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It had only taken one electric kiss to convince Maddy that she wanted to spend the night in Brecken Holloway's bed. This, however, wasn't exactly how she'd imagined it.

Boredom had been seeping into her veins for hours, and with nobody to talk to, she now found herself lying on her back, counting the rivets that ran along the whitewashed ceiling. She'd already counted the books that lined Brecken's bedside table (lots of Garcia-Marquez), as well as the number of steps it took to reach the two adjacent rooms within the suite (seven to the luxurious bathroom, twelve to the smaller office).

Ninety-one rivets. She sighed. Maddy's wandering mind began tallying up all the things she'd rather be doing with Brecken right now. It only made the waiting worse.

Thunder rumbled through the walls, and as the ship rocked back and forth, she wondered just how bad things had gotten out there. With all the hatches battened down for the safety of Brecken's party guests, she couldn't just poke her head up above deck for a peek.

After Brecken had left her, but before she'd settled into his stateroom for the night, she'd briefly wandered back out to the yacht's below-deck lounge. A dozen or so guests had still been milling around, clearly nervous, but not quite ready to say goodnight to the party. Even in the shared experience of the storm, Maddy still found little in common with Chicago's rich and famous. Trying to get their minds off the storm, they'd all clung to their usual banter: tee times, successful auditions, campaign fundraising. Maddy had lasted about ten minutes.

On her way back, she'd run into some of the kitchen staff, putting away food in the dining hall. She'd felt relief at their sense of calmness. They had weathered this type of situation before, and they'd all seemed confident in the yacht's ability to handle the wind and waves. A few of them had seemed

positively giddy, and she hadn't understood why until one of them mentioned getting paid double overtime for storm-duty.

Although it seemed like a world away, Maddy thought of her own bank account, and wondered if she'd also collect a bit of extra spending money from this ordeal. She supposed not. After all, she wasn't on the clock anymore, exactly. She'd already crossed a line, and had become something more than just one of Holloway's bartenders. Now, as she lay in her boss's boss's bed, she wondered where this all might lead.

Every time she learned something new about Brecken, it made her want to learn *everything* about him. Not because of his power, or his money—although Maddy had to admit that those things had their appeal—but because of his unexpected... depth. Here was a guy who should, by all rights, have ended up as some shallow, spoiled, womanizing jackass. Instead, he'd been proving himself to be a genuinely interesting person, not to mention the rare guy who she seemed to have great chemistry with. Every time their eyes met, Maddy's heart, her stomach, and half-a-dozen butterflies did a little dance together. She wondered if he felt it too.

Another thunder-boom snapped her out of her reverie, and a moment later, the bedside lamp flickered and went out. Earlier, Maddy had left the stateroom door cracked open to stave off claustrophobia, but now, when she glanced over in that direction, she saw only darkness. The lights in the hallway had gone out too, apparently.

She sat up on the edge of the bed, listening carefully. More thunder. And something else that sounded a lot like thunder, and yet... wasn't, somehow. *What's that roar? What's going on out there?* Maybe it was the engines, working harder than usual in the rough waters. Maybe not. Curious, she shimmied down off the bed. Taking one short, careful step at a time, she made her way through the darkness, shuffling toward the door.

As she reached the doorway, a startling beam of bluish light flashed across the hallway. She peered through the crack, and exhaled with relief when she saw two members of the yacht's crew. Both men held flashlights, and casually made small talk as they walked down the corridor toward her. *They're not panicking*, she thought. *That's a good sign.*

"Excuse me," she said, leaning out into the hallway.

"Yes, ma'am?" said the shorter of the two crewmen. She recognized him and his bushy mustache from her earlier tour of the ship, but now he wore a hardhat and a soaking wet pair of coveralls.

"Is the power out?" She cleared her throat. "I mean, obviously it's out

here. But is it out for the entire ship?”

“Just the passenger electrical. The ship’s running just fine, don’t you worry. We’re heading down to twiddle a switches now; we’ll have the lights back in a jiffy.” He glanced upward, and in the glow of his flashlight, Maddy saw him arch an eyebrow.

