, meeting Niko’s eyes for some reason. The detective returned a dubious look that suggested they’d chat about this later, in more detail. To the Charmed Ones and her cousin, she asked: “Dinner?”

Sora Hamada was not difficult to spot across the crowded bar. If the siblings had a nickel for every time someone told them they looked like twins, Niko would be living the good life in a mansion on a beach in Costa Rica by now. He was sitting in a back corner booth, two beers in front of him as he waited, and when his brown eyes turned to spot her approach, warmth and relief flooded Niko’s chest.

“Sora,” she breathed in greeting as he grabbed her in a full body hug.

“Jesus fuck Nik,” he replied quietly near her ear, tightening his arms around her shoulders. “I was so worried about you.”

She hugged him back firmly, brain firing off feelings of comfort and home at the familiar smell of his shirt, his Calvin Klein cologne and the scent of him she could only just now put words to, like volcanic rocks and ocean breeze. Tears rose up behind her eyes, and she heard him sniffle too before they parted and sat down, holding hands over the table. It’d been almost a year since they’d seen each other last. He was Military Police in the Army, currently stationed at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri, and taught in their MP training program at the base. But right now, in his plain clothes and grinning at her over an IPA, Sora was just her little brother, cynical and sarcastic Sora, and she really needed the simple, unconditionally loving relationship that they had with everything else going on in her life, or lives.

“I almost brought the whole unit up here,” continued Sora, letting go of her hand to take a drink.
“Sorry it took me so long to get leave.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” she replied quickly, gulping a mouthful of her own beer. The bear wasn’t stirring, but this was her first foray into public with it, and just that knowledge inspired a little nervousness.

Jada and Macy sat at the bar about twenty feet away, chatting calmly and sipping drinks, paying them absolutely no obvious attention. Mel and Maggie were outside in their car, “stakeout style” as the youngest Vera had hissed enthusiastically, and somewhere, Zelda was at the gala in the form of some old white guy, keeping an eye on Greta. It was totally under control. The bear could kick rocks.

“How… how are you feeling?”

Niko let out a breath, leaning back in the booth. She went for truth: “Exhausted. Constantly overstimulated.”

Sora nodded as his eyes darted to his beer. After three tours, he’d certainly had his struggles with PTSD, and the two of them had talked about it often. Niko’d certainly seen trauma just as a police officer, people at their worst, or victims of people at their worst—but this was different than all that, because for her, it was the first time the violence was personal. She’d been hunted. It left the open space of the bar feeling a bit like an unguarded flank.

Her brother’s hand coming to rest over hers brought her back. “What else?”

“Like that old hobbit when he wanted his ring back,” sighed Niko, offering him a grin.

“And… Greta?” Sora’s voice faltered over the name. Unsurprisingly, he was not a huge fan of the blonde, but up until her last few years of misery, she’d previously just chalked it up to typical “no one is good enough for my sister” stuff. “And don’t just tell me what you think I want to hear, aneki.”

“This was like… a near-death experience, right? And people talk about how their lives flash before their eyes and things come into perspective and whatever, you know?” She finished her beer and waved the empty cup at a passing waitress, who nodded and teetered back over to the bar. When the woman returned with a beer that would go on their tab, Niko also handed her a couple ones. “You know what I’m talking about.”

“Definitely.”

“And, whatever, you’re not married so maybe this all sounds really stupid, but I just… Like yes, she’s been a huge part of my life for a long time, so I thought about her. Except once I was back, and safe, I just… My big takeaway is that I don’t love her, and I haven’t for awhile.”

“First, nothing you say to me is stupid, except that you think Post Malone isn’t the next generation’s Eminem.” Sora grinned, wiping some beer foam from his lip. “Second, I want you to know that I say this completely separate from my opinion of G, but I’ve known for years that you weren’t happy. I wish it didn’t have to come to the point of violent crime to get you to admit it, but… Don’t ignore the thought just because you went through something. Your feelings are valid, maybe don’t make a decision now, but tell her. Separate first, maybe.”

“Fuck, I’m so happy you’re here. You have no idea.” Niko tried not to get teary-eyed as she looked at him, afraid she wouldn’t be able to stop herself from spilling the rest of the magical beans if she did.
They pivoted into less intense topics after that, and the detective soon found herself relaxing into the
evening, forgetting about her four babysitters hovering nearby and the oncoming world-destroying
asteroid that was a group of powerful magical beings that wanted to kill or imprison her for life.
Whatever the Veras had learned with the discovery of this coin had sent them into broody moods
through dinner, which was a shame, because the Somali takeout had been choice.

A couple hours in, Niko nearly spilled her fourth beer when Zelda’s voice suddenly rang in her ear,
quiet like she was whispering.

“Hey, Niko… I fucked up.”

She blinked and kept trying to listen to what Sora was saying about his new truck. They’d told her to
“think” back to anyone who spoke into her brain, so she tried it: What?

“I lost Greta. I stopped for, I swear, five seconds to unscrew a salt shaker lid, because these people
fucking deserve it, and I can’t find her.”

How long?

“I’ve been looking for her for like ten minutes. Her key’s not on the valet rack anymore.”

Can you tell Mel and Maggie?

“I did, and—”

With perfect timing, Niko’s phone lit up with a text:

10:56 pm Maggie: greta just got out of an uber in the parking lot

“Everything okay?” asked Sora, ducking his head to catch her eye when she looked up from her
phone.

“I, uh… Greta’s coming,” was all she managed to say out loud. With everything happening at once,
the bear was rumbling now, concerned, paying attention to the twinge of danger she felt. She looked
over at Jada and Macy, who were looking at their own phones, hopefully receiving the same
warnings.

She was on her feet when the door opened, and Greta met her eyes while the doorman checked her
ID with a UV penlight. Shit.

The blonde beelined for her as soon as she got her license back, and when Niko saw Macy begin to
slide off her stool, she gave a quick shake of her head. This was her mess. It didn’t help that Greta
looked a little absurd in full makeup and her gala gown, bright blue and paired with long white
gloves, amidst the weeknight bar patrons, like an angry Disney princess come to town.

“Niko,” she hissed, coming to a somewhat teetering stop, and a moment later, the smell of tequila hit
her full force. Niko realized this was the first opportunity she’d had to be near Greta since the bear
arrived, and the woman’s scent unsurprisingly made her nose wrinkle a little; she smelled like
sterilized metal and scorched trees under an evening’s worth of perfume.

“G, what are you doing here? I’m visiting with Sora—”

“Yes, and I’ve been texting you for hours with nothing—”

“Hey,” interrupted the visiting soldier, standing up from the booth and extending an arm to Greta.
She did not accept the hug. “Can we sit down and talk about this, maybe?”

“This is between us,” said the blonde, crossing her arms.

“You know I haven’t seen Sora in a long time, can we just talk about this when I get home?”

“You haven’t wanted to talk about anything in months Niko, so for once, I want to get to decide when we talk about something.”

Anger sparked in Niko’s chest, but she breathed through it, looking at her brother. And ever the perfect angel of a brother that he was, Sora helpfully suggested he was tired and would text Niko in the morning before taking his leave. The detective led her wife to sit down across from her at the booth.

“Oh, Niko. Now what do you want to talk about?” she asked once she’d settled the bear a little bit and finished another beer. The waitress, appreciative of the tips with each delivery, had kept them coming, but she still felt barely a buzz so far.

“Jesus Christ Niko, you know what I want to talk about.” Greta put pale elbows on the table and held her head in her hands.

“I want you to say it.” Niko knew she was being bratty, and she did feel bad about that, but Greta was drunk and on her worst behavior right now, and the detective was not well equipped with patience as of the last day or two. The bear began to pace again.

The blonde sniffled, but ordered a rum and Coke from the waitress before answering, “You hate me.”

“Come on, G, that’s not fair. I don’t hate you. I don’t.” Niko frowned and leaned forward. “You know I don’t.”

Greta’s drink appeared in front of her, but with the way her eyes were reddening and her sniffles increasing in volume, the waitress this time scurried away very quickly. “I saw Perry tonight, at the gala.”

Oh. Interesting. Niko set down her pint glass and waited.

“And I get that you haven’t seen your brother in a long time, so this isn’t about you not being there, but… Perry and I talked all night, she brought me drinks, she helped make me look good in front of the other directors. I had a great time, and then I just…” Greta chugged some of her cocktail. “I forgot what it’s like to spend time with someone who enjoys you.”

Niko was inclined to agree. She almost wanted to laugh, in a dark and maybe hysterical way; Perry and Greta would be an Instagram supercouple, if that’s where this was going. How lesbian, the classic switcheroo. That thought sent her careening off into new territory, remembering that she and Mel, no matter the old timeline, still barely knew each other… and certainly not like that. Fuck. Just another enduring question mark in her current life.

Greta pushed on. “Nothing happened—I wouldn’t do that to you, but it… It made me think. About us. I’ve been afraid that if I let go of you, it would be embarrassing or whatever… but I’ve known you’re not happy, Nik, for a long time. And you have, too.”

Despite the fact that she was obviously on the drunker side of tipsy, Greta the Real Person had slipped out of hiding, and Niko felt that familiar tingle of regret that had, up until now, always made her turn tail and run from these conversations before they began. She held out a hand, and Greta
placed delicate fingers in her palm. “You’re right.”

The blonde paused, tilting her head. “You must be in more of a traumatized state than I thought.”

Niko laughed unexpectedly like that, surprising herself enough that it came out like a hyena bark, and she cleared her throat. “Yeah, yeah… I’ve been an asshole to you. I can admit that. We just… seems like we’ve been in denial for a long time.”

Greta wiped the tears from her cheeks with a napkin, but her makeup was hopelessly ruined, so Niko helped narrate how best to clean up the mess for a few minutes. The blonde hadn’t done anything wrong, not really, not like secretly changing a timeline here or erasing a memory there, but… deep down, Niko knew that they had some core value differences that would be difficult to overcome at best, and impossible to overcome once you had been turned into a werebear and introduced to magic. For example, Greta would never handle truth like that with grace, nor would she go quietly. She didn’t have the imagination for it.

“So, what do you want to do?” asked the detective once they’d finished another round in companionable silence, relieved at getting the words into the universe, despite their consequences. “I can stay in one of Morris’ AirBnBs until I find a new place.”

“Rachel can recommend an attorney or mediator, I’m sure.”

They clinked their glasses and finished the drinks. “We’ll talk more about the details later. You should go home and get out of that… gown. Maybe take some ibuprofen and drink one of my Gatorades.”

Greta snorted and leaned back in her booth. “I really loved you, Nik.”

“I loved you, too.” Niko tapped her fingers on her empty glass, seeing the way Greta’s eyes flickered to the door every few seconds. “Want me to call you a Lyft?”

“I’ll Uber home. Thanks, though.”

Niko stood to make sure she didn’t stumble on her way out, but then the sound of people talking and the crowds stopped. Greta was frozen mid-rise from the booth, one gloved hand pressed against the table to leverage her weight up. The detective’s head snapped around to look at Jada and Macy, who thankfully weren’t paused—they were already jogging across the bar to her.

“What’s happening?”

“Is Mel—”

The front door banged open again, and the two younger Vera sisters appeared.

“I’m not doing this!” Mel shouted as she shimmed through the crowd towards them.

When they’d all gathered, a red light appeared in the air above them, a continuous spray of embers like the business end of a firework. It moved down, then split into two in opposite directions and came back up until it’d traced the general shape of a door.

Niko saw Mel’s hand jerk towards her, and then—
Mel froze Niko in hopes that she would blend in with the crowd under the gaze of whatever was about to make its appearance. Jada disapparated, right before the fire-blown doors swung open, an effect that nearly had her head spinning. The very world in front of her bent and twisted into a rectangled chunk, and behind it was a darkened chamber illuminated by flickering white light.

The sisters took each other’s hands and waited, until a shadow she’d thought was just from the chamber moved, and a man stepped through the gate. He had silver-gray hair past his shoulders and a clean-shaven, wrinkled face. Dressed in all white and sporting an impressive staff crafted out of some kind of ebony wood, it wasn’t difficult to figure out who was interrupting their evening.

“Chancellor?” asked Mel, as loud as she could while her heart pounded in her throat.

“Charmed Ones,” he greeted in a surprisingly friendly voice, like any old grandpa saying hello to young women. “We need to talk. Come along with me to the Ruling Realm?”

When they hesitated, two more figures appeared out of the doorway. As the light hit their faces, Mel’s breath hitched.

“It’s okay,” said Charity, her smile inscrutable. “We’re just going to talk.”

Harry cleared his throat, making eye contact with the time witch. “The Chancellor has some questions about an item you found.”

“We’ll have you back before breakfast,” assured the seemingly elderly man.

After a silent conference, the sisters agreed, stepping towards the door as the Elders and whitelighter went back through it. Mel whispered a quick spell into her wrist, and then dropped the silver chain on the ground before entering the dimension of the Elder Council for the first time.
The Ruling Realm, essentially a melodramatic teacher’s lounge for the Council, was almost greyscale. Every light source—torches, candles, pyres—glowed pure white light. They stepped from The Haunt into a large hallway, where the air thinned and grew cold. The realm wasn’t sure whether it was a temple or a cave, with meticulously carved columns growing out of natural rock ceiling and meeting smooth stone floors dotted with glinting gems.

“You told them,” Macy hissed at Harry as they fell a little behind the others.

“I didn’t. You’ll notice that he left Niko in the bar, hmm?” He put a hand on her shoulder and leaned closer. “Do you happen to have an Elder trinket that you neglected to tell me about?”

“Maybe.”

“Do not admit that to him, no matter what it is.” Harry moved back closer to rest of the group when Charity noticed the two lagging back.

The corridor took them a few hundred feet before dipping ever lower and curving, until they arrived at a set of wide metal doors guarded by two figures wearing white robes and, unsettlingly, black cloth around their faces, thin strips wrapped in a mummy-like effect. Wordlessly, the guards opened the heavy doors, and the group passed into a larger room leading to a raised dais behind a moat of white fire.

When the group finally reached the front of the long hall, the Chancellor disapparated, and then reappeared across the fire moat, sitting in a wide throne on the dais.

“Subtle,” scoffed Maggie.

A series of cracks echoed across the empty space, and people that Macy assumed were the rest of the Council appeared—twelve of them, various ages, genders, and races, all decked out in various types of white outfits, which altogether bordered on just this side of ridiculous. Sean Combs had effectively ruined this look for them, but what else were supreme magical leaders supposed to wear? Chairs
materialized under each Elder as they appeared, and Macy calmed her nerves by imagining them sitting comically stiff off in a green room somewhere with paper cups of coffee, very seriously waiting for their cue to enter.

“Welcome to the Council Hall,” announced the Chancellor over the fire, his voice amplified in the cavernous space. “Harry, thank you for your assistance, as always. That will be all.”

The whitelighter gave the sisters a long look, but obediently disapparated, leaving them standing before the Council with Charity. Macy felt a stab of anxiety; whatever suspicions they might have about Harry, he was certainly their closest ally in this world. She, at any rate, believed that he had kept his promise. Like they’d learned with the Ouija board incident… Harry’s word was good more reliably than it wasn’t.

“Allow me to formally introduce myself: I’m Chancellor Tychon.” The silver-haired man had a Gandalf-adjacent quality to him, least of all because he was obviously trying to act jovial and elderly, like he wasn’t a devastatingly powerful warlock. Not for the first time, Macy sent up a silent thanks for backwards-thinking old white men, who reliably underestimated women like the Vera sisters. “I’ve led the Council for nearly four centuries. I know that you young women have had differences in opinion on how we do things here, but… I can assure you, nothing we decide is done so lightly.”

“What do you want to know?” asked Macy, shifting a little in front of her sisters.

Tychon looked at Charity first, searching for something, and then back at Macy. “Very well. Did you kill the wolf, Sigmund?”

“No, we didn’t,” answered the eldest Vera with the conviction of truth. After all… the Charmed Ones hadn’t killed him, just helped hogtie him into submission. She refused to let her gaze leave Tychon’s eyes.

“Did you give Anubis’ Dagger to someone?”

“Maybe it was stolen,” offered Maggie. “If you’re talking about the knife Charity gave me. But it’s back in our house, so maybe you have your magical residues all wrong.” That part was truth, too; Jada had taken the wolf’s sword and the cloak, but given Maggie her knife back after giving it a physical and magical cleansing.

“Tell us about the Elder item.” This came from a sandy-haired man sitting next to the Chancellor. He had a prim British accent not unlike Harry’s, currently undergirded with obvious disdain.

Mel took over here: “We stumble on a lot of random magic. I’m not even sure what you’re referencing.”

Charity was giving her a sharp look, scolding, but also… concerned.

The unnamed Elder leaned forward, and then suddenly appeared in front of her, his face just inches away. “Why are you and your sisters looking into the deaths of Cecilia Lopez and Paula Garcia?”

“How do you know about them?”

“Your mother was one of us. We knew her well, perhaps better than you” The man gave Mel a slow up and down that made Macy’s skin crawl, and she would’ve thrown him into the moat in a heartbeat if her sister showed any sign of distress—but Mel was Mel. She straightened her spine and met his stare as her lip curled into a snarl. “I see Marisol in you… Stubborn. Impulsive.”

“That’s enough, Braun,” interrupted the Chancellor, and the man popped back up to his seat behind
the fire. “Charmed Ones, I would respectfully ask that you let sleeping dogs lie with regard to your mother and her sisters. The more you press with the humans, the more attention you draw. Look what happened with the young man who died—*that* is exactly the type of tragedy we aim to avoid.”

Macy honestly hadn’t been expecting the Trip card, and just the thought sent a jolt of anger through her, but Mel’s anger bubbled forth first: “That wouldn’t have happened if we could just be *honest* . If demons and whatever else are going to keep killing people in Hilltowne, then the police are going to keep finding out we’re at least adjacent to either the deaths or the killers. *Someone* will notice.”

“And it’d be nice if we could *save* some people instead of just figuring out who’s drinking their blood,” added Maggie.

“The world is a dangerous place, and we can’t protect all six billion of the humans. That’s why we perform memory erasure and have other means of maintaining silence and *order*. Malevolent disruption becomes easy to spot, a splash on quiet waters.” Chancellor Tychon smiled wider. “But I admire your reasoning… I must say, it sounds very familiar. I’m sure I’ve heard it before. Perhaps from a certain rebel group you may have recently discovered? What were those girls calling themselves these days?”

*Dick*. The Elders seemed to know more than she’d expected, but Macy could almost hold out hope that they were missing some key pieces, like Niko and Jada. Maybe.

“I understand your misgivings,” continued the Chancellor amiably. “Most witches are raised under our teachings, the history of our people that’s brought us to our present, and will lead to our future. They understand, on a deeper level, why we do what we do.”

“Yeah, well, that boat’s sailed. You said this would be quick, so let’s make our way towards your point.” Mel crossed her arms, irses sparking purple.

That little trick still gave the older Vera sister (as she’d come to be okay with others calling her, despite being a Vaughn) her own spark of awe and pride, mixed with some uncertainty. Macy’s telekinesis was the most utilitarian power of the Three, but she’d yet to really find her moment to *shine* like her sisters, not even the small stuff like glowing body parts and flashy energy beams. In the heat of battle, she still felt herself shimmying along the edges of her power, afraid of the damage she could cause at full bore—unless it came to protecting her sisters. That type of danger made her practically black out with rage, though lately, she could do just fine with *less* occasions to slam people’s bodies into things (or vice versa). But the telekinetic would certainly do it as many times as needed for Mel and Maggie. Even if that meant smashing Dumbledore into the ceiling until he cried uncle.