“These emergency lights should be on already, actually. I’m surprised—”

Just then, Maddy heard a series of clicks, and a long strand of small, red lights near the ceiling of the hallway came to life, bathing the entire area in a dim, red glow. To her, the corridor suddenly reminded her of a photographer’s darkroom.

“Ah, there we go,” said the shorter crewman, grinning. “One less thing to fix tonight.”

The taller, lankier man spoke up. “Just sit tight, okay? Don’t want nobody in the infirmary tonight because they bumped their heads.”

Maddy nodded. The pair of crewmen had slowed to answer her question, but now that they’d done so, they hurried onward, setting a purposeful pace toward the stern of the ship.

“Good luck down there!” she called after them. The short man gave her a friendly wave, but didn’t look back.

Stepping back from the doorway, she noticed that her room—Brecken’s room—also sported a strip of red emergency lights, which now illuminated the bedroom in the same eerie glow as the hallway. She put her hand on the bedroom door handle, intending to push it closed for the night... but then hesitated. Curiosity crept into her mind.

Where is he, anyway? she wondered. Was Brecken still overseeing things up on the bridge, with Maxim and the captain? It had been hours. If everything truly was under control—as that crewman had just assured her—then surely Brecken wouldn’t mind a surprise visit, would he? Maybe he’d even appreciate a momentary diversion. She imagined all the possibilities, and in each one, the idea of seeing him for a few minutes before bed seemed like a particularly pleasant idea. *Who knows, maybe I could even convince him to come to bed.*

So instead of closing the bedroom door, she pulled it open and slipped out into the hallway. Trying her best to remember which direction was which, she turned left and followed the trail of red lights. The combination of thunder and that other, mysterious roaring noise made the little hairs on the back of her neck stand up. To calm her nerves, she started giving voice to her

thoughts.

“There had better not be any *The Shining* shit happening down here,” she muttered. In the patches of darkness in between emergency lights, she walked with one hand out in front of her, hoping that it would keep her from running face first into a wall.

Soon her hand *did* hit something unexpected, and she stopped. Maddy squinted, then quickly realized that she’d gone completely the wrong way. By pure accident, she now found herself standing in front of the immense steel door of Brecken’s vault; the one she’d been shooed away from hours before.

Could he be inside? she wondered.

Maddy examined the door closely. As she’d learned earlier, knocking would do no good. Rapping her knuckles on a slab of steel this thick was more likely to break her hand, than to be heard by someone on the other side. Oddly, she noticed, the panel that had flashed green digits at her earlier now stood dark and lifeless. *Must be connected to the same circuit as the lights*, she thought. She put a hand on the huge spoked wheel that served as the door’s handle, and felt tiny as she prepared to tug on such a gargantuan piece of metal with her bare hands.

She yanked down, really putting her back into it, then realized that the effort wasn’t needed. The wheel spun freely. The mechanism was so well balanced that she could have spun it with one finger, and after the first few rotations, that’s exactly what she did. The wheel whizzed counterclockwise, faster and faster, until it hit the end of its threading and stopped with a loud *KLANK*.

Still not fully believing that it could be so easy, Maddy pulled the handle toward her. The monstrous door must have weighed a ton or more, but an intricate system of counterweights let her move it with one hand. Starting slow, the door picked up speed as she pulled. Soon, momentum took over, and the vault door swung the rest of the way open on its own.

She took a deep breath, Brecken’s beautiful eyes burning in her mind’s eye. She hoped to see them again in person when she stepped through the vault door.

It wasn’t until she stepped inside that she realized the vault had no emergency lights. Another realization, made a few seconds too late, was that she’d failed to account for the momentum she’d put into opening the door. Instead of slowing to a stop in the fully open position, it had hit the door springs hidden somewhere deep within its construction, and was now rebounding. She turned around just in time to see it closing in her face. She

put out her arms, but had neither the strength nor the leverage to stop it. The vault door slammed shut with a thud; one that she felt deep within her chest. She heard a sickening click from deep within the door's locking mechanism.