The fire in front of them jumped up into a wall, and images began to form in the flames—a simple rendering of the sun and the moon, circling each other.

“The two most basic concepts in the universe: good, and bad. Light, and dark. Every culture, every religion, every myth is ruled by this duality,” the Chancellor narrated as the celestial bodies circled each other. “Light magic is of course associated with the sun: cleansing, healing, life-giving.”

To illustrate this point, a bunch of cutesy looking woodland creatures and their babies sprang to life, scurrying around a clearing between trees.

“The dark and those who use dark magic feed off despair, fear, and greed. The humans know this, instinctually. They’ve felt the velvet tongue of the Dark Lord in the night, violating and corrupting.”

Macy met eyes with Mel, who rolled hers, and they tried not to smile. The fire display changed to
show an assortment of assumably bad creatures, the three-headed dog, chupacabra, and a tiger with rotting flesh.

“Dark creatures and witches exact a price from the universe in pursuit of power. They spread curses and plagues, drain souls, and inspire turmoil and pain. And so in the name of all that is Good and Right, the Council came together, representing more than half of the world’s light magic witches and warlocks, as a unified front against the forces of darkness.”

The aforementioned dark creatures broke apart as if cut by swords, and in their place grew up caricatures of the Elders behind the wall, decked out in armor instead of robes.

“We initiated the principles of secrecy to protect humans and light magic alike,” continued the Chancellor. “No more young gods, Olympians, or Titans, wiping out villages on a whim. No more dragons plucking children out of fields. No more witch trials, most importantly. All the work of the Council.”

“That’s a great story,” called Macy into the wall. “And then what happened?”

A series of hieroglyphics appeared in the flames. “We developed our bylaws based on centuries of experiences—mistakes, victories. They are literally etched in stone. The S’Arcana and other dark creatures are forbidden.”

“You can’t make people forbidden.”

“They choose not to surrender to judgment and due consequences.” The fire dropped, and the Chancellor was on his feet, gripping his staff tightly. “Voluntary surrender takes naught but fortitude of character. The S’Arcana murder, lie, cheat, and steal to spread darkness. They are destruction. Necromancers, succubi, vampires, lycans. The things that humans say go bump in the night, with good reason.”

The rise in ominousness of the Chancellor’s words and tone made the eldest Vera’s spine tighten. Macy had never considered whether she could manipulate fire with her telekinesis before; did energy count as particles or substance to the point that her powers would affect it? She subtly pushed at a nearby torch, unsure whether its flicker was due to her or a breath of air. Could she perhaps tear down one of these columns and toss boulders at an attacker? The odds didn’t look good no matter which way she sliced it. She highly doubted, despite their recent victories, that they could defeat even half of these Elders if it came down to it, and that was the elephant of reality in the room making her increasingly nervous, regardless of whether any overt threats had been made yet.

“The thing about bylaws is, you have to have a way to show people that you’re serious about them.” Tychon took another step forward. “First, there’s a warning. Second, an powers embargo. Third, trial and judgment.”

Braun’s voice rang out again: “If the Council were to become aware of any of you hiding the whereabouts of forbidden creatures from us, the disciplinary process would begin.”

“So... this is a warning?” asked Mel flatly.

“This is your warning,” confirmed the Chancellor with that smile again. “And a chance for us to assure you, in person, that we have done everything we can to investigate the death of your mother. We have not found a sign that her death was anything but an accident.”

Macy narrowed her eyes, trying to discern his true intent in the eerie white light of the fires. There was a zero percent chance he was as kindly or naive as he was acting. This whole charade dripped
The Chancellor kept droning on about bylaws for several minutes before Macy got the distinct impression that he was stalling. The other Councilors began to shift and glance around, some nervous and others bored. She hated that even her conspiracy-happy brain couldn’t think of something what he might be waiting for, but then a thought occurred to her, and she went rushing into a plan that had only partially formed.

“You keep talking about these bylaws like we’re supposed to know what they are,” the Charmed One interrupted the Chancellor loudly, prompting shocked looks from the other Elders. “But we’ve never read them before—we just have to go off of what you say. That’s not fair.”

Tychon tilted his chin down as he looked at her, eyes widening. “Excuse me?”

“Look, I know you’ve been around longer than the Constitution, but we’d like to see what ‘laws’ we’re being expected to follow before you try and convince us that we’re breaking them, hmm? Surely your rules would allow for that fairness.” Macy tried to keep the grin off her face as the Chancellor gaped like a fish. “In English or Spanish, please.”

Tychon looked at Charity, who just raised her eyebrows.

“It will take hours for you to read—”

“Well, better hurry and get us a few copies.” Macy flashed Mel a smile as the Council erupted in minor chaos, the Elders squabbling briefly with overlapping voices. They were easier to unsettle than she had expected. Now the Charmed Ones had officially made the first move, and things would’ve looked slightly more ‘up’ for them if only one of the sisters had had the foresight to get a law degree.

In less than a fraction of a second, Mel, her sisters, Jada, and the door were gone. With this, there was no swirl in the fabric of space-time or whoosh sound—just, gone. Niko startled, and Greta gave her a strange look, no longer frozen to the table. She looked around, surreptitiously sniffing the air, but only picking up a faint hint of dahlias. Gone.

“You okay?” Greta teetered on her feet, leaning almost at a forty-five degree angle, but still somehow looking at Niko like she was the one about to tumble over. The detective absently wondered how many drinks her good friend Perry had chivalrously brought the blonde tonight. That was a thought for further examination later. The bear grumbled unhappily.

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“Yeah, I’m fine, don’t worry about it.” Niko noticed a sparkle from the ground and leaned down—a small chain with a couple charms. She reached out, and as soon as her fingers made contact, Mel’s voice erupted in her brain like a rolling clap of thunder: Wear this until I get back. Don’t do anything stupid.

Clearing her throat, Niko looked around for anyone who might’ve seen, finding no suspects, and then slipped the silver chain around her wrist. It warmed instantly against her skin, like a comforting squeeze, as she followed her soon-to-be ex-wife out of the bar. A Prius waited in the parking lot, Uber sign glowing in its front windshield, and the two women exchanged quick kisses on the cheek before the blonde hauled herself inside and closed the door. Niko was struck with the thought that the satisfying thunk of the door slotting into place bookended the impending dissolution of her marriage quite appropriately, and she had just a moment to acknowledge that that conversation had
been a hundred times easier than she’d expected. After getting turned into a cursed creature and finding out ancient magical beings wanted to kill you… divorce? Child’s play.

When the Prius had left the parking lot and disappeared down the street, Niko turned, and then gasped, one hand going to her chest.

“Jesus, Jada,” she breathed at the whitelighter-witch, whose eyes were glowing blue. “You nearly scared the bear outta me. You aren’t with them?”

“That was the Chancellor’s little light show,” Jada answered tightly. She looked away, and then back at the detective. “I had to get out of there. They would’ve burned down this bar to kill me.”

Niko nodded, realizing that her companion (friend?) was feeling guilty. “You did what you had to do, and I’m glad you’re still here. I don’t know what I’d do on my own. Did I get frozen?”

“Probably saved your life.” Jada took hold of her elbow and led her around the building, out of view of the street and parking lot. “Take a deep breath. We’re going to my place.”

“How are we—"

In later retellings of her first conscious experience with apparition, Niko would ease up on descriptions of just how nauseating it was, but in reality, she very nearly lost all her drinks as her body seemed to suddenly come apart and reassemble, not like shifting to the bear, but like what she imagined happened to that kid in the Willy Wonka movie who went through the TV. She existed, and then she didn’t, and then she did again, but now she was standing in an unfamiliar apartment with Prudence looking up at her from a lumpy couch, confusion etched across her face.

“Hello?” greeted the teen cautiously as Jada disappeared into a hallway. “Um, excuse me, but what are you two—"

“The Chancellor showed up at The Haunt,” said the whitelighter-witch as she came back into the living room with a brown leather duffel over her shoulder. “The Veras went with him, I think.”

Prudence gave a heavy sigh as she sat up, unrolling herself from the black comforter she’d been wrapped in, and Niko almost smiled when she realized the usually gothlike teen was wearing baggy gray sweatpants and a cartoony Visit Lake Michigan t-shirt featuring a trout jumping out of the water.

“We have to go,” Jada continued as she darted between rooms, occasionally aided by her blue lightning. “Pack a bag.”

The teenager finally rose languidly to her feet, calling back to her cousin, “Fine. Where are we going?” It was like she was being asked to put her clothes away.

“Someplace safer than this apartment. HQ has centuries more warding on it. Can you text Zelda?”

Despite the close calls they’d had so far, this was the first time Niko detected true anxiety in Jada’s voice. It made her muscles tense, the bear picking up its head again, wondering why her adrenaline spiked. Prudence sighed, but didn’t dawdle as she headed into her room.

“Hey, uh, I found this—” Niko caught Jada’s attention and held up her arm. “It’s Mel’s. It talked to me, I guess. She talked. Through it.”

That made the whitelighter-witch pivot back to her, green eyes locked on the jewelry. “Yeah, doesn’t really suit you. May I?”
The detective nodded, and Jada closed her hand around her wrist, eyes fluttering for a moment, and then she let go.

“Stay with Niko and don’t do anything stupid.’ You?”

“Same, except she wants me to wear the bracelet.”

Jada raised her eyebrows, shoving a drawstring pouch into her bag. “Somebody’s special, huh?”

The fact that the whitelighter-witch could still find room to tease made Niko feel a little more at ease. Prudence emerged from her bedroom with a large backpack and, somehow unsurprisingly, a black metal morning star gripped in one hand, having changed out of her loungewear and into another school dress.

“When I was at the station today, something magical was watching me, and I don’t think it was because I looked like you—I think they knew I was glamoured. It wasn’t someone friendly.”

“Do you think it was the Chancellor?” asked the teenager, lifting her chin.

“I think it was someone working in or with the Council for sure, and if they made a move with the Charmed Ones, we don’t want to get caught in the ripples before we’re ready. Let’s get out of here.”

Prudence took her cousin’s hand as lightning curled around the older woman’s arm, and then the three paused at a small noise, like a branch tapping on the window.

Niko had been reaching for Jada’s other hand, but then the windows to the apartment burst, sending a hailstorm of glass into the room. Her eyes met wide green ones. She didn’t quite close her fingers around Jada’s before the whitelighter-witch and her cousin blinked away in a flash of lightning.

Oh, fuck. The detective turned to see three figures float through the now-open window frames and land silently among the debris. They wore white robes, almost toga-style, and had black strips of cloth wrapped around their necks and heads. Each carried a long, bladed staff that they waggled at her in such a way as to suggest the bindings around their eyes did nothing to hinder their aim.

For the first time, Niko’s shift stuttered. Her heart thundered in her ears, and adrenaline threatened to make her rocket through the roof, but when she thought about her shift and how useful it would be right about fucking now, she couldn’t do it.

“Shit, shit-shit.” Instead, she had to jump backwards as one of the blades jabbed too close for comfort, and the back of her legs hit the nearby dining table. Stupid fucking bear. “Who are you supposed to be?” she called to the robed intruders as they moved closer. Where the fuck did Jada go?

In lieu of dialogue, the closest masked attacker lurched forward, and the bladed staff sparkled in Niko’s periphery before it sliced into her shoulder, deep enough that pain and tingling pricks burned all the way down to her fingertips. She managed to channel the responding agonized scream into a heavy shove against the spear’s handle, and then she kicked out a leg to drive the person farther back. They stumbled, but kept the weapon readied, and Niko watched her own blood drip to the ground from its silver tip. She threw a chair at the attackers and moved around the table, breathing deeply to focus as she felt her flesh coming back together around the wound in her shoulder. The dumb, no good, useless bear was nowhere to be found. A gun would’ve been just as appreciated; her annual hand to hand combat testing didn’t quite live up to this level of threat.

What had Prudence’s notes said about shift control? Something something something, truest expression of the self, yadda yadda yadda, blocked by… what? She could see the handwritten notes in her head, the elegant curve of the witch’s script, but couldn’t recall what the words said.
A second attacker flashed a blade, and Niko groaned as it sliced open her other arm, but this time she was able to wrap a hand around the staff and rip it away from the stranger, smashing it to pieces against the wall. The intruder drew a knife, and she tossed another chair, knocking them back and buying herself precious seconds to catch her breath and focus on the room. Jada’s gray curtains flapped gently in the wind from the now-open windows, and the moon cast white-blue shapes across the ground. She could smell the moonlight for the first time. Crisp, cottony, and fairly indescribable. A thought drifted in on the breeze, and she looked down.

Wear this until I get back. The fingers of her opposite hand came around to touch her bracelet. Instantly, a pulse of purple light blasted out in all directions, and it sent the intruders hurtling into the walls away from her hard enough to break loose chunks of plaster and clouds of dust. Their staffs disintegrated to embers.

She made her move, lunging to one side and leaping across the faux granite of the kitchen countertop, and then she skidded into the moonlight under the open windows. She remembered just one sentence from Prudence’s detailed notes: The moon won’t force you to change, but on nights when it’s fuller, you’ll experience a thinner wall between you and the bear itself.

A surge of power hit her veins, her back warming where the moonlight hit her, as if it were a bright daytime sun. As the attackers stirred and began to struggle to booted feet, she rose into the bear and charged. The first attacker within reach got smashed into the floor and trampled as she barrelled towards the next. Her claws caught the white fabric and buried in the flesh underneath, eliciting the first noise from the intruders, a pained scream as she launched the person’s body into the dining table with enough force that it exploded into to splinters—sorry, Jada. The last enemy almost made it to the window, but she grabbed one booted foot and pulled them back, using the momentum to swing them all the way around like a baseball bat, head colliding with light fixtures and cabinets until she let go, launching them into the ceiling. They landed on top of their friend and the remains of the dining table.

Finally, the room stilled, save for curling clouds of dust and debris. Niko shifted back to herself and had to put a hand on the wall to stay upright. As was generally the case as of late, Niko had no idea where these guys had come from, but it seemed pretty obvious that she needed to get away from this apartment; somebody or something bad knew she was there. She just didn’t know where else to go.

“Jada?” She waited, and waited, but nothing happened. The three intruders remained still, and she tentatively tried, “…Harry?”

To her true surprise, the whitelighter appeared, looking a little taken back himself. “Detective Hamada? How did you call me?”

Niko just gaped at him, shifting her stance so that she hopefully didn’t look so exhausted.

“You can relax—I’m not going to hurt you,” said the whitelighter grudgingly. “I promise, for whatever that’s worth. Now, you shouldn’t be able to summon me, so how did you?”

The detective hesitated for only a beat before holding up her arm, pointing to the bracelet.

“Ahh, I see. Not exactly Hotmada style?”

The use of the nickname surprised her out of her suspicion and somehow helped calm her nerves, and the detective found at least couple words: “Yeah. Bracelet… Mel’s.”

“May I?”
Niko looked around at the crumbling apartment as Harry moved closer and touched the bracelet, pausing like Jada had.

“‘So help me if something happens to Niko, I’ll clip your wings. Don’t do anything stupid.’” He took his hand away and glanced at the would-be attackers. “These are Council Guards. They almost never leave the Ruling Realm. Where are we right now?”

“Jada’s apartment,” replied the detective with a shrug. “She ‘poofed’ right as these guys showed up, and she didn’t come back.”

“Yes, well, she wouldn’t, would she?” Harry gave her a sideways glance. “But to be fair, it’s probably because the Guards have a protective ward around the building, preventing dark creatures from coming on the premises. But not servants of the Elders like myself.”

“Maybe not dark creatures…but you know what I bet can get through?” Niko looked around on the floor, triumphantly snatching up her phone when she spotted it. “Cell signal.”

11:34 pm Jada S.: Can’t get back. Meet me across the street

“Niko, I must insist—stay with me. I can keep you safe,” said the whitelighter softly. “Please.”

“You said you wouldn’t help hide me. I was there, remember? Forgive me if I’m a little incredulous.”

“I did say that…” Harry’s face slid into a more rueful expression. “But I do love those women, and… they very much love you. In this rather extraordinary circumstance, perhaps I can be more helpful than I might otherwise.”

“Do you know where the sisters are?”

“The Ruling Realm. The Chancellor got tired of waiting for answers regarding an Elder item, so he wanted to chat face to face. They’re not necessarily in danger at the moment.”

Niko almost said ‘the coin’ out loud, but then she remembered: Don’t do anything stupid.

“Charity also told him about the S’Arcana entering the picture with the Charmed Ones, which is probably what brought the guards here.”

“You knew about Jada, specifically.”

“And I said nothing of her. The Elders have their ways of conducting investigations; whitelighters are not their only extra eyes and ears in the mortal realms.”

11:43 pm Jada S.: You alive?

Niko quickly texted back in the affirmative. “Mel told you and Jada to protect me, so protect me. Come with us.”

“Jada won’t trust me.”

“Perfect, because you don’t trust her. It’ll balance out. Focus. The sisters. That’s why we’re all here, right?”

Harry clenched his jaw a few times, but seconds later they appeared on the street, where Jada materialized out of the shadows, stopping several feet away.
“Are you okay? What happened?” she asked as she eyeballed Harry.

“Still standing.” Niko felt unanticipated relief at being back within shouting distance of the whitelighter-witch, but she didn’t act on the urge to move towards her, knowing it would upset the tension between the two bristling creatures on either side of her. “It was Council Guards.”

“I couldn’t get back in the building. I’m sorry.” Jada nodded to the new, thick scar on Niko’s shoulder, visible through the bloodied tear in her shirt. “I thought I had you. I swear, I thought I had you. I tried to come right back.”

A strange sort of heat built behind her eyes, and the detective waved Jada off as an acceptance of the apology. She gestured to Harry as she cleared her throat. “He’s supposed to be on his best behavior. Truce until the Veras come back.”

“Are they? Coming back?” Jada gave Harry another pointed up-and-down.

“I suspect the Chancellor sent those goons to collect you as evidence of their crimes, to compel them to give up information. In fact, it’d be quite wise to get away from here, soon.”

Jada looked at Niko, who nodded back. “You’ll have to hold onto me. Our wards won’t let you through,” warned the whitelighter-witch. Harry frowned and scoffed, but took Jada’s hand, and they apparated to... a bar, apparently the S’Arcana “HQ.” Prudence and Zelda were waiting in a black-and-red vinyl booth, both looking uncharacteristically tense as they sipped on sodas with neon-colored straws.

“Oh.” Harry looked between the two with wide eyes, his lips twitching as if he was unsure whether to smile. “Hello.”

“Prudence, Z, this is Harry. He’s an active whitelighter, but we’re going to forgive him today because we have a truce until we get the sisters back,” explained Jada in a bored tone.

Apparently unconvinced, Zelda shifted to her fox form and crawled up Prudence’s shoulders, glaring at Harry from behind the teen’s neck. Prudence just smirked darkly at him, like a snake spotting a rat. Niko had to hand it to the teen; she was fearless.

The dark witch stood and circled closer to him, sniffing the air. Her perfect brows knitted as she declared, “You’re dead.”

“Well, yes, but that’s quite beside the point—”

“How come you can be dead and light, but we can be alive and dark?”

Harry made a shrill, affronted noise, attempting unsuccessfully to avoid the teen’s glare. “The Council’s politics are not my idea. They brought me back, they enlisted me into their service. I’m just trying to explain their... perspective.”

“So if they’re not in danger, what do we do while we wait?” continued Jada, leaning over the bar to grab a bottle of gin. “And are you sure waiting is the best plan?”

“The Council didn’t seem surprised that the S’Arcana exist so much as at the Charmed Ones’ involvement, however transactional. They must have assumed that that connection ended with Marisol.” Harry shifted away from Prudence, closer to Niko, which was an odd development for the detective. “The Elders are not quite emotionally ready, I think, to accept that three young witches could be more powerful on an off day than any of them on their best days.”
“Ugh,” groaned Prudence, throwing her head back dramatically. “Just once, I’d like to be the special prophecy witch. I was so close before.”

Jada shot her cousin a sharp look, but didn’t address that. “What about Niko?”

“There’s very little chance the Council won’t know about the bear after the fight in the apartment.”

“So then, what does that mean? We just, what?”

Harry clicked his tongue, touching his fingertips to the back of a vinyl-covered chair. “Hope that our Charmed Ones come up with something to keep the Council at bay, at least temporarily if we’re lucky. The Elders will never stop chasing you and your sisterhood otherwise. They’ll send archangels, guards, slayers, witchers, and all manner of bounty hunters.”

“War by attrition.” Niko looked down at the silver bracelet thoughtfully. “They’ve got the deep bench, if not the commitment to the cause.”

“It’s about control,” asserted Jada, arms crossed. “They don’t want any of us near the Charmed Ones. That’s the difference between ignoring our sisterhood and not. They don’t want the Veras developing a soft spot for misfit magical creatures. Like their mother.”

The whitelighter’s jaw flexed. “That does make sense. It is… possible… that the Council could bind them to the Ruling Realm, teach them what they need to know there, and just bring them out… for special occasions.”

“Ya’ll are really the shining example of good in the world, huh?” Sliding her braids over one shoulder, Jada shook her head and opened the gin bottle. “You sure they can keep the Charmed Ones in a corner?”

“Perhaps not forever, but if they hold a trial… that would bind them without issue.”

“What does that mean?” interrupted Niko, not liking the way Jada’s jaw clenched in response to the idea.

“Despite what they want people to think, the Elders didn’t create magic,” explained the whitelighter-witch, taking on a softer tone with the detective. “There are principles of magic that run deeper and older than even them—the cost to resurrect the dead, things like that,” explained Jada. “In a trial, the Charmed Ones are submitting to a voluntary judgment. That judgment will be impossible to escape.”

Niko had ten thousand questions about that, but the basic stakes weren’t hard to spot. She felt a little lightheaded still, so she let the questions lie for now. Prudence seemed to notice her swaying and quickly got up, disappearing behind double swinging doors at the back of the bar for a few seconds. She reappeared, Zelda still perched on her shoulders, and quietly placed a plate of apples, pears, and bananas down in front of her. Niko thanked her with a nod and tore into the bounty as Jada and Harry continued talking.

“We need a way to get there, and more importantly, a safe way to get back,” the whitelighter-witch was saying. “I’m guessing whitelighter is too low in the pecking order to bring guests?”

“Uninvited guests, certainly,” agreed Harry sheepishly. “Charity, might be able to help, but I don’t think she’ll leave the Charmed Ones unattended with the Council. I also somehow doubt she would be willing to bring S’Arcana to the Ruling Realm.”

“What if you had... like, a powerup?” Jada exchanged a look with Prudence, something that could only be understood between them.
“I’ll need more details than that.”

Harry’s reaction to the revelation that the S’Arcana had possession of Sigmund’s cursed cloak and the weapon Fitela had killed for could only be described as apoplectic. It took quite some time for Jada to even get out the specifics over his protests; it had been Heimdall’s Sword, Hofund—best known for its interdimensional travel capabilities, which was how a human like Sigmund had gotten to Mimir’s Well. Niko got to flex her patrol officer memory and restrained Harry from shouting directly in Jada’s face, which eventually would have rightfully earned him some kind of physical rebuff from the whitelighter-witch, whether a lightning strike or a solid punch in the gut. Instead, Niko locked his arms behind his back in a tight grip and hauled him to the other side of the room until he calmed down. Apparently, these types of things were a big deal, too. The detective wasn’t in need of more convincing that the Council had a lot of rules.

After Harry’s face turned from tomato-red to a healthier blushing pink, he finally gathered the wherewithal to confirm that, despite his concerns, the sword would likely provide him with the power necessary to take all of them to the Ruling Realm. Once they were there, the Elders would be able to amend their wards to stop the sword from letting them back through the ether; they (1) needed an exit strategy, and (2) could do with a little better understanding of what they were potentially walking into up there.

While Harry worked on evening out his breathing, Niko made eye contact with Jada and jerked her head to one side. Jada followed her a few yards away from the whitelighter, ducking their heads together, and Niko said quietly, “Do we tell him about the coin?”

The whitelighter-witch glanced at Harry and narrowed her eyes. “I think we can ask questions without revealing the coin. Stuff about the Chancellor.”

“He’ll know there’s a reason we’re asking, or he’s not going to know if he’s leaving out something important. I’m deferring to you, because this is all Greek to me.” Niko tried not to use the words ‘in my experience with interrogations’, not wanting to sound like that asshole at this very moment, but she couldn’t stop herself from adding: “Seems like we need to shake him loose of his loyalty. Just a little bit, or see what happens when we push.”

Jada mulled it over for a few seconds, her green eyes fixed on a point on the floor. When she looked back up, she nodded. “Okay. You’re the detective, so, if that’s what you think is best. This is basically an interrogation.”

Oh. Right. She actually was qualified to make a recommendation here, a rare moment of expertise amidst all the magical shenanigans. The low key, probably unintended affirmation from her new ally unsettled her a little, but she could also have hugged the other woman. “Right. Yeah. Let’s do it.”

They turned to face Harry again, and Niko cleared her throat. “Just a reminder that you love the Charmed Ones. A lot.”

“O…kay. Yes.”

“The Elder item they’re asking about is a Chancellor’s coin. Mel and Macy found one where their aunt, Marisol’s sister, died. They think it started a fire to hide evidence.” Jada watched Harry carefully as she spoke, like she expected him to bolt with the new information. “Why would something like that be at the scene of ‘accidental’ deaths?”

Harry’s Adam’s Apple bobbed. “You’re sure it’s a Chancellor’s coin?”

“I saw it myself.”
“Have they visited the other site? Where the third sister died?”

“Not yet.”

Harry’s eyes flitted around the bar, the gears in his mind visibly working. Niko could tell the moment he accepted the truth. “Perhaps… our beloved Veras are in more trouble than I initially thought.”

“Yeah, you might say that,” barked Zelda mockingly from Prudence’s shoulder, adding under her breath: “Dick.”

“Hey, that’s quite unca—“

“Enough,” interrupted Jada. She’d poured herself a doubleshot of the gin, and then handed the rest of the bottle to Niko. “The Council, they’re not all licking the Chancellor’s sandals?”

“Hardly.” Harry straightened his vest. “He has a solid four who would follow him to Tartarus with bells on, but the rest can be reasoned with, more or less. Voluntary judgments require a simple majority vote.”

“Any that you know may have been sympathetic to Marisol?”

“No, I... that’s deep politik. We need heavier firepower for...” Harry’s brow furrowed, and then he snapped his fingers. “More firepower. That’s it.” His eyes sought out the fox, which bared teeth in response. “You—kitsune?”

“Duh.”

“And so you have a coven?”

“Kamakura.”

“Ah, of course.” Harry’s eyes next flicked to Niko, but he kept talking to the spirit: “Is it possible you could ask them for a favor? Quickly?”

Unlike the Book of Shadows, the inches-thick tome that was the Elder Bylaws (North American English Edition) did not open itself to the exact page you needed. Not by a long shot. Mel felt a little quaking in her confidence as three copies were slapped down on the long stone table in front of the sisters. The Council members hadn’t wanted to sit and watch them read, thankfully, so instead they were transported to a small room with three chairs and the aforementioned table. Two of those face-wrapped guards stood inside the room with them, completely still and quiet, and entirely eerie. This pair carried ornate staffs taller than their bodies, topped with glinting curved blades that swirled with magic like Maggie’s knife.

One of the central tensions that she couldn’t resolve was how far the Council would let them push. All sides seemed in agreement that the Charmed Ones weren’t fully prepared for whatever apocalyptic event waited on the horizon, but the sisters needed powers to train for it, so the Council couldn’t take them away, either, not indefinitely. They certainly couldn’t kill the Veras without bringing destruction on themselves, so why all the hype and posturing?
Since the Council swore up and down that no Table of Contents existed (sure), and the sisters couldn’t ask about specific topics without risking suspicion, they divvied up the bylaws and scanned as quickly as they could for applicable passages. The vast majority of the text didn’t apply to their current situation, as fascinating as the content often was. Mel almost got distracted by an entire passage describing restrictions surrounding transmogrification, specifically permanent body additions or subtractions or major facial structure alterations.

“I’ve got weres,” announced Maggie around the hour and a half mark. “Chapter D… CL… XXIII.”

“Six hundred and seventy three.”

Both younger Veras looked at their sister with surprise.

“What? Dr. Vaughn, remember? I can do cool stuff.” Macy waved her hand at them dismissively. “Plus, in undergrad, that skill won us the regional championship in Academic Bowl.”

“Nerd,” teased Mel as she marked her last page and turned to “Chapter DCLXXIII: Accursed Humanoids, Shifters, and Wargs”.

WHEREAS, the nature of these powers renders their bearers faceless, the Council of Elders has a vested interest in close tracking and registry of such creatures.

Section 01 - Of the light

Any lightbound creature capable, outside glamour, of taking the form or appearance of another creature, including those with such capabilities in 10% or more of their body, are to register with the Council in person. If the ratio of dynamic to static body mass is in question, contact an Elder for assessment.

Section 02 - Of the dark

Creatures whose powers match the above description and are derived from dark magic are subject to automatic castration. Creation of such beings carries the same punishment. Judicial trial for incurable and spreadable afflictions may allow for two outcomes:

- Long term imprisonment in a secure realm
- Humane execution

(In some circumstances, the overall disposition of the dark being may warrant elimination of Outcome 1 as a viable solution.)

See Chapter DCCCXXXI for further information on Containment Protocols for Incurables.

The rest of the chapter consisted of a seemingly exhaustive list of creatures that commonly fell under the statute. Mel looked up and waited for Macy to finish reading. “‘Overall disposition’?”

“Maybe that’s what Harry was talking about—he said feral,” replied the older Vera quietly. “But I bet they’ll interpret that however they see fit if it comes down to it.”

“This is about more than their stupid rules, no matter what they say.” Mel tapped her fingers on the papyrus. “It’s about our associations. Like they want us to believe that S’Arcana and weres are bad. Council Good, S’Arcana Bad.”

With no answers and only vague questions, the sisters went back to work, until Macy happened
upon the chapter for appeal rights. It didn’t sound all that different than U.S. legal proceedings, but none of them were lawyers, and there were a few fairly obvious differences—the magical oath to tell nothing but the truth included a self-fulfilling hex that would burn the witness if they lied. Obfuscating might work, but that seemed risky in the face of immolating fire.

As she read along, Mel startled at a quick, warm sensation along her wrist, and her sisters gave her narrow-eyed looks.

“What?” Macy put a hand on her shoulder, checking for injury.

Mel focused on her arm. She’d almost forgotten the enchanted bracelet, but now realized that the feeling, like someone brushing fingertips across her skin, was coming from that particular wrist Niko was wearing it, that much she could feel easily through the connection, and the detective’s current status… Healthy. A little scared. Very much pissed off.

“I put a protection charm on my bracelet before we left. Niko has it. I think... Jada and Harry are there with her now.”

“Jada and Harry?” Macy’s voice spiked in volume a little, and she coughed while looking at their guards for some kind of reaction.

“I told both of them to keep Niko safe. That should be a peace accord enough, for awhile at least.”

Maggie leaned forward to get their attention. “A way to communicate with them would be really nice right about now. I feel like we are very short on friends here.”

“If they show up here, they’re dead,” warned Mel. “You don’t need to find the bylaw that says that to get the implication.”

“Maybe not dead—” Macy trailed off, her eyes wandering back to their creepy guards. “Even some privacy to communicate between us would be nice. Keep an eye out for anything that might help with that… attorney-witch privilege, something.”

They continued searching the tomes for useful bits. After another long while, Mel thought she heard Maggie say something and turned to look at her—only to find her sister staring intently at one of the pages, almost pointedly ignoring her. The second time it happened, she realized the disconnect: the voice was in her head. She licked her lips and tried to move her eyes like she was still reading.

“Testing. One, two, three.”

Maggie?

“Prudence has been teaching me psychic projection. I’m a natural, obviously.”

Do you have any ideas?

Maggie turned her book to page 1,981, and Mel wordlessly followed. Chapter CCLXXVII: The Coven Rites.

With Maggie communicating telepathically with both of her sisters, passing ideas back and forth, they took a few more hours to scan the bylaws before announcing to their guards that they were finished. Finally, they had a plan, more or less, and it would require a giant, potentially eternally consequential leap of faith on their part. A system of law was only as reliable as those enforcing it. If the Elders were truly of Light, their plan should work.
Charity appeared in the room after the guards disappeared in puffs of red smoke. She looked almost ragged, her eyes underlined with purple bags.

“Is it safe to talk in here?” asked Macy, crossing her arms. “The Chancellor’s not listening?”

“I can’t guarantee that,” replied the Elder softly. “I’m sorry.”

“Well, then take us to him. We have nothing to say to you.”

Mel looked between Macy and Charity, adrenaline spiking as their plan began to take shape. The smaller room melted away, leaving them standing before the fire moat yet again, and the Council snapped into view in short order.

“I trust your time with our bylaws was enlightening,” grumbled the Chancellor, though he still managed a smile after getting that out. “May you never accuse us of not being accommodating.”

“Oh, we’ve got plenty of other ideas for accusations.” Mel smirked up at him. “We’re invoking our right to judgment by trial.”

“Judgment?” Tychon’s eyes rounded. “We haven’t even levelled charges—”

“Then send us home.”

The time witch and the Chancellor locked eyes. His baby blues were icy, brimming with the experience of centuries of life, and she saw the reality of the gauntlet they’d thrown begin to darken his irises. “Very well. It sounds as though you’ve read the trial law?”

“We have.”

“So you have an established attorney that you’d like to bring to your side?”

“Yes, but she’s mortal. She’ll need a chance to learn your rules, too.”

The Councillors grumbled unhappily. The Charmed Ones knew that nothing in the bylaws prohibited mortal representation; in fact, it had probably never even been requested. The only question was whether their chosen attorney would accept the job.

Charity’s face had turned lobster-red, tears shining in her eyes. “Girls, no—”

“It’s okay,” assured Mel quietly. “Trust us.”

Tychon cleared his throat. “We will send guards to collect your mortal. Her memory will be wiped upon the trial’s conclusion.”

“Agreed,” said Macy with just a hint of a smirk on her lips. “So, what are our charges?”

“Macy Vaughn, Melanie Vera, and Margarita Vera—you are hereby charged with harboring of dark creatures and conspiracy to overthrow the Council. You’ve submitted to voluntary judgment before this Council and are hereby eternally bound to the decision.”

“Bring it,” was Maggie’s inexplicably perfect response.
For years, decades even, Keiko Hamada had fantasized out loud about returning to her homeland for a final tour, and she’d promised over and over again to bring her children, to show them to the places where their ancestors slept. Then, an aggressive cancer had smothered her life force within six months of diagnosis. They never went to Japan.

Perhaps that was why her eyes burned as she stared around the Shinto shrine buried deep in a grove of conifer trees outside Kyoto. A dusting of snow covered every surface, and she realized she didn’t even know enough about the differences in seasons or geographies to know if that was normal. But she had finally made it, had finally put her feet where Keiko had always wanted her to go, not just for entertainment, but for connection. She admired the swooping red arches looming among the trees, and her heart rate picked up as Zelda led her, Jada, Harry, and Prudence towards the singular temple in the shrine, the thin outer walls delicate, beautiful, and glowing yellow-orange with candlelight. Everything else was red and gold and forest green, and Niko almost wanted to take her time looking around, soaking in the buzzing energy of the place—but they had a purpose. And an unknown time limit. Another time.

Zelda slid open an exterior door, and as soon as Niko stepped through, she grew up into the bear, totally unbidden. It was surprising enough that she froze, and when she looked back, Zelda trotted up to her in fox form. “It’s a revealing ward. Don’t worry,” explained the kitsune, scrabbling up her leg. Niko dropped to all fours, and the fox settled between her shoulder blades. “Through that door.”

On the other side of the sliding panel, which Jada had to open given Niko and Zelda’s lack of fingers, a single person sat waiting for them. She had silver-white hair pulled back into a tight bun and wore a black silk kimono, sitting cross-legged on a mat.

“Mamushi,” greeted Zelda from Niko’s shoulder. “You got my message?”

The small woman gestured to a several mats set out in front of her, and the visiting party variously sat or knelt in a horseshoe shape around the coven leader. “Quite the set of misfits you’ve brought me, yokai… Except. You, bear.”

Niko met the witch’s milky eyes with a gulp, and when she waved a wrinkled hand, the detective shrank bank into herself, Zelda shifting her weight to remain on her shoulders throughout the shift. “Yes?”

“Nice to see you again, Niko-chan. Zelda, I thought your mission was to prevent further disruption?”

“I… I tried to…”

“It wasn’t her fault,” interrupted Niko, lifting her chin. “And that’s not why we’re here. We need your help… please. You obviously cared enough about me to send Z to the States, and this is about my safety, but also my friends’ safety.”

The Mamushi regarded her for a few seconds, not unkindly, but curious. “The last time I saw you, you were barely speaking in full sentences.”

Niko grit her teeth. The woman in front of her represented a wealth of opportunity for answers. About Keiko, for sure, but also quite likely about her father as well. The tease of that trove of information shined like a lighthouse on stormy seas, but Niko… as she had done all her life, pressed on past what she wanted to what needed to be done.

“I’d really like for us to have the chance to talk about this in more detail later. We have a situation with the Elder Council that needs action now.”
That certainly got the old witch’s attention. She leaned forward. “Tell me.”

By the end of the story, mostly the big picture plot points of Sigmund, the were curse, and the subsequent Elder snooping, the Mamushi’s mouth had curled into an unhappy grimace. “Tychon is… an asshole.”

Prudence snorted, getting an elbow jab in the side from her cousin.

“So you need a ride home, is that it?”

“Pretty much, yes,” answered Harry. “That seems to be the most important detail.”

The old witch actually cackled, clapping her hands together. “Very smart, an excellent idea, whitelighter. You know the Coven Rites.”

He nodded and allowed himself a small smile. “I’ve read the lore.”

“Covens have implicit travel permissions in the Ruling Realm. Elders don’t want us dropping in unannounced, so we can’t get in,” explained the Mamushi, folding her hands over her lap. “But we are given free leave. The Council cannot bind anyone under a coven’s protection to their realm. They can certainly chase you home and strike you dead, but keep you there? Against the rules.”