Sealed inside a pitch black void, the lack of emergency lights suddenly seemed like a far more serious problem.

Maddy heard an unusual sound. *Is that... sniffing?* she thought.

Then she heard another click, this one—apparently—the electricity being restored. Above her, a cold florescent light flickered to life. Maddy's eyes widened, and her jaw dropped. In a small, bare room made of metal, just out of reach in front of her, stood a giant, black-furred beast. Not fully a wolf, not fully a man, it bore characteristics of both. The creature stood perhaps eight feet tall, and it stared down at her with intense, dark eyes that seemed somehow familiar and yet completely wild. There was rage in those eyes. And hunger.

It sniffed the air as it stared down at her. Then it growled.

Maddy couldn't tell if she felt like passing out, or puking. Neither happened, and she knew a scream would die in her throat, so she did the only other thing she could: she swallowed hard, pressed herself back against the vault door, and looked on in terror.

The creature bore the head of the biggest, meanest-looking wolf she'd ever seen or imagined, but that head sat atop a human-shaped body (albeit a huge and *very* hairy one). Its body stretched out in an unnatural spread-eagle position, and when Maddy looked closer at its arms and legs—all rippling with sinewy muscles under the fur—she noticed that they were bound by large, steel shackles.

Chains stretched from the beast's wrists to the two opposing walls, and from its ankles to the floor. There was a large steel band around its neck as well, and a long chain, with links as big as grapefruits, stretching up to the ceiling. Each of the chains had been pulled taut, giving the monster very little freedom of movement. *A good thing, too*, thought Maddy's panicked mind, as she took a closer look at the giant's hairy hands and saw a collection of nasty claws, each one as long as a steak knife.

From the moment the lights had come on, Maddy had been positive that she was about to die. The chains made her wonder if this night might somehow end with her *not* expiring horribly, but that didn't quell the terror thumping through her veins. She felt like her heart would explode at any moment.

The beast's growling stopped, but only long enough for it to take in a

fresh lungful of air. Then, narrowing its eyes at Maddy, it unleashed a mighty roar. She took in its impossibly large fangs as a blast of musky-smelling air hit her full in the face, and she could feel her hair being blown back. The sound was almost too much to bear. She put her hands over her ears, but it didn't help.

When the roar finally stopped, the creature went into what could only be described as a frenzy. Mad with bloodlust and hunger, it strained against its bonds to get at the small, tender morsel now being presented to it. Maddy felt tears streaming down her face; even in her darkest moments, she'd never before been the focus of such mad rage. This creature wanted to tear her apart; she couldn't get away, and aside from trusting in the chains to hold, there was nothing she could do to stop it.

It thrashed, twisting and pulling in mad convulsions. Throwing itself forward, then relaxing back against the wall behind it, winding itself up for another full-body thrust. It repeated the process again, and again. After half a dozen tries, Maddy heard another sickening sound: the snap of metal. As she heard a clinking sound against the hard floor, she knew that one of the chains' links had popped under literal tons of pressure from the beast.

In the blink of an eye, one of its clawed hands shot out and seized her around the shoulder. Razors pressed painfully into the flesh of her back, and the monster pulled her toward its gaping maw, now open and ready receive a meal. The beast twisted its neck and turned its head upward as best as it could, despite the still intact chains, and let out a piercing, bloodcurdling howl of victory. Feeling warm blood running down her back, Maddy could do nothing but hang limply from its grip like a rag doll. An involuntary whimper escaped her lips as it prepared to devour her.

The werewolf looked down into her eyes. It opened its jaws wide, and Maddy stared at the set of terrible fangs inside. As the werewolf's head came down at her with lightning swiftness, Maddy's last thought was this: she wished that tonight had gone so very differently.

There was an explosion of blinding blue light.

Then, Maddy's whole universe got very wobbly.

She felt cold.

She felt sick.

She was... somewhere else.