“Jurisdiction,” sighed Niko, shaking her head. “I get it, trust me.”

“I can tether you to this realm and bring you back upon request. To the rest of it… I’m afraid that will be up to your Charmed Ones. Without a tether or a coven, they’ll have to win their trial.” The silver-haired witch tilted her head. “I’ll need to summon my sisters for the tethering. That could take a couple hours. May I have a moment with Niko?”

The fox sighed petulantly, but hopped into Prudence’s arms as the others filed out. Jada was last, catching Niko’s eye with a questioning look, and the detective gave her a nod. The whitelighter-witch pointed two fingers at her eyes, and then turned her hand around to point them at the Mamushi before leaving. The coven leader seemed amused by the warning, but her slight smile faded as the door slid shut behind Jada.

“Niko-chan,” breathed the older woman, rising to her feet… which wasn’t that much of a height change. She was probably just shy of five-foot, and Niko instinctively made herself smaller, shoulders hunching. Her mother had been 4’ 10” on a good day. “I’m sure you have questions.”

“Oh, I… Not even his name.” Niko’s heart rate ticked up. She was ready to stop wondering about these blank spots in her own life, to get the pieces she needed to wrestle her self-autonomy free from a bunch of magical beings that all seemed to have stolen pieces of her for their own. She was very
much ready to get those back now, thanks. “Tell me. How do you know me?”

“Roger Abraham Paulson. Your father.” Each word hit like a deep drumbeat against Niko’s chest. “He was a Marine, stationed in a nearby camp. Your mother fell hard, and he… He was not a good man.”

“Is that why she came to you?”

The Mamushi nodded. “With a broken spirit and two blackened eyes.”

Niko took a deep, ragged breath. It was the truth she’d come to expect after the fairy tales of childhood had faded; once she’d become a detective, she’d all but assumed. Her mother’s quirks and defense mechanisms, the way she avoided the questions… all behavior she’d seen in battered women throughout her career. She’d long ago accepted that her father wasn’t a saintly war hero, but someone who struck fear into her mother’s eyes. Actually hearing the details was an entirely different matter than assuming, though. She had to swallow before going on, “What did you do to him?”

“Sent him to Tartarus,” replied the witch matter-of-factly. “And arranged safe passage for you, your brother, and your mother to the United States.”

“What did you get in return?”

“Your mother was a thrall, until she died. She’d run errands for us mostly. I’m not of a mind to give hard labor to a woman escaping her personal monster.”

“Well… thank you, I guess. Who knows where we would’ve ended up without your help, back then or now.” Niko offered a small smile as she declined her head.

The Mamushi folded her hands into her sleeves. “And speaking of personal monsters… I know have your own right now. Our sisterhood stands ready to help. We can protect you here—from the Elders, from all that Western madness. All you have to do is ask.”

“What about my friends?”

The woman’s tiny shrug told her all she needed to know.

It was tempting. How could it not be? Haunted by magic or not, what human adult alive in 2019 wouldn’t at least consider a chance to walk away from it all? Clean slate. Away from Trump, or as away as you could be when he had control of enough nukes to destroy the planet in an entirely non-magical apocalypse. The thought of getting some distance from him alone almost prompted her to accept.

“I can’t,” she said after a few breaths. “I have to… I…”

“The Charmed Ones are the most powerful witches in history,” reminded the Mamushi seriously. “They will persevere, and the whitelighters are much more well equipped to help them face off against Elders. Based on what you told me, perhaps the bear’s absence would… untangle some of the trap in which they’ve found themselves. Unless there is something more keeping you involved.”

Niko looked down, swallowing thickly. “Zelda told you about Mel?”

“The time witch.” The silver-haired woman moved back to her mat, sitting down, and Niko instinctively did the same. “Of course she couldn’t have been the telekinetic…”

That made Niko smile, though she tried to hide it behind her hand. The Mamushi used the same tone
Keiko had upon finding out Greta graduated with an art history degree. “Of course she couldn’t have been an MD, not even a chemical engineer…”

“I understand. I thought perhaps the offer would take you down a safer path to each other.”

“You don’t think I’m being stupid? We barely know each other…” Niko tried not to think too hard about the absurdity asking a millenia-old magical being about her crush. “But I feel her. Here.” She brought a fist to her chest.

“The relationship between time and fate is a tricky one. I myself have never bothered much with trying to change such things. It often ends up fruitless or worse than before.” The old woman’s expression softened. “Fate is patience, and time is ephemeral. You and the time witch, I feel your connection, even here, having never even met the woman. It’s more than some old bracelet.”

Niko touched the jewelry in question almost reflexively, and it again sent a warm pulse along her skin.

“Would you like to speak to her while we wait for the sisters to gather?”

“To... Mel? How?”

“Pay attention, Niko-chan. We’re talking about connections of fate.”

Every few minutes or so, Rachel Jackson, Unlucky Esquire, would turn her eyes up from the trial procedure chapter and gawk at the half-mummified guards in their mini research cave. True to his word, the Chancellor had had the attorney brought to them post-haste… so post-haste that they’d disapparated the redhead right out of her bed. After she stopped screaming, the Charmed Ones had tag teamed bringing her up to speed on the major points, and then there was some more screaming, but a couple hours later, and she was doing much better, even if her hands were still shaking as she turned the pages of the bylaws.

Every now and then, her nervous staring would erupt in a question that she just couldn’t keep down, understandably.

“So when you say we’re in another dimension… you mean like... another planet, or…?”

“A witch is like, more like the wiccans or are we talking like Wizard of Oz… no, I guess you aren’t green…”

“Maybe Saruman is a better point of reference for this Chancellor dude?”

The oldest sister tried her best to continually reassure the public defender, but to be honest, she was having her own trouble keeping track of their road to getting out of this in one piece. Mel was confident they could solve several problems in one go, and Maggie was ready to set the whole realm on fire, mini-harbinger that she was, and yet Macy couldn’t help but falter under the worst case scenario of what they faced. Maybe they weren’t going to be able to outsmart a jury of ancient magical beings. It felt healthy to think that. Right? Anticipate the weak spots. That was productive.
“So what are, like, your powers?”

Macy glanced at Rachel, feeling guilty again that the attorney would be arguing the case in her pajamas. “I’m a telekinetic.”

Rachel’s green eyes rounded. “Like Jean Gray?”

“Sure.” She looked next at her sisters, who were napping against the back wall. “Mel can freeze people and things in time, temporarily. Maggie’s an empath.”

“Oh. Me, too!”

Macy had to chuckle at the desperate undertone of humor to Rachel’s voice. She knew the feeling, intimately. “She can read minds. Mostly only when she’s physically touching someone, so don’t panic about eavesdropping or anything. She also likes enthusiastic, continuous consent.”

The attorney nodded, eyes going a little unfocused. “Jeez, the implications… Is a later, progressed thought based on privileged communications, a thought that only occurs inside your head, given the same protection as the conversation itself?” When Macy gave her a wide-eyed look, the redhead let out another too-loud laugh. “Sorry. This is me nervous. You’re not gonna, like, curse my bloodline if we don’t win, are you?”

Also a fair question, Macy supposed. “We won’t. I promise.”

“Okay, good.” Rachel tapped her fingertips on the desk. “Does all this have anything to do with Niko and Greta splitting up?”

“That was like… eight hours ago, how did you find out about that before bed?”

“Greta took her relationship status off of Facebook and posted a fancy selfie with Perry on Instagram.” The attorney said it as seriously as if she were citing legal precedent. “Nothing gets past me.”

“Well, good, we’ll need that.”

“I also notice when people don’t answer my questions.”

Macy looked over at her snoozing middle sister, mouth hanging open, one hand resting on Maggie’s back as the youngest slept curled onto Mel’s lap. Rachel’s memory of all this would be wiped, and it felt strangely liberating to spill their secrets to someone new like this. With the exception of Niko, most everyone they usually chatted about this stuff with knew more than they did. Which was frustrating, to say the least. “Yeah, um, the split does involve magic, in a way.”

“More than just, Niko becoming a werewolf?”

“Were [bear. But yes.” The eldest Vera shifted in her chair. “Mel and Niko… they used to date. Let’s just say there’s a multiverse where they were pretty serious, and Mel remembers it, but Niko doesn’t.”

“Aha.” Rachel nodded as though that made it all make sense. “Well… I’m not sure what to say to that, but with the Greta, stuff, good. I was tired of waiting for that shoe to drop.”

Macy threw her hands in the air. “Didn’t anyone ever say anything to her about that?”

“Oh, we did. A lot.” The attorney sipped her magically-manifested coffee, which she had demanded
as a condition of her assistance. “It was like she doubled down after her mom died. Greta was all she had left, Sora was being Captain America all around the world, and whatnot. But, that kind of thing can only get two people so far.”

“That makes sense.”

“Don’t get me wrong… she’s a stubborn asshole when she wants to be, good reason or not. You’ll see.”

Macy grinned, finding comfort that even this stranger tossed into the weirdest scenario could find the space to reference the future. Any future, beyond this bleak realm.

Across the room, Maggie was stirring, sitting up with a yawn. She stretched her arms and twisted her back, then out a hand on Mel’s shoulder.

“Mel? Mel? Me-e-el?”

Macy’s stomach dropped when she saw the way their middle sister just tipped limply to one side, eyes still closed, and then she was sprinting across smooth floor to her sisters’ side.

Mel wasn’t sure how or why she was walking through dense forest. The trees looked a lot like the ones at home. She had a vague thought that she should really be helping her sisters doing something somewhere, but at the moment… all she wanted to do was keep strolling through the relative serenity of the trees. Plenty of small animals scurried to and fro, largely ignoring her as they foraged and went about their days with chirps, scratches, and whistles.

At one point, she passed a huge white-tailed stag, which just stood and chewed, occasionally scratching his shoulder with his antlers. Next, a little gray fox that looked suspiciously like Zelda darted parallel to her path, not quite visible in the underbrush, before darting to the left. She followed it to the next encounter, a snake, light brown with darker, irregular splotches down its back as it hung from a tree branch. It was definitely watching her, and it seemed to nod when her eyes met the viper’s cloudy brown ones.

After a few more minutes of peace, the forest split, and she found herself standing in front of a modest two-story house, mostly brick, with gray-white smoke curling from the chimney. Seemed innocuous enough. Her instincts weren’t alarming to any threat, so she headed to the front door and found it unlocked.

The house inside was unfamiliar to her, but also… not. There was a healthy blaze in the fireplace on her left, with a living room decorated with an impressive collection of multicolor sarapes across comfy-looking couches straight ahead. Soft music drifted through the air from a standalone record player between the large window overlooking the trees and a dark green leather armchair in one corner. To the right, a wall and wide doorway marked the path to what looked like a kitchen, but that was where Mel stopped her initial exploration.

Standing in front of the white ceramic farmhouse sink, currently turning to face her, was Niko. The detective wore a soft-looking red and white flannel shirt, straightleg jeans with some wear around the knees, and a pair of thick brown boots, with her dark brown hair pulled back in a simple ponytail.

“You’re alive,” said Niko simply, taking a single hesitant step towards her.
Mel stared back as her brain raced to remember where she’d been before this, or how it could be within the realm of possibility that Niko was standing there right now.

Ruling Realm. Council. Bylaws. Trial. But what were they doing here? The witch looked down and registered her own clothing, a heather gray sweatshirt and black jeans tucked into her own pair of solid workboots. She paced forward into the kitchen, glancing at the dining room against a far wall. It held a long table with live edges and a natural finish, set on top of three stumps, like the table itself had grown out of the forest and into the home. Mel followed a lot of woodworkers on Instagram, and this table style… She’d coveted such a piece for a long time. They were easily five figures to purchase handmade, let alone transport and install. The witch moved past Niko, over to the table to put a palm flat against the sealed grain. It was the right color, the right dimensions, the right type of wood—walnut, a little grayer than gold. The dining table of her dreams.

“Where are we?” she asked as she felt the detective move closer behind her.

“I don’t know, exactly.”

“Are you doing this?”

“Kind of. Yes.” Niko brought up an arm as if she were about to touch her glasses, but then seemed to remember, and instead scratched the back of her neck. “Zelda’s coven is helping us. I don’t know what the magic is, exactly, but this is me.”

“Nik, I told you not to do anything stupid…”

“I know.” Both of their eyes fell to the silver bracelet somehow still around the detective’s wrist. “But I promise, this isn’t stupid.”

“We’re taking care of it. Stay where you are, and you’ll be safe—”

“Safe?” interrupted Niko loudly. “Mel, I’m not even human anymore. Safe is long gone for me, and that’s… it’s okay. It is what it is. At this particular moment, I’m worried about you, pretty exclusively.”

Mel sighed, trying not to let the exhaustion tugging at her bones come through in her tone. “You’re right. But we have a plan to get the Elders off our backs. It could work.”

“We have a plan to save you from the Elders. You wanna flip a coin for it?”

When the witch’s eyes opened again, the detective was hovering in her space, not threateningly or intrusively, just close. It was the first time they’d been alone in a room together, much less a secluded house, since falling asleep together that first night. Tentatively, she reached up and adjusted Niko’s collar for no particular reason, bringing herself the rest of the way forward to close the distance between them.

“This is all a lot of drama just to get my attention, Miss Vera.”

Despite everything, Mel chuckled as their eyes met again, and she let go of Niko’s collar, only to rest her hands just underneath, palms pressed flat against soft fabric and solid muscle. A part of her was relieved at how real the detective’s chest felt under her fingers. “You’re the one trying to rush in and save the day.”

“Oh, that whole thing? Forget I mentioned it. That’s for Maggie.”

Mel rolled her eyes, and then nearly startled when Niko’s hands wrapped gently around her wrists,
tugging her hands up until she got the message and accepted, locking her fingers behind the detective’s neck instead. The closeness was simultaneously dizzying and grounding, her veins singing with a feeling of home. The song from the record player had changed to a totally different artist, reminding her that this wasn’t in any way a natural setting. But still they stood there for a handful of too-short seconds, Niko’s hands resting on her hips, not dancing in any sense of the word, but just taking the time to exist, pressed close.

“I need you to stop punishing yourself for the timeline thing,” Niko said quietly. “Stop trying to sacrifice yourself for me, stop trying to move the cookie jar before my hand gets in it. That’s not what I want.”

Mel gulped, dropping her eyes as a couple traitorous tears made it free to her cheeks. “Okay.”

“Okay?” Niko slipped a crooked finger under the shorter woman’s chin, lifting until their gazes met again. “Good. Because I didn’t become a police officer to sit on the sidelines.”

“Detective,” Mel managed to joke, smiling as Niko’s thumb wiped at the wetness on her cheeks. They kept standing like that, ludicrously intimate, touching from knee to chest. It was almost too much. She thought about taking a step back, but her body had other ideas, and instead, her fingers just tightened their hold on the handsome detective’s neck until their foreheads thunked gently together, mercifully too close to keep eye contact.

“We should probably get back,” suggested Mel thickly.

Niko nodded, but added quickly, “Do you know what the red string is?”

“I don’t.” Mel waited, feeling the detective’s thudding heartbeat against her own chest.

“It’s a belief about fate. People, things, events—they’re bound by a red thread that represents fate. Destiny. It can tangle and loop, take longer than it needs to get to the point, but the connection never breaks.” Niko took a deep, shuddering breath, a tiny bit of the bear seemed to rumble through her exhale. “And I think it’s like… fuck, this is going to sound so stupid… my soul remembers you.”

“It’s not stupid.” Mel’s voice came out strained, and she pulled back her head just enough to catch those warm brown eyes again. They were bright with fear, a little watery, and Mel forgot any plausible reason why she’d ever thought she could stay away from those eyes without being marooned in another galaxy—

Niko huffed, like a kid ready to dive off the deep end, and then her hands on Mel’s hips gripped harder, and finally, finally, they came together.

Mel remembered the first time they kissed, the real first time, like it had happened just minutes ago. The fire that blazed across her skin under Niko’s unsubtle gaze, the way she’d practically mounted her in the middle of the bar, and how the detective expertly took her apart once they’d reached a place incrementally more private. It’d been hot, fast, and somewhat overwhelming.

This was different. Maybe it was because of the gravity of events swirling around them. Maybe it was because she’d spent so much time and energy fighting it. Giving in was like cool rain in the dog days of summer, like the first bolt of sunlight after a hurricane, a shimmering revelation of relief saying, We are going to be okay. Niko’s lips sliding against hers, tasting faintly of alcohol and something sweet and citrusy, Niko’s tongue pushing past her lips… She couldn’t help the groan that escaped her throat, prompting the detective’s hips to press forward with purpose.

Niko practically melted, walk-stumbling them both towards that gorgeous table, and Mel hiked
herself onto it immediately, allowing the detective to move between her legs before twisting her fist in that adorable butch-lite flannel and dragging Niko’s mouth back to hers. Wide, warm palms skated over her legs to grip at the loops in her jeans, jolting their hips together. It was indulgent, and Mel had a fleeting thought to run away in this world together, good luck everybody else.

They both knew that wasn’t an actual option, but with eternal damnation staring down the barrel at them—she would spare some time to relive in full 4D how good it felt to press herself up against the detective again. Not just for the hard muscle flexing against her. Because it was Niko. This was her Niko, and despite all of her fears and anxieties about revealing the truth in the old timeline, she’d never felt closer to the detective. Figuratively speaking.

A gentle ringing, not from the record player, but seemingly from everywhere all at once, dragged them back to the present, both looking around even as they kept a tight hold on each other.

“Time to go,” sighed the detective, but she still dipped her head to plant a last kiss on Mel’s lips.

The witch smiled, brushing a palm down Niko’s face. As the taller woman shifted, Mel’s eyes caught sight of something on the wall behind her head. “Niko… Is this the type of place you’d like to live one day?”

“Well, yes…” The detective cleared her throat. “This kitchen is my dream kitchen. Down to the knobs on the cabinets.”

“This table is my dream dining table. And looks like at least one of us has another dream too...” Mel pointed at the picture hanging on the wall over the dining table that had caught her attention, waiting until the detective turned to look. It was a large printout of a professional photograph, all perfect lighting and golden tones, of them —Niko and Mel, faces in wide smiles burgeoning on laughter, the detective’s arms wrapped possessively around the shorter woman’s shoulders as she hugged her from behind. Perched in Mel’s lap sat a chubby toddler with shining brown eyes and black hair, a purple “M” stitched into their little shirt.

“Oh.” Niko’s face flushed bright red. “I don’t know if you—we can talk about that, um…”

“Niko,” Mel grabbed her face with both hands. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about that right now. Be safe. Don’t come to us if you can’t be safe.”

“Bet. Race you to the rescue.”

The ringing bells were growing louder. Mel touched Niko’s bracelet, and it briefly glowed neon purple. “That’s our plan. Give it to Jada and Harry. Whatever happens, I love you.”

Niko nodded, but before she could reply, she blinked away. The music stopped. The lights faded, until there was nothing but black. And then her sisters’ voices, calling. Mel bolted upright, gasping, and nearly collided foreheads with her younger sister. Maggie, Macy, and Rachel were all leaning over her with creased brows.

“Jesus, Mel,” breathed Macy, putting out a hand to help her stay upright. “What happened?”

The time witch let her sisters help her to her feet, and then to one of the stone-carved chairs. She pitched her voice low, wary of the guards just a few yards away. “I’m fine, don’t worry about it. Just haven’t slept in a long time.”

In her mind, she said: Niko got a message to me. They’ve got some kind of plan. Jada and Harry are in on it.
Maggie nodded, implying she’d heard, and said out loud, “Okay. Then we’re ready to get started.”

Chapter End Notes

one more chapter! then the wind-down!

Thanks for sticking along on this exposition-heavy ride.

(Yes, I am totes bitter at the showrunners loving themselves enough to go with the classic and much simpler "I just felt like something was missing" bit, but I'll take it for now as I attempt to dig myself out from under a mountain of plot of my own making.)
Once upon a time, Maggie signed up for a mock trial after-school group. At the top of the elementary school food chain socially, fifth-grade Margarita was confident she would destroy the fourth grade counterparts who served as their opponents. After all, people had told her throughout her young life that she was very persuasive, even if maybe that was usually expressed as, “Fine, Mags, just please stop talking.” Her victory in this extracurricular felt like a certainty in her mind.

Until she had to learn the rules. An endless parade of them, each more asinine than the last. Hearsay. Badgering the witness. Asked and answered. Scooter Cooper, actual name, had been her second chair, and by the end of the actual mock trial, that pasty jerk had smugly taken over the proceedings entirely. After, Maggie retreated to the bathroom for a vigorous round of crying in one of the stalls, until Marisol had been able to make it down to the school and coax her out to go home. Mel, then in that sociopathic middle school stage, had been snide for days.

Joining Kappa House and learning all those rules (“no drinking in letters”, “no gym shorts at chapter”) had been triggering, but she powered through with the assistance (read: distraction) of her newfound magical powers. The current scene was like both of those experiences, but on MDMA. Crack, as the usual adage went, wasn’t a good comparison; this was truly a dreamlike slice of reality, everything extra intense and personal. Incidentally, she was also uncomfortably thirsty, but apparently they didn’t provide water bottles in the Ruling Realm.

Helpfully, the Council and this “trial” was more Kappa House Disciplinary Ceremony than anything she’d seen on Law & Order. The Council was jury and judge, with the one called Braun serving on the accusing side.

Rachel, lucky that she wasn’t a naked sleeper, stood in her pajamas with a solemn expression, backlit by the white fire moat, in a portrait that might’ve looked comical if their fates didn’t hinge so precariously on these proceedings. The sisters sat on a set of chairs off to the side, with testimony and cross examination happening in the middle of the wide, flat area in front of the the councillors, brightly lit like a circus ring.

Niko, Jada, and Harry showing up hadn’t been part of their initial plan, but if that trio pulled it off without getting immediately captured or killed, they would actually help. For now, the sisters just had
to go with their schemes and hope.

She stifled a yawn and glanced at her sisters as Braun made his opening argument. Macy, the sister she never knew she needed, and Mel… the sister she’d more than once cursed and wished was never born. Marisol had tried her best to referee, but Maggie was far enough removed from those battles now to confidently say there would’ve been nothing their mom could do to stop them from verbally tearing into each other at least quarterly. It was then nature of being teenagers stuck in close quarters, she supposed.

Now that Mom was gone, though… Mel’s initial reaction, the angry blame slinging, had been devastating. In the subsequent unpacking of all that, Maggie had accepted that sometimes people had shitty reactions to grief, and she’d forgiven her sister for it, even if the memories of navigating her own pain alone still haunted their relationship. At least, after they’d changed Niko’s timeline, Mel’s humble search for comfort with her younger sister suggested there was hope for them. Macy’s arrival was like another shock to the system, jolting them into a new perspective and appreciation for one another. And here they were.

“Margarita.”

It had been so long since someone called her that that Maggie almost didn’t look up. When she did, Braun was staring at her with a deep frown. “What?”

“It’s your turn to take the oath, empath,” he said flatly.

Maggie sighed as she straightened up in her seat, holding up her right hand, “May my promise to truth be true, or may Helios’ fire burn me through.”

She expected some kind of sound effect or physical feeling, but nothing happened. Nevertheless, Braun appeared satisfied, moving away from the table to the middle of the stage area. If Tychon looked like a cross between the two old dudes who played Dumbledore, Braun looked like that haughty liar teacher at Hogwarts, the one that was all grandeur and no substance. He had curly, light brown hair that screamed “I developed my sense of taste in the early 80s”, a lean and somewhat muscular build, and the most annoyingly smug voice that Maggie had ever heard. And she’d spent a lot of time around frat boys, so in this area, she was an expert.

Mel shifted in the seat next to her, touching her wrist.

“What?” she asked, not needing to be that quiet with Braun’s artificially projected voice filling the space.

“I’m just worried.”

“Well, as far as I’m concerned, it’s about time someone came to our rescue. Mix it up a bit.” Maggie smiled to try to get her sister to stop looking so glum, but the unhappy expression persisted. “Seriously, Mel, your girlfriend is a magic, giant bear. She’s a little better equipped for survival than before.”

“Yeah, physically, but…” The older sister chewed her lip thoughtfully for a moment. “This is all still really new. I think we’re kidding ourselves if we believe that she’s totally processed what it means.”

“She broke up with Greta on the fly,” offered Maggie. “That was huge, and she didn’t even shift.”

“Doing something that objectively needs to be done isn’t the same as being faced with some of the choices we’ve had to make.”
That was fair. Maggie put a hand on Mel’s shoulder, squeezing lightly, as she turned her attention back to Braun. Under the two accusations, harboring unlawful creatures and conspiracy to overthrow the Council, Braun wove a tale that was actually fairly close to the truth, but missing some key plot points. He didn’t mention how Zelda, Prudence, and Jada had been instrumental in Sigmund’s defeat, and he didn’t reference any of the aid they’d provided in keeping Niko’s secret after the rescue. In his telling, the S’Arcana had come to the Charmed Ones to try to win them over to their side, tempt them into dark magic and other heresies. He described Prudence in the same terms that he might a goblin, and Maggie rolled her eyes as some of the Elders clutched their proverbial pearls. Jada came off as a terrorist demagogue, merciless and cruel. Maggie had once had an exchange with the whitelighter-witch in the Vera kitchen where they commiserated on their favorite Boxcar Children books. *Demonic witch hunter? Please.*

She almost reacted out loud when Braun also used the word “mongrel” in his description, but Macy reached across Mel to touch her shoulder and gently shook her head.

Getting into a showdown with Braun would technically be a sign that their plan failed, but Maggie almost wouldn’t mind at this point if it meant she could knee him before it was all over.

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*Whatever happens, I love you.*

Perhaps the way the words made her head swim wasn’t entirely healthy. She gave herself a pass given this was a little more complicated than an Ask Abby letter. Still… Niko would storm St. Peter’s Gate to save Mel and her sisters, and as she’d recently learned, that was probably possible.

This version of reality, where magic and monsters existed, also included the quintet of witches in front of her, all middle-aged and older women wearing the same funeral kimono as their leader. Presently, said women were doing something that looked a lot like meditating, and to Niko’s understanding it was a like a Dragon Ball power-up; the “kamehame—“ power up to the final, shouted “ha” that would create the connection to this realm, or something. Whatever it looked like, the detective couldn’t deny that *something* was happening to the air around them, as if the very substance of matter was beginning to thin and bend.

Prudence and Zelda would stay behind, sent back to the States to try and find out more about Cecilia Lopez, just in case.

*Whatever happens, I love you.*

“The Elders aren’t above using tricks,” Jada was warning her as they waited, each standing in a pentagram drawn in volcanic ash. “Remember how you feel right now, standing here. You’re Niko Hamada, badass detective, werebear, and you’re going to rescue your girl.”

Niko nodded, gulping, too nervous to address that last ridiculous part directly. Some cuddling and a maybe-not-real-kiss hardly made Mel “her” anything. But she got the gist of the mood Jada was trying to set. The detective leaned forward to peer at Harry, who looked paler than usual and a little green. He’d stripped down to just his unbuttoned Oxford shirt, suspenders, and his trousers, but was still sweating profusely.

“I could lose my job over this,” he muttered, wiping some moisture from his forehead with a deep
red handkerchief.

“Is that really the most pressing concern right now?” Jada replied hotly.

“It’s more than a paycheck, and I am perfectly aware of its place in the Current Troubles Prioritization Chart, Ms. Shields.”

“They’re not gonna like, vaporize us as soon as we get there, are we?” interrupted Niko, rolling her eyes. Was this what it was like having two parents like the other kids? The hype seemed overblown.

“Ehhh,” Jada’s voice creaked on the noncommittal noise. She snickered when Niko spluttered back, and then added, “I’m just fucking with you. Not immediately. We’ll have some time to get our bearings and exchange in witty repartee with the Chancellor before vaporization.”

Niko nodded soberly, crossing her arms. “A witch, a whitelighter, and a bear walk into an alternate dimension…”

**Whatever happens, I love you.**

“We’re almost ready. The tether to this world won’t last forever, so no dawdling. Once the connection breaks, you’re on your own,” the Mamushi was saying, her eyes closed from where she sat at the crest of the half circle of seated witches. “And don’t believe a word the Council tells you.”

Jada nodded and caught Niko’s eye, jabbing a thumb at the coven leader. “See? What did I say?”

And then to Harry, she declared, “I could definitely do your job.”

“It’s not that simp... “ Harry sucked in a deep breath, looking at the ceiling reverently as if asking for some kind of assistance. “If you don’t behave, I’m going to leave you here, Ms. Shields.”

**There he is,** laughed the whitelighter-witch. “Just making sure you’re awake, whitelighter.”

Niko gave Harry a sympathetic glance before the Mamushi interrupted to announce that they were ready. The witches began to chant, increasing volume and speed as Harry pulled Heimdall’s Sword from its sheath. Trickles of red light, more particle clouds than actual rays, drifted from the curved row of witches to the three travellers, until glowing clouds engulfed them all. When Harry got the nod from the coven leader, he lifted the sword with both hands, and then drove it straight into the temple floor. White light sprung out of the puncture, and then glowing spider-web cracks rippled out from it. Harry grabbed Jada’s hand, and the whitelighter-witch took Niko’s. The detective thought she heard the chirp of a phone, as odd as that contrasted against the scene, but on her next breath, they ceased to exist.

**Whatever happens, I love you.**

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As a rule, kind of like the Secret Service, whitelighters could not be called as witnesses, though they could be prosecuted separately for not reporting wrongdoing.

The first witness Braun called was Charity.

Mel wasn’t sure she would ever forgive the Elder if she said something that harmed her sisters, Niko,
or the S’Arcana. The “sides” didn’t get to do pre-trial interviews, which made everything feel more theatrical, with the potential for plot twists at every word.

Charity said the oath in a strong voice, but her eyes kept darting to the Charmed Ones with obvious conflictedness. She looked stunning, as usual, in her millionaire Laguna Beach mom kind of way.

“Charity, thank you for being here. You are the only Elder who has worked closely with the Charmed Ones. Please tell the court your impression of their temperaments and character.”

Mel looked at Rachel, raising an eyebrow, and their attorney shook her head.

“They’re powerful and intelligent young witches,” began the Elder, looking at Braun. “They care deeply for one another, for humans, and do their best to make the right choices. And like so many of us in our first centuries… headstrong. Brash.”

“Have you ever heard them talk about going against the Council’s wishes or otherwise argue their teachings are wrong?”

Dick. Mel tried to remind herself that Charity couldn’t lie without serious bodily harm as the Elder recounted the plentiful instances in which the answer was a resounding yes. None of the earlier stuff amounted to these crimes, but Braun’s intended implications on their character were clear.

“Thank you, Charity. No further questions.”

As the sandy-haired asshole with legs went back to his seat, Rachel cleared her throat and moved to the circle of light. Unlike the night they had met at the dinner party (a much more portentous occasion in hindsight), Rachel seemed unrelentingly serious in this setting, and thankfully not at all nervous. For all she’d had to learn and process in such a short amount of time, the redhead was a shining beacon of hope for Humans Taking This Well.

“Charity,” she began, flashing a polite smile. “You knew Marisol Vera?”

“Of course. She was an Elder for many years. A once in a generation witch.”

“And when she died, what did you and the Council do to investigate her death?”

“Objection,” called Braun. “Marisol had nothing to do with her daughter’s crimes. She was already long gone.”

Mel bristled as Rachel quickly replied, “Behaviors occur in a context, and that context can provide legal defense in this Court, even if intent isn’t a factor in determining guilt.”

Tychon looked between the two, and then nodded to Rachel. They were on the board.

Charity wrung her hands a little as she answered: “I can only speak to what I personally experienced. While the Veras were at the police station, we visited the home.”

“Who, specifically?”

“Myself, Tychon, and Braun.”

Finding out these men had been in their home without their permission or knowledge crawled across Mel’s skin like a cold, wet rag. Maybe they needed to make the alarm ward permanent… and find some way to make it smart phone compatible.

“And what did you find?”
“Nothing. If Marisol was pushed from the window, it was done the old fashioned way.”

Rachel did that thing lawyers on TV did, made a little “hm” noise and put on an extra casual expression. “You found no evidence of a magical presence, other than Marisol Vera, at the property?”

“No—” Charity broke off with a sharp hiss, her hand flying to her chest. Smoke curled out of her mouth and nostrils as she coughed, and Mel’s jaw went slack as she realized it was the oath curse.

“The fire seems to say you’re lying,” offered Rachel with an almost-smirk. “Do you want to try that again? Any evidence of magical presence?”

The Elder cleared her throat and spat ash to the ground, then considered her answer again. “Just Marisol and other Elders.”

Apparently, the terms of what constituted a lie were strict. Good.

“Which Elders, specifically?”

Charity glanced at the Council, Mel noted. “Myself, Chancellor Tychon, Braun, and Quri, who was good friends with Marisol and visited regularly. Otherwise, it was the three of us who investigated that night, so—no one other than those who were in the house at the time.”

The random friend Quri, Mel didn’t know. She exchanged questioning glances with Maggie, who shook her head. No Tía Quri that they remembered. Macy seemed to be struck with an idea, and Mel watched as she telecommunicated it with Maggie, who then appeared to bounce the idea to Rachel. The attorney paused, clearing her throat to hide the interruption, and then asked, “So… you wouldn’t be able to tell if any of those four people had been in the house shortly before you arrived? You would just assume they were causing the… magic?”

“I’m not sure I understand what you’re asking.”

“In human courts, the magical residue would be analogous to something like epithelial DNA left at a scene. It proves you were there, but it doesn’t prove when you were there. Does that sound right?”

Charity’s jaw clenched and unclenched a couple times as the Council murmured quietly amongst themselves. “That sounds right.”

“So any of the four of you could’ve been the last person to see Marisol Vera alive, and subsequently, during your visit, you wouldn’t be able to tell either way?”

“Correct.”

The magical misfit trio reappeared in what looked like a doctor’s lounge in a Tropical Café—a dim room with natural cave on all sides, furnished with myriad low couches and coffee tables, a counter floating attached to one natural wall with white ceramic mugs and little plates. The air place was cool and clean, with Niko’s nose picking up next to nothing but stone and the inanimate objects around them. She closed her eyes and listened, but no sound came from beyond the door on one side of the room, nor any of the walls.
Huffing, Jada crossed her arms, shuffling around the room aimlessly and studying each piece of furniture like a threat. For all Niko knew, they could be. Harry struggling to affix the sword to his belt, and after a few seconds of that anxiety-inducing sight, Niko snatched the sheath from him and tied it to herself instead.

“Where are we?” asked the detective, raising an eyebrow when he looked like he might protest.

“Er, the whitelighter receiving area. From here, we can get down to the main chambers. There should only be maybe a handful of guards, no alarm system. Technically speaking, what we’re doing right now is the most serious assault on the Ruling Realm since…” His eyes flickered to Jada, and then guiltily away.

“We’re just here for a rescue,” reminded Niko. “Are the guards these mummy people with the spears?”

When Harry nodded, Niko decided to take no chances, and she shifted into the bear before the heat of the moment could throw her off her game. It made it a little difficult to get through the door, but she managed after a minorly embarrassing round of wiggling. Jada was kind enough to just grin at her as she followed, and Harry looked too lost in panic to even notice. He led them through the narrow cave halls with several winding turns, and the ground began to take them steadily lower. She thought it strange to have such distance without any apparent function; it wasn’t as though they passed any other doors or rooms. Just more hallways.

“Some of these passages lead to traps, in case of invasion,” muttered Harry, ever the teacher even as his voice shook. “You have to physically pass through the halls because it’s the final inconvenience to invasion. Like the Germans in a Soviet Winter.”

The first two guards they encountered popped out of a four-way intersection, and Jada was easily able to disable one with a strong zap. Niko used the back of her paw to slap the spear of the next out of the way, and her huge size in the small space meant it was only another two steps before she smashed the guard into the ground under her claws, not slicing into their neck, but holding down until they ceased to struggle. As the trio got themselves together, another set of guards appeared from the opposite direction.

Jada’s lightning snapped to life as she leapt over Niko and unleashed on them, sending each into opposite walls so hard the rock behind them cracked. One crumpled immediately, and Harry—bless his heart—sprinted in from nowhere and punched the thing squarely in the cloth-wrapped face. The guard went down.

“Well that was—Christ, I forgot how much that hurts,” complained the whitelighter, delicately holding up his reddened knuckles. “Human fights are… savage.”

“Let me,” said Jada, chuckling softly as Harry sucked in a breath through his teeth. She took his injured hand with exceeding gentleness and brushed her fingers over the bleeding skin.

With a bright blue glow, the wound healed over, and Harry nodded gratefully as he examined the work. “Thank you, Ms. Shields.”

Niko’s ear twitched as it picked up footsteps approaching, the tiny break in action giving her pulse time to calm down so she could focus. They moved the bodies around the corner from the direction they needed to go, and then moved at a quicker pace deeper into the maze. As they jogged along, Jada somehow decided to pull out her phone.

“Really?” whispered Harry, sounding exactly like someone who was about to launch into an
insufferable rant on Millennials.

“...I think I got something before…” She stopped, narrowing her eyes at the screen. “Prudence dropped me some photos from the Lopez house. I’m guessing they didn’t get arrested. Hopefully.”

“You got service in Japan? Do you have like, magic cell plans?”

Jada and Harry gave Niko a withering look. Look at that, a moment of bonding. “International plan, my guy. I’m a teleporter, hello?”

“Oh, yeah.” Jada turned the screen, green eyes looking a bit more hopeful than before. The picture showed what looked like a bunch of coins on a table, arranged in a honeycomb type pattern. Except, there was a uniform glare across the photo, and she realized the coins were all under one surface, like a table or— “It’s the floor where she died.”

“The coin,” murmured Harry, what little color he had draining from his face. It was one of those modern, custom designed floors made of pennies and poured over with a clear sealant to make the surface uniform. Except right in the middle of the photo, interrupting a clean three rows of the otherwise perfect pattern, was a silver dollar, evidence forever emblazoned in acrylic. “We have got to get this in front of the Council.”

And so a witch, a whitelighter, and a bear walked on.

When Braun called Mel to the stand, Maggie thought her heart stopped for more than just a second. There was no “pleading the fifth” in Elder trials, but this they knew before asking for the proceedings. Whether their scheme would be effective on Plan A or Plan C, if effective at all… that was the key question here. The empath shifted in her chair, glancing up at the stony-faced council, and then back to Mel, whose expression could only appropriately be described as “ten seconds from ripping his dick off.”