XIV

The blue light faded, leaving Maddy blind and stumbling. Her knees buckled, and the floor rushed up to meet her in the darkness. Her forehead slammed against the hardness beneath her, and she let out an involuntary yelp. Stars emerged from the darkness and swirled in her vision. The knot in her stomach tightened and convulsed, and with a lurch, she found herself suddenly unleashing the contents of her stomach onto the floor. It didn't provide much relief, but she'd take whatever she could get.

Her vision slowly returned, and she found herself staring downward at a pattern of white flooring tiles that she recognized. They were... her own. It seemed that—somehow, beyond all reason—she was back home, crumpled on the dining room floor of her own apartment.

What the hell? she thought. Maddy tried to sort her chaotic thoughts into some semblance of order. *How did I get here? Am I hallucinating? Am I... dead?* If she'd known death would bring her back to her home, she reckoned that she wouldn't have rented such a lousy apartment.

She ran her fingertips along the smooth tiles, avoiding her own mess, grasping for whatever reality she could find. The floor felt real enough to her.

When her fingers wandered over and brushed against the dining room's woven rug, however, it jolted her memory and reignited her terror. She recalled the feeling of fur, and remembered the sight of the unnatural monster aboard Brecken's yacht. Those long teeth, dripping with saliva. Those terrible claws, each one longer than her entire hand. Those dark, rage-filled eyes. A renewed sense of panic gripped the already shell-shocked young woman, and for a second time, she vomited.

By the time she'd finished, Maddy had never felt so exhausted. She wondered if she should be laughing or crying. *Just breathe*, she told herself. *In... and out. Process later. For now, breathe in... breathe out.*

“Welcome home, *podna*,” said a deep voice, from somewhere above her. It was Augustus.

“In the movies, they always make teleportation look sexy,” he continued, his New Orleans accent lending a musical quality to his words. “Whether it’s sci-fi or fantasy, they always make it look like it’s some kind of treat. What they don’t mention, is that it makes you feel like every inch of your body has been worked over with a sledgehammer.”

Maddy couldn’t yet bring herself to speak, but she was happy to hear her best friend’s voice. Maybe she wasn’t dead after all. With great effort, she rolled over, away from the vomit and onto her back. Her eyes darted around the apartment, part of her still not fully believing that all this could be real. *What the hell?* Just moments before, she’d been waiting for death aboard a yacht in the middle of Lake Michigan. Now she was just... magically *here*, somehow?

“Moving a person from place to place—while skipping all the places in between—is no easy business, love. It takes a lot of work. A lot of energy.”

She focused on Augustus. He was grinning, with his broken leg propped up on the kitchen chair across from him, and his crutches resting against the table.

As her vision steadied, Maddy noticed an odd-but-familiar blue glow tinting everything in the room. Her best friend’s eyes reflected the light of half a dozen lit candles in front of him, arranged into a pentagram atop the dining room table. Each of their wicks burned with eerie sapphire flames.

She looked down, and saw more of the blue glow radiating from the floor itself. The sooty shapes and runes, the ones that Augustus had cleaned up days ago, had returned. Where his smudgy patterns of ash had once been scrawled, bright lines of light now glowed, like blue laser beams. Maddy blinked.

As she looked around, yet another blue glow caught her attention, pulsating at the bottom of her vision. She clutched at her chest and lifted her pendant up, in front of her face. It too shone blue, just as it had when Augustus first cast his magic on it. Back then, when she’d said the word “magic” in her head, it was surrounded by huge, sarcastic (or at least, patronizing) air quotes. Now, she was starting to think that she hadn’t given her best friend the credit he deserved.

“I told you it would protect you,” said Augustus, pointing down to the necklace in her hand. Although the haze in her head swirled, she realized that she still couldn’t quite form words in her mouth, but she at least managed to

nod.

Over on the stove, the kettle started whistling. Augustus snatched up his crutches, hopped to his feet and hobbled over to the kitchen counter, where he set to work making two cups of tea. Plucking herbs from a series of leather pouches he'd laid out in a neat row, he filled up two tea diffusers and dropped them into a pair of bright yellow mugs. From her vantage point on the floor, it looked like he was adding significantly more ingredients to her cup than to his, but she decided to trust in his expertise. At this point, she was just grateful not to be inside the stomach of a literal monster. She hoped that whatever he was brewing would help with the splitting headache that had just started kicking its way through the back of her skull.