“Melanie,” greeted Braun with a lazy smirk. “Thank you f—“

“Just get to the point,” she snapped, hands clenching at her sides.

“Easy,” Maggie warned in her sister’s head as the bad feeling in her stomach grew. Next to her, Macy drummed her fingers on the table and shifted her legs. She heard her sister think, Here we go.

“Did you and you sisters kill the wolf Sigmund?”

“No.”

“Were you a party to his death?”

“Yes.” Mel cleared her throat, seemingly to stop herself from elaborating. Rachel had only reminded them a thousand times— no word vomit.
“Explain.”


“Who killed Sigmund?”

“Jada Shields.” Mel blinked demurely at him as the Elders chattered amongst themselves.

Through a maddeningly asinine series of poorly structured questions, Braun did get the basic plot points out of Mel: The Niko-napping, the assembling of a motley crew, and the rescue.

“And during the course of these events, did Niko incur the were curse?”

“Yes.”

Braun made a sort of triumphant hooting noise and whirled on his feet, yelling to the Council: “I move for an immediate judgment of guilty against the Charmed Ones!”

“Hold your horses, Gilderoy,” interrupted Rachel from where she stood at the edge of the light, her calm stillness contrasting nicely against his theatrics.

Gilderoy Lockhart. That had been the annoying Hogwarts professor she couldn’t remember earlier. At the very least, now she didn’t have to worry about that question lingering at the back of her mind for eternity, or whatever end they might face.

“Possessing knowledge of the existence of Jada and Niko doesn’t prove either charge.”

Braun gave her a withering look, a vein subtly beginning to stand out on his forehead. He turned back to Mel without needing to confirm with Tychon. “Your whitelighter told you that the existence of a were was required by law to be reported?”

“Yes.”

“And yet you did not?”

“Correct.”

Braun turned with a “see?” wave of his arms this time, and he was too caught up in his imminent victory to notice the way Rachel’s lips curled into her own sort of smirk.

“Anything to add, Rachel?” asked Tychon, looking surprised at the turn of events.

“You’re only ruling on the harboring charge for now?”

“Yes, but we—“

“Then go ahead,” encouraged the attorney with a wan smile.

The Chancellor seemed a little off put, but he went ahead and declared them guilty, moving on to the potential punishments before getting interrupted by Rachel’s clear, cloud voice:

“We’re asking for an appeal of the Council’s decision. My clients hold that they have a legitimate claim to Coven status.” Rachel moved like a predator further into the light as Elders and Braun all started talking at once. “At which point, the Coven Rites apply.”

“That’s preposterous,” Braun was saying, flustered. “You can’t just—“
“Oh, we sure can,” the redhead replied confidently. “There isn’t a single reg on the books that says we can’t. Melanie Vera verbally extended her protection to Niko Hamada, and therefore Niko is a member of the coven, too, meaning they are shielded from harboring law.”

“Alleged coven,” he sneered, because that was all he could really do.

“Very well,” said Tychon. “Let’s get on with it, then. Who will speak on behalf of—what will you call yourselves?”

“Vera-Vaughn Warren,” answered Mel. “And Macy will speak on our behalf, as the eldest witch.”

The sisters traded spots, and Maggie hugged Mel as soon as she sat back down. This just might work.

Macy began: “My sisters and I have been living together for more than a year now, and our house is the center of our magical lives. Harry has been there for us, but the majority of our spells come from the Book of Shadows, which is not an Elder item. It’s a family tome of our own making, and it’s taught us almost everything we’ve needed to know to survive this far. You all certainly haven’t—“

A deep rumble sounded from the other side of the Hall. Maggie was turning in her seat when the massive doors at the entryway thumped so hard she startled, and Mel was on her feet.

“Nobody moves,” yelled Tychon from the dais before teleporting closer to the doors, about halfway between them and the trial area. He did look exceedingly Gandalf-y with his staff and cape in the cavernous space. The doors groaned open after a short silence, and a roar echoed through the chamber. “Show yourself!”

“Don’t—don’t shoot anything at me.” Maggie’s heart lifted when Harry’s pale face, smudged with dirt, materialized out of the shadows of the doorway. “Tychon, I have two witnesses for the trial.”

Unlike in human courts, the Elders’ trials didn’t allow for all witnesses to be present, given the oath curse’s general effectiveness. But that didn’t mean they could reject witnesses who were already present, and the text didn’t specify any restrictions on how they could get there.

The Chancellor’s body language relaxed, and he leaned against his staff. “Very well.”

Jada showed herself first, more anxious than Maggie had ever seen her, with her blue electricity sparking all over her skin and through her usually-green eyes. The Elders made displeased noises, but that was nothing compared to the tumult that erupted when Niko appeared behind Jada, the hulking bear form easily discernible from this distance. When the bear stood, the crescent moon on its chest seemed to glow from Jada’s light, and even Tychon seemed to draw back a little at the sight of them.

“This is just evidence of your conspiracy—“

“Shut up, Braun,” snapped Charity.

They waited for the trio of newcomers to reach the end of the hall. Maggie could see Mel itching to greet them, her hands clenching and unclenching at her side as she took half-steps forward and back.

“Where are our guards?” Tychon was asking as he led them.

“Sleeping,” answered Harry. “Probably a bit sore tomorrow, but they’ll be fine.”

The Chancellor seemed to accept that. When the group had come within a reasonable distance, Mel
seemed to snap, darting across the ground to throw her arms around the bear’s head, pressing her face into the thick fur around its neck. Niko made some sort of adorable tiny chuff, but then everyone was back to business.

“You’ve established the concepts of cohabitation amongst your witching members, but not that your charge accepts your offer of protection.”

Maggie tensed. She hadn’t expected Braun to break down crying, but his voice, if anything, had grown haughtier.

“Tychon, I don’t think it’s fair for Niko to accept that protection without the full story. She’s only aware of a small part of Melanie Vera’s role in her life.”

The Chancellor looked over at the bear. Though flashy and boring, Tychon didn’t seem nearly as malevolent as Braun, and he even had the sense of mind to look a little sympathetic. “I believe he’s correct, is he not, Rachel?”

The attorney nodded, her mouth now pressed into a thin line.

“What’re you talking about?” asked Jada, shifting a little in front of the bear, which was cute, if not ridiculous.

“They’re going to give her memories back,” sighed Mel.

Niko wasn’t sure what would be on the other side of the giant, melodramatic doors where they knocked several guards into next week. The Elders must have truly used the guards as 98% decoration and not expected anyone to get to their realm in the first place, because the fact that they were able to then just push the doors open was ludicrous.

A Merlin type warlock greeted them with hard eyes, introducing himself as Tychon, Chancellor of the Council. He led them across an impractically large hall, until they came upon a part that abruptly ended in a river of fire, behind which sat the end of the cave and a raised dai with maybe a dozen people sitting along it. They looked a bit like a GAP ad mixed with a Tomb Raider boss battle. Were they underground? Or was the whole dimension strictly within these walls? She had a thousand questions, the detective in her chomping at the bit, and yet they all evaporated to dust when her eyes set upon the Charmed Ones… and Mel, who soon came rushing over to hug her head, which was just about the only way the petite woman could fit her arms in a proper embrace. It felt stupid, but she flicked her ears and made what the bear apparently considered a happy noise as Mel’s blunt fingernails scratched her head.

That brief bit of sunshine was quickly eliminated by another Elder, apparently named Braun, who had a lot of frankly nonsensical things to say before landing on something she could solidly understand.

“My memories? But—how can I have two sets of memories?” Niko lifted her head slightly as Mel stepped away.

“There’s a chance you’ll be a little confused about some things, for awhile,” answered Tychon, who was still standing next to them. “This level of memory restoration has never been attempted before, as far as we know. It will be… intense.”
“I’ll do it,” she said quickly, before her mind could get too far down the rabbit hole of the implications of two birthdays, dueling holidays, and cases that may or may not overlap… No. Like a Band-Aid. “I want my life back. Do it.”

There was a small commotion of people on all sides of her talking, but her eyes were focused on the one called Braun, who smelled like sulphur and, horrifyingly, mayonnaise. He was directing his gaze right back at her, and she saw his mouth moving, but even her bear ears couldn’t hear what he was saying.

“Are you ready?” Tychon had moved closer to her, but his voice was in her head, heavy and hazy.

Niko nodded, and the warlock rapped his staff on the ground, sending out a pulse of white light. On the second tap, the light went straight for Niko, and on the third, her world lurched.

She wasn’t sure what to expect, but she ended up at Jessa’s thirtieth birthday party, which had been at the local gay bar for drag night. Her mind recalled the night as uneventful, but fun, though she could remember a few unmarried-ly hopes rising in her chest as she looked over the crowd. Except in this scene, she watched herself set eyes on something on the dance floor—Mel. Things escalated very quickly from there. The bar bathroom, where Rachel had apparently caught them. The Uber ride to Mel’s apartment later, and the cardio to follow, in the living room, in Mel’s bed, in the kitchen after a refuel snack. Less fun was watching her own walk of shame back into the apartment several hours later, showering before slipping into bed next to Greta as the sun was coming up.

She saw the shamefully textbook affair, nooners and lots of sneaking around, until Mel asked for all or nothing. Whereas she had thought she was following along with the generally warm feelings before, as she watched Mel toss a duffel bag at her head, she felt not the projectile but the ripping, raw pain in her chest. It wasn’t just from watching events unfold; it was directly tied to what her old timeline self had written all over her face. Looked like she was getting the emotions back too.

Are you sure this is the woman you want to swear your life, your eternity to?

Braun’s voice slithered in, unwelcome and inescapable, made that much worse by watching herself spend weeks in abject misery. Watched herself confess her sins to her then-fiance and get kicked out of the apartment. The force of her loneliness and regret nearly drove her to her knees in the present.

She’s a liar, a cheater, a manipulator.

They were standing in the Vera house. Niko saw herself gaunt and sobbing, Mel glaring down at her from across the room as she snarled, “I honestly don’t give a shit what words you use, Niko. If you want to soundboard me, go ahead, but you and me are… We are nothing.”

Things were moving more quickly now, like someone fast forwarding through a movie. Her chest loosened at the sight of she and Mel moving in together, apparently having gotten past the bold contempt from earlier.

The scene slowed. Outside the Vera house, night. She saw herself ducking police tape, approaching a covered body on the ground, kneeling to lift the corner and look into Marisol Vera’s pale, dead face. A bit of blood smudged at the corner of her mouth. Mel and Maggie were sobbing nearby.

The more you take care of her, the more she takes for granted.

A dark, sinister shadow opened in her belly as she saw the relationship unravel again. Arguing over nothing. Snapping at each other, holding grudges. Rising resentment, culminating in Mel screaming at her until a neighbor called 911. And then, they ended again. She saw Maggie looking at her
sympathetically as she helped her sister take boxes out the front door.

She’s a cruel woman, vengeful. Unforgiving. Vicious.

They were in a diner. Mel’s eyes narrowed. “Well, good thing I’m not your problem anymore.”

“I still care about you,” Then-Niko protested, somewhat weakly.

Mel’s retort cut hard. “Then dumping me after my mom died was an interesting choice.”

Her chest tightened and twisted, like she was having a heart attack—but it was just the emotions crashing in with memory, distilled and concentrated into the present seconds. It still really fucking hurt.

She’s the reason Trip Bailey is dead. A fellow officer, and your adored partner.

These words were accompanied by a memory that shouldn’t have been hers. She hadn’t been there, Mel had said, and presently, she didn’t see herself in the huge, abandoned building where the Charmed Ones and Charity were hitting a demon ( was that Angela Wu? ) with beams of light as debris flew through the air in a cyclone. When the pipe swung towards her partner, a man she suddenly loved and remembered, she screamed. It didn’t drown out the sound of the metal as it collapsed his skull in a small geyser of blood and brain matter. He was probably dead before he hit the ground. None of the witches noticed.

She let his mother cry herself to sleep at night, thinking he was a murderer.

“Enough!” Present-Niko shouted into the void as the memories flashed on, until she saw Mel deny her a proper goodbye as sand fell from the ceiling all around them. She gripped her head with both hands. Pain crawled along her bones, loss and heartbreak overloading her veins to the point that peeling her skin off seemed like it might be a viable option to escape it. Trip, the students, Marisol, almost Angela Wu. Magic was death. It was death at every turn. Taking her memories had hidden that from her.

She breaks all the rules except for the one that would’ve saved your partner and you. She could have asked you for help.

Everything faded to an endless black, and she dropped to her knees, head in her hands, as the voice kept going.

She could have told you the truth, but she didn’t. Why not? Because she didn’t trust you? Didn’t love you?

Something in Niko broke open, more rock slide than explosion, exposing old scars and smashing the delicate version of her life she’d held dear for three fake years. Her vision went red as the bear bellowed and rose from the ensuing rubble, and she felt herself acquiescing to it, along with a relief deeper than anything she’d ever known. No more fighting, running. No more liars. She was done. Her muscles relaxed, the pain dulling to a consistent ache. The bear would take care of things for awhile. She just wanted to sleep.

The next thought seemed to manifest from outside herself, and dimly, she realized it was an independent thought from the bear. What Braun showed them was true. It was all true. None of this would have happened if it wasn’t for her.
There was no denying that Niko and Mel had faced some pretty low lows in their relationship, but they’d had some really great times, too. Not that Maggie knew firsthand, but nobody had been as close to their relationship as she and Marisol, except maybe Niko’s brother Sora. At any rate, Maggie had been somewhat surprised when the restoration spell seemed to be making the bear more and more agitated.

“What’s taking so long?” asked Jada, who’d been circling the Chancellor and the bear, frozen like a marble god and his supplicant in a shimmering mist of white.

“It’s two years of memories,” said Charity coolly. “It can take some time.”

A sharp growl made them all tense, and Harry put a hand out in front of Mel in the classic “mom arm” driving move. “I think we should… step back.”

“She’s fine,” snapped Mel, even as worried creases appeared on her forehead.

Maggie glanced over at Braun, thinking that he’d been oddly quiet during this whole thing. She narrowed her eyes when she noticed his lips moving.

Mel, she whispered, even though the words were delivered telepathically. *What is Braun doing?*

Her older sister looked at the Elder, tilted her head, and then thought back, “Do you remember that whole broom curse thing in the first Harry Potter book?”

Internally pumping her fist that she had been right, Maggie didn’t hesitate. She stood and stretched her arms, making a show of how sore she was as she circled towards the Elder from behind. He was doing his best to look casual, but now that Maggie knew something was afoot, his posture definitely looked stiff. She got within a few inches of him before reaching out and clamping her hand firmly over his wrist.

Braun shouted in surprise, pulling away, but not quite hard enough, and she held on for a second or two more before he freed his arm—and slapped her with the back of his hand.

She hadn’t even fully stumbled to the floor, cheek stinging, before Macy had thrown him across the room with enough force that he crossed over the fire moat in a sailing arc. Braun disapparated before he hit the ground, reappearing before them with his face contorted in rage.

“You dare—“ he began, but Macy just threw him again.

“Enough,” interrupted Tychon as Braun reappeared for the second time, somehow redder than the first. “Braun, that’s hardly appropriate.”

“She was reading my thoughts without consent—“

“He was feeding Niko negative thoughts and bad memories!” Maggie’s voice spiked over his, and it caught Tychon’s attention. “He showed her Trip… dying.”

They had anticipated resistance within the bounds of the game the Elders had created. Apparently, the Elders were unfair Dungeon Masters. That hadn’t been a part of any of their contingency plans. The Chancellor opened his mouth to reply, but then he was roughly thrown to the side, his body twisting unnaturally around the point of impact. It wasn’t because of Macy.
Maggie watched what happened next as if frozen by her sister. The bear reared up and roared, saliva flying from its teeth, and she didn’t need to see the red that had overtaken its usually Niko-brown eyes to know that the gentle-hearted detective wasn’t home. Jada was closest to it, but she blinked away after grabbing hold of Mel with one hand and Harry with the other. Braun apparated behind the moat. The bear swung at Macy, whose expression was something like devastation as she lifted her hands and threw the car-sized predator backwards through the air.

The bear hit a column, its massive weight immediately cracking it clean through, and huge chunks of stone fell towards it before suddenly freezing.

Mel’s chest heaved with the effort of holding up the pieces of the column until Macy stepped in and swept the pieces aside, and they crashed harmlessly down in a cloud of dust behind the bear as it struggled to its feet, groaning and rumbling. A stream of blood leaked from Mel’s nose, and her eyes looked a little glazed as she tried to catch her breath.

“What do we do?” Macy was shouting as the sisters instinctively moved closer to each other, until they were in the center of the light, Jada and Harry to either side. The Elders had all disappeared, except Tychon, who was completely still where he slumped against the wall.

“I-I don’t know,” Harry stammered, looking sweaty and wild-eyed. “Ferality is still mostly unstudied.”

“They usually just kill them,” snarled Jada. “We need to subdue her, see if we can get through to her whe—wait, Maggie!”

She may not have been able to manipulate time or throw a truck across a room, but this was a mind thing.

This was a job for an empath.

Juking around the arm Jada stretched out to try and stop her, Maggie sprinted towards the bear, picking up Tychin’s white staff as she went. The beast was standing now, looking back on guard, and she felt the tug of Mel trying to freeze her, Macy trying to pull her back. But she was just as much of a Charmed One as they were, and she shouldered through them with a shout.

The bear roared again, rising up to strike, but she just kept moving, ducking under the swiping claws and wrapping one arm around the bear’s middle, as best she could. Her face collided with soft fur and firm muscle, and she slammed the staff against the ground three times with her free hand.

Instantly, she was standing in a dark, endless space with Niko, the real Niko, who was currently curled in a fetal position on the ground. She hurried to the detective’s side and knelt.

“Maggie?” The detective’s voice wavered with a wet sniffle as she looked up, her face a mess of tears.

The empath tried to give her best comforting smile, cautiously putting a hand on Niko’s shoulder. Her skin was hot, worryingly so. “I need you to get up. We need you to come back.”

“For what?” murmured the taller woman, putting her head back down with a soft thump. “Two bad marriages and two girlfriends who lie to me? Who fuck with me, constantly?”

“Braun was messing with you. He was emphasizing the bad. There’s been so much good, Niko. I was there, I remember. You and Mel were disgustingly cute, and after the spell, I was there. I saw what it did to her; she was a useless mess for weeks, Niko. She mourned you, because she always wanted to spend the rest of her life with you.” Maggie got down so she was sitting cross-legged next
There was a moment where Niko almost looked convinced, but then her expression hardened and her lip curled to show teeth. “It’s all just more fucking with me. Why can’t you all just leave me alone?”

“Don’t be like that.” Maggie called upon all her nights coaxing drunk Kappa sisters out from locked bathrooms or from under bushes. “You can do this. You’re Niko, and we could really use you back, not some bear, no matter how cute it is. If you don’t want to do it for Mel, then do it for me?”

Niko peered one eye up at her, still frowning, but clearly listening.

“When Mel first started bringing you around the house, I was sixteen, and Mel and I hated each other for the majority of our waking hours. I knew you were a cop, and you were not single, and I wanted to be mean to you, but… You walked in, and you had that smile, and Mel was just… I’d never seen her like that before. Bubbly happy.”

Niko’s restless limbs had stilled, and Maggie began to let herself hope she was getting through.

“Mom liked you instantly too, and she didn’t really like any of Mel’s other girlfriends. I remember the day exactly, because I had just failed my driving test the third time and had to wait three months to take it again, and I was really upset, because I felt like it was Mel’s fault.”

“Your sister is a terrible driver.”

“Yeah, and she’s the one who did most of teaching me. Mom tried, but she was busy. Then comes Officer Niko Hamada. Do you remember?”

“I remember. I took you through practice tests.”

“Twice every weekend for three months, Mel complaining the whole time, until I took the test and passed. You had been dating my sister for like, five seconds, and you did all that for me because… I don’t know, I never really understood until later, when I realized you’re just an annoyingly noble person.” Maggie paused, hoping for a smile from the detective, but they apparently weren’t quite there yet. “We need that Niko to come back right now, and I promise you, it’s worth it. Let me show you what else is lurking in those missing years.”

Niko flopped on her back, holding up a wrist in apparent consent.

As if any of their plans had ever actually gone “according to plan”, this one was one hundred percent off the rails. They’d thought themselves smart to plot out at least ten different and plausible ways things could’ve gone wrong, but the sabotage was too specific to pick out of a host of possibilities.

Maggie shrugging off her freeze was bad enough, but when her sister had picked up Tychon’s staff and done the same spell with three taps on the ground, she’d been convinced it was over. This magic was beyond anything they’d done before, with most of their expertise being in imprisonment and, frankly, destruction. She’d lost her sister forever.
“Don’t touch them,” warned Harry when Macy’s hand extended. “You could cause some serious damage to Ms. Hamada’s memories.”

“As if we haven’t already,” Macy replied weakly, putting a hand to her forehead. “What do we do?”

“We can take you back,” said Jada with a small sigh. “Maybe Niko and Maggie come to, and we get out of here before the Council returns. We’re tethered to the Kamakura.”

Mel was going to reply to that, but when she glanced at the whitelighter-witch, she noticed that Jada’s skin looked a bit waxy, shining with sweat. “Are you okay? You look a little… fever-y?”

“Yeah, it’s just a warning. The witches said they can’t hold the tether forever. Either we have them call us back, or we’re stuck here until whatever conclusion.”

“We’re not leaving them,” Macy asserted in a tone that allowed for no debate.

Jada nodded. “I respect that.”

Abruptly, the light around the two women faded, and Maggie took a few stuttering steps back before Jada caught and steadied her. The bear was gone, with Niko in its place, looking for all intents and purposes like the white knight she was with a stupidly large sword hanging off her belt.

Mel dropped to her knees as the detective coughed and struggled to sit up, stilling the confused movements with firm hands on Niko’s arms. “Niko? Niko, say something.”

Brown eyes looked back up at her, and the tall woman smiled weakly. “A whole new world.”

“You are so stupid,” laughed Mel, sniffling a little and leaning in for a quick kiss. She looked at her sisters, then Jada and Harry. “We’re not going anywhere. Let’s finish this.”

A new voice startled all of them.

“Ya’ll. That was the wildest shit I have ever seen. I mean, I know we’re in like some kind of Witch Supreme Court, but Christ Almighty, what is going on?”

“Rachel,” sighed Mel. “Where did you go?”

“Literally under the table. It has never failed me as a defense move.” The redhead strode over and extended a hand to Niko. “Hey there, old friend. Nice bear look.”

Niko accepted the help up, groaning as she was pulled to her feet. “Thanks for this.”

“To my understanding, I won’t even remember it, which is kind of a shame.” They fist bumped. “Welcome back.”

The Council reconvened, sans Tychon, who would survive, but would take some time to fully heal due to his age and the depth of damage done to his body. There apparently wasn’t a “Vice Chancellor”, and this was the first time in four hundred years that Tychon had been absent from a proceeding, even after the attack by the S’Arcana.

The mismatched group waited while the Council spoke amongst themselves for awhile, at times looking quite heated, but completely silent from their side of the fire moat.

Mel stood pressed against Niko as they waited. She couldn’t help it. She had a thousand questions, a million worries and tiny, grating thoughts flying through her mind. Every mistake she’d made, every hurtful word during their original relationship was replaying in her own mind, and frankly… That
part did look pretty bad, taken all together. But whatever Maggie had said, had shown her—Niko’s arm was heavy and snug where it was slung over her shoulders, holding them tightly together. That much, she could focus on for now.

When the silence dropped, the Council turned back to the Charmed Ones and Co. from the safety of the other side of the moat. Charity had joined the other Elders on the dais, with all of them shifting one seat over so that the one called Quri had taken the Chancellor’s place. She was tall and heavyset, with white-gray dreadlocks and umber skin, barely wrinkled with the time her hair color seemed to imply.

“Charmed Ones,” she began, her voice serious, but empathetic. “Today has been… an unusual one, to say the least. As has been said here, I knew your mother, Marisol, very well. She was like a daughter to me, and so I must admit that I feel a level of personal investment in these proceedings, but… we all do, in some way. Tychon’s rule has led us to this morass, and we have voted to suspend trial rules for now. I would ask that you tell us plainly your side of the road that brought us all here today.”

“What about Braun? He messed with Niko’s head,” called Macy with a shuffling step forward.

“We will deal with Braun,” sighed the Elder with a wan smile. “And whoever else needs to be dealt with.”

Braun himself sat slumped, sulking in his chair as Macy told the story of what they’d discovered at the house of Paula Garcia, and then Jada showed the video of the coin floor in Cecilia Lopez’s garage and added in the detail of the Council Guards who had arrived at her apartment while the Charmed Ones were away.

When it was all done, without addressing any of the allegations, Quri turned to put Braun under the oath.

“Are you responsible for or involved in the deaths of Marisol, Paula, and Cecilia?”

“No,” he snarled, even as the answer clearly began the burn, with wisps of gray rising out of his ears.

“Don’t do this to yourself, Braun,” shouted Charity from the end of the row of chairs. “Be better, just tell us what you did. What did you do to Marisol?”

“I’ve served this council for two hundred years,” hissed Braun, the smoke graying his teeth. “Everything I have done has been to preserve our legacy.”

Quri just shook her head at him, tapping the staff against the ground. White cuffs sprung up to wrap around his wrists, and he began to wriggle and huff. “Did you orchestrate the deaths of Marisol, Paula, and Cecilia?”

“No.” Braun groaned, and it grew to a hoarse shout as ash flew from his mouth. He choked and sputtered, and more of it came from his nostrils.

Quri sighed, rubbing a temple with her free hand. “Just tell us why, Braun. You more than anyone have always lobbied for a forceful defense against the Apocalypse. Why wipe out half of a bloodline?”

“A bloodline?” barked the sandy-haired man, whose hair was beginning to blacken and singe around his ears. “They may have whelped the Charmed Ones, but the Vera bloodline is nothing more than a bunch of shamans wearing loincloths in the rainforest. They were a distraction.”
Oh. Oh no. After all this, she had been expecting some kind of master plan that maybe resulted in better odds against the end of the world in exchange for some dirty deeds, but this? It seemed so… human. Plain, classic bigotry.

Quri looked as disgusted as Mel felt. “Answer the question, Braun.”

“To protect us,” he spat.

“From what?”

“From a conspiracy to remove Tychon from the Chancellor’s seat, to change the very essence of our purpose here. Marisol wanted to turn this Council upside-down.”

“What purpose do you think this Council has been serving?”

“Survival and order.” Braun lifted his chin, saliva and ash dripping down to his chest. “Marisol could never have prepared the Charmed Ones in time. Worse, she was preparing to unbind her own sisters’ powers so they could help train them, not just in magic, but in their flower circle, hippie communist way of thinking about magic.”

Mel’s heart lurched. Her aunts had known about them. They had been on the precipice of reentering their lives. And Braun had taken that from them.

“The Charmed Ones wield the most powerful magic this world has ever seen, and yet we let them dilly dally around, fucking and partying instead of training for the Day that is yet to come.”

“They’re not soldiers,” said Quri, calmly. “And we don’t enslave.”

“I’m not talking about slaves, I’m talking about weapons,” laughed Braun. “With the proper training, the Charmed Ones can vanquish any foe set before them. Point them in the right direction, and all shall fall.”

From a feet feet in front of her, Mel saw Macy’s shoulders jerk the moment the information hit. “You wanted to use us like a hit squad.”

“Of course I did!” shouted Braun, spittle flying from his thin lips. “Demons are for slaying. You see a beast, an unholy bear, or wolf, or fox, you put it down, and the world becomes a safer place. You Charmed Ones have been nothing but distracted, irresponsible, and borderline failures. I haven’t survived 600 years to melt in the apocalypse because you three witches can’t get your act together. This is a once in a millenium opportunity to tip the scales towards light!”

“This isn’t light.” Quri tapped the staff again, and bounds sprang to life around Braun’s ankles, too. “You and Tychon, you planned this together?”

“Yes.”

Everyone in the room took a breath in surprise when the answer burned Braun again, and this time live embers flew from his mouth as he coughed. He looked up, eyes round with confusion.

“Really, it wasn’t just me. Tychon approached me about all this, and—” His words broke off in what might’ve been a scream, but flame jumped his nostrils and lips, singeing the flesh, and just a ragged, wet noise came out.

“Oh, my God,” breathed Maggie, looking away.
“Tychon. Tychon asked me to.” Braun choked out the words one last time before orange light overtook his eyes, and Mel followed Maggie’s lead by turning her eyes down. It didn’t stop her from hearing the way his eyes burst out of their sockets, or his frantic, muffled screams, and then the thud of his body hitting the ground. Silence followed.

When she looked up, he was nothing more than a blackened impression of the Elder that had once been.

“Why would he die on that hill?” Macy’s voice broke a little on the sentence as her eyes remained glued on the smoky remains. “He wanted Tychon to go down with him, but he knew we’d know it was a lie… so why?”

After a beat, it was Niko who blurted the answer: “Tychon’s not Tychon.”

Quri herself went to the Chancellor’s chambers, quickly returning to say he was gone, and that she had requested Council Guards begin the process of tracking him down. The only thing left behind was a business card, blank on one side, and with a star logo on the other, purple and white.

“That’s the symbol for my lab,” whispered Macy, looking stricken. Mel shook her head.

Later.

Quri eased herself back into her chair with a long sigh. “Obviously, we’ve got a lot to… investigate. We don’t know how long this imposter may have been in place. In the meantime… you are all free to go home. I think there’s been enough judgment for one day.”

“No,” called Mel before anyone could move. “No, because I know how this works. I want this resolved, now. We want you to give us coven status and call off the kill order on the S’Arcana.”

“Do you understand what that means, fully?” Quri directed the question at all of them, but her eyes lingered on Niko.

“It means we’re on our own, and quite frankly, given the way your organization is run, I’d like to keep it that way.” Mel stepped out from under Niko’s arm. “My sisters, our Mom, our aunts, even—we’ve been doing just fine on our own, over and over again, until this place gets involved. From everything I’ve seen, you’re no different than a colonizer—you recruit new witches, use them to run your errands, take advantage of the magic they create. And then you kill them off when it suits you.”

Quri looked at her for a long time, but nodded. “My bloodline is not entirely unfamiliar with such a process. Tychon had been in power for… too long. We will grant you your coven status and lift the order on the S’Arcana, but I humbly ask, Ms. Shields, that you tell your sisters the truth of what happened here today, including me saying, perhaps now our old wounds can heal.”

“What about Harry?” asked Macy, her tone a little more urgent than was strictly necessary. Mel smirked at her, but she ignored it.

“We remain a friendly, if independent organization.” Quri tipped her chin down a little bit. “Harry may continue to be your whitelighter so long as you will have him. Now, I don’t mean to be rude… but we have a lot to sort through here. Thank you for your help, and your courage in standing up to tell the truth.”

While the Council would finish up with Rachel, Jada and Harry transported the rest of the adventurers home, where the sudden simplicity and familiarity of the attic nearly brought Mel to tears.

They had done it.
Niko was safe. The S’Arcana were safe. They were safe.

The reality and relief of it was heavy in the room; Maggie let out a sob and buried her face in Macy’s shoulder as they hugged tightly. Jada and Harry were laughing and even embraced for a split second, before jumping five feet apart and looking around in embarrassment. And Niko? *Oh fuck, Niko, she ...

Mel let out a breath, half-yelp, half-giggle, as Niko hauled her up into her arms and spun her around, the sword hilt digging into her thigh. She clung to the taller woman’s shoulders even as Niko set her back down, and then strong arms were wrapping around her waist to hug her right back, their chests almost painfully tight together.

“It’s really you?” she sighed against the detective’s cheek.

Niko let out a strangled sob, but managed to reply, “It’s really me.”

There was no choice but to throw an unwinding party. Everyone was somewhere between half asleep and completely wired, the air filled with a lot of almost-hysterical laughter and shouting as the liquor bottles emptied and smoke floated across the scene. The experience had been so close to disaster that, despite none of them admitting it, they needed to stay together tonight, to experience these first few minutes of newfound freedom with people who understood.

Niko knew this phenomenon well. Being a detective meant it happened less often, but as a patrol officer, she had spent plenty of nights getting absolutely plastered with other cops after a particularly tough or violent encounter. The camaraderie, the community—it helped stave off thinking too hard of what might have been. Emotions ran high. Secrets were thrown into the open.

Their “party” amounted to indulgent amounts of mind altering substances and Maggie’s Spotify playlist over a BlueTooth speaker in the attic, something lowkey and easy background music to avoid any pensive silences. Prudence had practically cried when she saw her cousin, hugging her for a long time before straightening back up with her typical cool mask. As a fox, Zelda had barked and wiggled and swished her plush tails at Niko until she was picked up for some scratching behind the ears.

“I did it! This is my first successful mission!” crowed the fox as she ran in a small circle around Niko’s feet. “Everyone else died.”

“Well… thanks,” laughed Niko, taking a swig off of the whiskey bottle that was her personal drink. “You helped bring the S’Arcana into this. I’m pretty sure I’d still be in that winter world without you.”

Zelda scampered off to raid the tray of Pizza Rolls that Maggie was carrying up the stairs, and Niko moved to a quiet side of the room. She let her eyes rove over the gathered misfits, unsure how something so new could feel so right. Her old timeline self certainly had more personal connections with the Vera women, but she’d been surprised to find she barely knew Dr. Macy Vaughn back then, given how much she liked her in this timeline. There were plenty of her own mistakes scattered amongst the jumble of memories that would likely take some time to sort through and reorganize. Some cases solved in one timeline could possibly be unsolved in the other—that was definitely worth checking out once she went back to work.
The thought of resuming that most basic of tasks made her breathe a sigh of relief. It was finally a possibility within reach.

Prudence, Jada, and Maggie were recapping the events excitedly, laughing while Zelda sat near their feet eating a pile of snacks. Macy and Harry were doing a terrible job of pretending not to flirt a few feet away, both of them swaying where they stood. And Mel—

“Hey.”

Niko startled upon realizing Mel was right next to her, leaning one shoulder against the wall and giving her a tentative smile. “Hey.”

Mel bit her lip, and Niko had to close her eyes against flashes of memory that brought an immediate blush to her cheeks. As it turned out, she had been just as much a fan of those lips in the previous timeline. Predictable.

“I don’t know what to say,” admitted the witch after awhile, sipping her rum punch. “Are you… sure you don’t hate me?”

“Hate you?” Niko’s eyebrows flew up.

“Yeah, for… I don’t know, everything.”

Niko turned so they were facing each other, and going off of a newfound understanding of their relationship, she hooked one finger in the belt of loop of Mel’s jeans and tugged her closer, until she could bring her other hand down to rest on Mel’s hip. The shorter woman immediately dropped her chin, and Niko tugged again, until their eyes met. Everything about Mel was simultaneously breathtakingly new and achingly familiar, an effect magnified by her new powers. She could hear Mel’s heartbeat rising and smell the insecurity coming off of her, and that latter part just wouldn’t do.

“Melanie Vera, do you remember our little dream cabin in the woods?”

The witch blinked slowly, as if she really didn’t remember and maybe that had been a total dream after all, but then her nervous expression faded towards a smile, and she nodded.

“That was before I got my memories back.” Niko pushed slightly off the wall and pivoted, now leaning into the witch’s space, front to front with Mel’s back against the wall.

“Just… if you remember something that makes you hate me, I’d understand.”

Niko lifted a palm to her cheek, brushing her thumb over those lips. She gave herself a silent throttle, blaming the whiskey. Focus. Romance first, you uncultured swine. “I can be mad at you, I can disagree with you, and I can even think you’re being ridiculous… but that’s normal, that’s a relationship. The important part is what happens next. And at every turn, despite literally writing me out of your timeline… we come back together.”

Mel swallowed, her eyes flickering around Niko’s face.

“I love you, Mel. I love you, in this timeline, in this dimension, and in all of the other ones out there, anything they wanna throw at me, or us.” Niko looked down as Mel’s hands suddenly fist ed in her shirt, and then back up at tearful brown eyes. “I’ll be right here, with you, beside you, until they drag us to Hell. Okay?”

The hands in her shirt tugged, and Niko slammed two open palms against the wall on either side of Mel’s head to avoid stumbling as their mouths came together again. It was frantic and messy this
time, Mel’s rum-flavored tongue sliding against hers, fire erupting under her skin where small hands ducked under the hem of her shirt and slid across her stomach. She remembered those hands, that tongue, the way Mel sighed into her mouth—she remembered it all very keenly. Her hips collapsed forward, pinning Mel in place as the shorter woman rubbed against her. She dropped her head to kiss along the column of Mel’s throat, nibbling lightly along where her neck met her shoulder.

A loud cough made Niko straighten up, instinctively curling her body over Mel even as she looked over her shoulder.


“Get a room,” called Jada teasingly, shaking her head.

Prudence elbowed her. “I was enjoying that.”

That did it. Niko looked back at Mel, who was just nodding vigorously with closed eyes. She gathered the witch in her arms and lifted her with ease, and Mel groaned as she gripped the collar of her shirt. Harry made a small squeaking noise.

“Use protection!” yelled Maggie to a chorus of nervous laughter, and that was the last thing Niko heard before she was down the stairs and heading for Mel’s room.

“Your guest bedroom,” Mel managed to say between nibbling and sucking along Niko’s collarbone. “Farther away from everyone.”

Niko probably would have dropped her at the implication if not for her newfound, magically fortified strength. She made it to the bedroom and deposited Mel on her back. The witch chuckled and scooted back, smiling up at her expectantly. Her hair was mussed and her lipstick smudged, her eyes dark with a very familiar look. Niko helped her get her skinny jeans and shirt off, then removed her own, and finally fell on her once-lost love skin-to-skin. Mel captured her mouth in another kiss, slower this time, hands exploring heated skin as Mel nipped her bottom lip and swiped her tongue past her teeth. Her bear-enhanced nose was filled with Mel’s skin and sweat and need, a heady mix that did more to cloud her brain than the entire liter of whiskey.

A sharp bite on her shoulder jerked her back to the present, and Niko growled playfully down at Mel’s smirk. The shorter woman rocked her hips up, a silent urging, and Niko distinctly remembered that she had never been able to deny Mel anything. And she couldn’t figure out when she’d ever want to. Shimmying down the bed, Niko took her time exploring Mel’s plush body with her lips and hands, until she was crouched between her legs with Mel’s arousal spreading across her tongue. Two fingers found silky, velvet heat, and Mel’s hands tangled into her hair as she arched up into Niko’s mouth.