Once the tea was steeping, Augustus shuffled back over to Maddy and extended a hand.

“Let’s get you up in a chair, okay? I’d just pick you up myself, but—“ He tapped his crutches against the floor, their rubber feet giving hearty thumps against the tile. She reached up and took his hand, letting the pendant fall back to her chest. Trying to balance the weight between her injured friend and her own wobbly legs, she managed to—in the least graceful manner possible—crawl up and settle, groaning, into the closest kitchen chair.

“Drink this, it will make you feel better,” he told her, after fetching the mugs from the counter, and dropping the single-serving tea diffusers in a nearby bowl. The steam rising from the cup in front of her smelled strange, but not unpleasant. She took a sip. It tasted bitter, but its warmth felt soothing in her throat.

“Want to talk about it?” asked Augustus. With a grunt, he settled back into the chair across from her, and returned his crutches to their leaning position against the table. Maddy shook her head, not knowing where to begin.

“I... I saw things tonight that you wouldn’t believe.”

Augustus flashed an impish smile. “What, exactly, wouldn’t I believe? That one of the Holloway crew turned into an eight-foot-tall mountain of muscle, fur, teeth, and claws? And that he attacked you?”

Maddy’s jaw dropped.

“You knew?”

“That you were in danger?” he asked. “Well yes, *obviously*. The teleportation spell I put on that amulet wouldn’t have kicked in unless you were in trouble. *Bad* trouble.”

Maddy shook her head. “I meant, you knew that these... *things* existed?”

That Holloway Industries has been doing some kind of... I don't know... genetic experiments, maybe? That they have *monsters*?"

"I assure you — it's nothing like that, dearie. Nothing *unnatural*," Augustus in a calm voice. "They don't *have* monsters. Most of them *are* monsters. That's Holloway's whole thing. It's a corporation of werewolves.

"Well that's just silly." Maddy crossed her arms, half amused, half annoyed that Augustus would toy with her at a time like this. But his eyes told her that he wasn't kidding.

"You didn't think it was so silly," he said, "when you were retching all over the floor." He glanced over toward her mess and wrinkled his nose. "You're cleaning that up, by the way."

She wasn't sure what to think. An entire corporation, run by creatures that she—until an hour ago—didn't even know existed? It sounded completely, utterly, batshit crazy.

She took another long sip of tea, shaking her head as she swallowed.

"M'dear," he said, "you should sit back and get comfy. I know you've had a long night, but it's about to get longer. It's about time I filled you in on how the world *really* works."

Maddy's mind was already filling to the brim with wild questions, and—if all this madness *was* true—she felt grateful to have a friend who might be able to actually answer them. As she leaned back against the kitchen chair, however, a sudden pain shot up her back. She winced, sucking in air.

"You're hurt?" Augustus asked, already on his feet again by the time the words left his mouth. Crutches back under his arms, he quickly shuffled over behind her. "Shirt off."

She lifted her shirt over her head. The sticky fabric caused her more pain as it peeled away from her skin, but she gritted her teeth and kept pulling.

Augustus leaned in and inspected the area where the werewolf had grabbed her, alongside her bra strap.

"Hmph," he grunted. "Could be worse, I'd say. Could be a *lot* worse. Stay right there; I've got just the thing."

He limped off into the bathroom, and she heard him rummaging through a tin box he always kept under the sink.

"More of your gran's magic?" she called after him.

"Something like that!" he shouted back.

“She seriously taught you some kind of mystical folk remedy for... *werewolf scratches?*”

“More or less!”

More rummaging sounds piqued her curiosity. “Well, what is it?” she asked. “Eye of newt? Pickled fairy wings? Powdered unicorn horn?”

“Even better!” He grinned as he reemerged into the kitchen, holding up two items. “Neosporin and Band-Aids. Magic isn’t the solution to *everything*, you know.”