Every sound, every taste was both a discovery and a memory. She seemed to know a certain drag of her fingers would elicit the subsequent moan from above, but it was still no less exhilarating than if this was the first time she’d dragged those beautiful noises from Mel’s throat. She kept her eyes open, watching with rapt attention as Mel hurtled towards the edge and then fell over it, eyes screwing shut, mouth falling open in a long, breathy groan as her body pulsed and flexed around Niko’s fingers. Her chest surged with heat at the sight. She would move Heaven and Earth to never be parted from this woman again. Charmed One, time witch, plain human, or whatever—it didn’t matter. Melanie Vera was the sun, and a Niko a woman who’d spent too many years in cold darkness.

When Niko moved back up to drape her body over the witch’s smaller one, she was surprised to suddenly find herself on her back, with a panting Mel leaning over her. Her pupils were blown, her
mouth hanging open slightly as her hand skidded along Niko’s stomach before landing between her legs. And it wasn’t long before Niko was shouting to the ceiling as colors burst and faded behind her eyelids, cold heat washing from the base of her spine to her fingers and toes. Her whole body shivered with relief, physical and something more, as Mel collapsed across her chest, their bodies sticky with sweat as their breasts pressed tightly together.

Niko lightly stroked her fingers up and down Mel’s back until their breathing evened out, and she thought the witch had fallen asleep before she noticed watery brown eyes looking up at her. “Baby? Are you okay?”

“I’m sorry.” The words came out as a thick wheeze. “I’m so sorry about all this.”

Concerned, Niko wrapped both arms around the woman on her chest and squeezed gently. “I know. It’s okay. It’s over now. We’re okay. We’re safe now.”

Mel buried her face in her shoulder and sobbed, hands tightening on the detective’s shoulders.

“Even if it’s only just for tonight. I’m taking what I can get—we’re safe now.” She loosened her hold to lightly stroke Mel’s back, running her fingers up and down the slight groove of her spine. Eventually, Mel’s breathing evened, and then slowed. Niko carefully rolled her to one side, curling her own body around Mel’s back with an arm thrown over her middle, their hands entwined.

Upstairs, the music from the party played on into the night. Outside, all was quiet, and the moon rose high above Vera Manor.

Chapter End Notes

Fluffy epilogue to follow. Thanks for all the kudos, comments, reads - this has been a majorly self-indulgent ride.
Epilogue

Chapter Summary

Soft girlfriends finally get a moment of peace.

Mel panted as she sprinted between rows of nameless boxes, crossbow in hand. The creature of interest today was moving parallel to her on the other side of the cargo pallets, a few feet ahead, laughing and cackling as she went. The huge airplane hangar-cum-warehouse seemed to go on forever, but she kept after it, even as her lungs burned. *Stupid running demons.*

They came across a widened cross-section of walkways, and suddenly her prey lurched to one side with a startled screech, flying into the air as webbed wings sprung from her back. Mel nearly slammed full speed into her older sister, not realizing she was stepping backwards, but Macy puffed her cheeks and blew out a quick breath, knocking Mel of course enough that they missed each other. The time witch tripped and skidded across the cement ground, coming to a stop against a pair of boots.

“Gotta remember the grid plan,” teased Jada with a click of her tongue, helping Mel to her feet. They jumped back when a splash of green slime hit the ground between them, droplets stinging Mel’s skin where they burned through her clothes. Great. *This is a brand new pair of jeans.*

Incensed, Mel turned to the fluttering succubus and muttered a curse, flinging at her unceremoniously. The demon just dodged the purple disc of light and laughed, sticking out her black, forked tongue. “Too slow, time witch.”

“What about this?” Macy’s throw wiped the look right off the demon’s face as it hurtled into a pile of boxes below, sending up a cloud of dust and bits of cardboard.

Maggie appeared from around the corner of some boxes, casually examining the fray. “Quit messing around you guys, I have a date in two hours.”

“Ohh? What’s his name?” hissed the succubus as she climbed out of the rubble, one of her wings awkwardly bent out of place. “Maybe I’ll have a taste, too.”

“Can it, Lost Girl,” snapped Maggie with a roll of her eyes.

The demon opened her mouth for another round of threats, but then something dark rose up behind her, and Niko smashed the succubus down under two paws, holding her there as she shrieked and struggled fruitlessly, her pointed fingernails unable to penetrate the bear’s thick fur.

“I got it!” called Niko cheerily, ignoring the withering look the rest of the team gave her.

Still, Macy, Mel, and Maggie joined hands for the vanquishing spell:

*By the forces of Heaven and Hell*  
*We banish this woman fell*  
*Rend from her foul desire*  
*That she may perish, as a moth to fire*
The succubus screamed as her body melted into a puddle of green goop, which then dried out until it was nothing but a pile of pea-colored ash.

Harry apparated between them with arms crossed. “Ms. Hamada…”

“I know,” sighed Niko, shifting back to her human form to better roll her eyes.

“You can’t just squish every demon we fight. Some of them are quite spiky, nevermind the ones without corporeal form.” The whitelighter pinched the bridge of his nose as Jada patted him on the back. “One day, you’ll have to follow an actual plan rather than the magical equivalent of sitting on someone until the schoolbell rings.”

“It’s worked every time so far.” Niko shrugged and rocked back on her heels, failing to hide her smirk. “Besides, Maggie’s in a hurry.”

“Thank you,” chirped the youngest sister. “Someone who cares about my social life.”

While Harry cleaned up the ashes of the succubus, Niko paced over to the witches, who were trying and failing to look scolding. Mel in particular gave a more exasperated eye roll than seemed strictly necessary, but the detective just gave her a quick kiss and stepped away.

“We’re having a going away bash for Prudence next week, at HQ. You all are literally the only invitees, so—no pressure or anything,” said Jada as she leaned against a pallet of boxes.

“Gonna miss that little soft goth.” Macy looked earnestly wistful. “Always talking about sacrificing things for the Dark Lord. So dedicated.”

“Be nice,” warned Maggie, who had developed a worryingly close alliance with the dark witch, giving birth to a potentially devilish duo that shouldn’t be trusted in the world unsupervised, lest they raze a fraternity house or City Hall.

“It’s refreshing to see that level of commitment to something, really.”

Mel caught Niko’s eye and the detective winked, annoyingly making her heart skip a beat. Jada had taught her that knee-melting move, and coupled with that dashing smile? Unfair, really… or it would be, except that gorgeous detective was hers, and she could now swoon all she wanted, to her heart’s content. And a lot more, of course.

The taller woman slid over to her surreptitiously while Macy and Maggie traded verbal jabs, referred by Jada. “You wanna be my date to Prudence’s party?”

“I’ll think about it.” Mel smiled up at her, trying and knowing she was failing at looking coy.

Niko growled softly, a real growl from the bear, a trick she’d honed for the exclusive purpose of messing with people.

“Oh no, big bad bear. Did I hurt your feelings?”

The detective huffed, but her lips broke into a wide smile when Mel pushed up onto her tiptoes to plant a kiss there, languid at first, but with increasing investment, until Niko’s tongue was sliding against hers and—

“Nope.” The firm word was all the warning they got before a spray of water hit their faces, startling Niko to the point that she stumbled back a few steps.
“Are you kidding me?” Mel wasn’t sure whether to laugh or give her older sister a very sisterly shove.

Wearing a “no regrets” expression, Macy stood holding a small spray bottle, pointing it threateningly between them. “Classical conditioning. I know you two are like, reunited and it feels so right, that’s fine, but every woman has her limits. It’s either the spray bottle, or you put a dollar in a jar every time.”

“You’re just going to carry that around?” whined Mel, crossing her arms even though she knew her sister was one hundred percent in the right. They had not been the best housemates when it came to PDA over the last three weeks, not that she’d admit that out loud to her sisters. “The house is almost done.”

“You can chill until then. Or rent a hotel room.” Macy smiled, and her words held no bite, but she gave Mel another spray for good measure.

After a little subterfuge and apparitions, the plot of land once owned by Paula Garcia was deeded to Macy Vaughn, Melanie Vera, and Maggie Vera. They’d thoroughly cleansed the area of any trace of the hateful magic that had taken lives there, and then Niko and Jada set about building a new house in place of the old.

Niko had put in her papers at HPD, blaming the trauma of the kidnapping and using the rest of her leave to work on the house. On a practical level, it was an unduly risky job when you were a self-healing magical bear who preferred to keep that identity on the DL. Deeper than that, Niko felt that she’d be unable to span both lives, especially if it required lying to Morris every day. She couldn’t do that. It wasn’t in her nature.

Still—detective work was in her nature, as much as the bear. With the world of magic at her fingertips, the possibilities were nearly endless, and so she decided to get her private investigator license, with her exam scheduled next month. It would allow her to work her own hours and do things her own way, choose her own cases and help people who truly needed it, magical or otherwise.

Now in the first true days of spring, Niko was able to work outside in just a pair of Levi’s and an HPD Academy t-shirt, pockmarked with holes and flecks of paint. Jada had flown in supplies from all over the world, and the house might’ve been finished already if not for certain pieces that Niko insisted on doing by hand—laying the brickwork for the chimney, attaching electrical boxes and their faceplates, and most importantly, hand-carving the master bedroom shower. That last would’ve been impossible without her bear’s strength, and it took nearly a week regardless, but Jada had gone through the trouble of slicing the black stone from Sakurajima, the most active volcano in Japan, and the final effect was worth the trouble.

The bubbled, almost crumbly stone required all her patience and a couple magical assists from Jada, but eventually she’d carved out a walk-in waterfall shower, more than big enough for two, and a large, deep bath that was flush with the floor in front of floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the woods, specially treated to avoid condensation. It was like walking into the belly of a volcano when the steam really got going, and she was fully aware that it all looked absolutely ridiculous after walking through the gentle country deco of the rest of the house, but she was hard pressed to give a single fuck when her building supplier could get literally any material in the world.
She’d spent most of the last week putting finishing touches in place, the industrial-grade, stainless steel appliances in her dream kitchen made reality, and then Mel’s living wood table, made from trees on the nearby land with the help of a carpentry spell.

In the interest of the health of their restarted and excessively complex relationship, Mel would continue to live with her sisters in Vera Manor, at least until they’d figured out the Apocalypse situation, whenever that day came. Niko would run a sort of safe house for the S’Arcana and other magical creatures as needed, like a coven B&B. A teleportation room had been set up in the basement, also known as Heimdall’s sword planted in the ground in the center of a pentagram, which would allow her to call people and some creatures directly to the house when necessary.

Because of her pledge to the coven, the Vera-Vaughn sisters could track her at any time, and if they concentrated, they could tell what she was feeling, and even look out of her eyes with a simple cantation. This revelation had resulted in some serious chats about boundaries, but she trusted the sisters to be respectful. She wouldn’t have pledged herself to their cause, and by proxy, the sisters themselves, if she didn’t.

Conveniently, it also meant that Mel would occasionally show up unscheduled, sometimes forgetting that Niko hadn’t literally asked her there. It had been endlessly confusing the first couple times, until Niko realized it only happened when she was feeling particularly lonely or had slipped into a daydream about Mel. Calling to her. How sweet, Prudence had commented with a dark smile and no further explanation. Whatever the case, Mel seemed to know when Niko wanted her to stop by, sometimes before the were even realized. Another boundaries conversation had followed, in which they had established that neither would be offended if Mel wandered to Niko, and then they had to immediately leave again. It became just another new quirk of her life in the world of magic.

Like now, as she was wiping down the kitchen counter a final time. Her hyper-sensitive ears picked up on the sound of gravel crunching under tires at the top of the long driveway, and she quickly checked her hair in the mirror. No good. A curly mess, but there was nothing she could do about it now. She threw on her favorite old baseball cap and went out to the porch with a glass of iced water, sipping it as she watched her girlfriend park and slide out of the driver’s seat.

Niko’s heart skipped a beat at the smile flashed in her direction as Mel approached, dressed in her usual monochromatic style, with black trousers, a black and white houndstooth blouse, and a black blazer.

“How’d it go?” asked the recently-retired detective, cautiously optimistic.

Mel shrugged, looking bashful as she walked up the steps. “I think it was fine. It’s a nice foot in the door, if I get the job.”

Having lost her teaching position in the old timeline, Mel had finally gotten around to applying for an adjunct professorship, which was just a part time gig, but would help her get back on course towards her goal of the tenure track, like her mother. Niko hugged her with her free arm, delicately trying not to spill any water with the other, and they exchanged a quick kiss.

“Looks like you’re about done,” ventured the shorter woman, resting her cheek on Niko’s chest.

“I am done. Ready for your inspection, ma’am.” Niko untangled herself and took a step back, gesturing to the door. A little bit of nervousness sprang to life in her chest as she followed Mel inside, watching her like a hawk for any sort of reaction.

Humming appreciatively every now and then, Mel paced around the bottom level of the house slowly, running her fingers over the furniture and stopping every now and then to admire the view.
out of one of the home’s many floor-to-ceiling windows. It wasn’t piece-for-piece the nest of marital bliss they’d seen in their dreams, but just like their relationship right now, it was a fresh place to start. A foundation with promise.

Admittedly getting a little emotional at the thought, Niko moved across the room and wrapped her arms around Mel from behind, resting her chin on the shorter woman’s shoulder. Unaware of their watchers, birds flitted between trees, building their nests for impending growing families and fighting over the best sticks to do so. Squirrels and rabbits scampered around below, digging through piles of dead leaves and occasionally coming up with something to gnaw.

Closer to the house, Niko had set up two small chicken coops and a small fenced area intended for goats and donkeys. They had enough land in the parcel to clear some trees and even get some horses or cows, but she figured it was best to start with something more easily cleaned away if killed by visiting demon creatures.

“I never thought of myself as a country kid,” said Niko softly. “But I’ve been really enjoying this.”

“You’re practically a homesteader now.” Mel leaned more of her weight back against her, a small hand reaching around to grip her waist. “Gonna start calling you Yee-Hawmada.”

“Jada beat you to that joke,” laughed Niko, kissing her cheek. “Too slow again, time witch.”

“Oh yeah?”

Mel blinked away, nearly causing Niko to topple forward against the window. She glanced around, not seeing her anywhere in the living room, and noticed that the clock was about eight minutes past where it’d been a moment ago. With a huff, Niko sniffed the air, scenting dahlias heading towards the stairs. She followed the trail up and into the master bedroom, noting the pieces of clothing that led her like landing lights. A blazer hanging on the bannister, one black heel on the landing, and then the second next to Mel’s shirt in the doorway. Her bed remained undisturbed, and she padded quietly into the bathroom, trying not to look too amused.

“How’s that for too slow?” teased Mel from the tub, just her shoulders, neck, and wide smirk visible above the steamy water. Her hands swirled the surface lazily, occasionally drawing enough water away that Niko could see the tops of her breasts.

Niko went for a casual expression as she pulled off her own clothes, idly noting all of her new scars in the mirror. There was the one in her shoulder where the Council Guards had cut her, the bite marks from Sigmund, the palm-sized hole from getting zapped by Harry and falling on the chair, and plenty of smaller scratches and puncture wounds from the subsequent lesser demons they’d faced, like the succubus. Whatever her healing powers, scar prevention was not a feature of it.

The heat practically cradled her tired muscles as she slid into the bath, coming to rest across from Mel in one of the carved seats as water sloshed over the sides. She closed her eyes and went limp, feet floating up slightly. Worth it.

“Macy says that symbol, the one Tychon left behind, is the logo for the company that funds her lab.”

Niko opened her eyes, watching her girlfriend’s forehead crease with concern. “Sounds like it’s time to check some financial records.”

“Sounds like a job for… Yee-Hawmada Investigations, Inc.”

Chuckling, Niko slapped the water to hit Mel with a small splash. “No. N-o.” And then after a long pause, she added, “Yee-konichi-haw Incorporated, obviously.”
Mel was laughing too much to be mad about the splash, as Niko intended, and the sound of it made Niko’s head swim with that warm, giddy feeling she’d previously thought was just other people’s exaggerated descriptions of love. The silly, overwhelming kind that usually made her roll her eyes in movies while the orchestra hits a crescendo of romantic tones. She was totally, completely, irrevocably fucked when it came to Melanie Vera. And she was one hundred percent okay with that.

Sliding around the bench until they were side by side, Niko grabbed one of Mel’s restless hands and brought the knuckles to her lips. “You have dinner plans tonight?”

“Sister night. Maggie really wants to talk about this new boy, Parker.”

Nodding, Niko released Mel’s hand to put her head on the shorter woman’s shoulder, pulling her close and pressing her face against the heated, wet skin as Mel’s chin came to rest on her head. “Bring me leftover tamales?”

“Only if you’re nice.”

“I’m always nice.” Niko settled herself more comfortably against the shorter woman’s body, until she could let her muscles relax without worrying about slipping under the water. Mel’s small hands slid along her back and shoulders, fingertips lightly scratching at the skin around her scars. It was more soothing than even the heat of the water, and her eyes were drooping as they looked out the massive viewing window, over fresh green trees and rolling hills and the orange-blue afternoon sky. Even if she knew exactly what types of horrors could stalk the forest floor, Niko couldn’t help but embrace the tenuous peace of her current life, witches and bears and demons and all. There was always going to be another battle to fight, human or not, whether that was as simple as solving a case or as complicated as stopping the Apocalypse.

Speaking of, Niko was jolted out of her happy place by the sound of Mel’s phone pinging insistently. She reluctantly lifted her upper body out of the water to grab the offending device off the nearby sink edge, and then carefully handed it to Mel, who read for a couple seconds before rolling her eyes and giving it back.

The sister group chat was titled “VVitches”. Subtle.

4:34 lil sis: don’t be mad

4:34 lil sis: like just take several deep breaths

4:35 Macy: Can you come home early?

4:35 lil sis: i may have accidentally lost a faerie somewhere in the house and it keeps eating left shoes

Niko had to chuckle, but it tapered off as Mel groaned and lifted herself out of the water, steam rising and water flowing in glittering rivulets down her golden skin. Not for the first time, and unlikely the last, Niko found herself just blankly staring up at her girlfriend, unable to come up with even the most basic thought.

“Down,” warned Mel playfully as she carefully exited the tub. “I should go before this thing eats one of my Balencia…gas.”

Mel’s pause made Niko smirk, as it was due to her own emergence from the warm water. She crossed her arms, watching Mel’s eyes trace the muscles there, and gave a quick, chirping whistle. “Hey, Vera. My eyes are up here.”
“You’re such a pain in my ass,” sighed Mel as she grabbed towels from the brushed silver wall hooks, handing one to Niko. After a briefly horrified expression flitted across her face, she quickly added: “Don’t you dare pun that right now.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.” Niko stepped out of the tub, curling her toes against the plush rug, and tied the towel around her waist before drawing Mel back into her arms for a languid kiss.

“I really should go,” murmured the witch against her lips, eyes closed.

“Go. Save your shoe.” She brought one of Mel’s hands up to her chest. “I’ll be here.”

Mel let out a long breath, her cheeks reddening the way they always did when she was about to cry, but after a quick sniffle and a flurry of blinks, the witch managed to reply, “I’m never gonna get tired of hearing that.”

THE END

End Notes

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