

MEMORIES OF THE NIGHT HOTEL, PART ONE

In my dreams, I always returned to the Sideways and my childhood home, the Night Hotel. This time was no different. Alone, I walked down a burgundy carpet covering an endless, black, walnut-stained floor. Walking down a corridor with no doors, for what could have been a minute or a month, I felt the hard plaster of the hallway walls scrape across my palms. Yellow Edison bulbs hanging from the ceiling cast harsh waves of darkness, allowing my friends, the Shadows, to follow me. I tried to ignore their gossip: they'd tell me tales about the guests, the doors they most feared, and Aunt and Uncle. I am taller here. An angular face, mercury-colored eyes, and hair made from strands of pure silver looked back at me from a small, gold-wrought, Victorian mirror. On the sides of the mirror, twin flames danced inside glass lanterns and sang songs of endless hunger and lust. I greeted the fire in the tongue of the Sideways.

“Hello, hello, we can burn. Can we delight?” they sang.

“Not this time,” I tell them and start to walk away.

“We are yours. We dance for your delight.”

I stopped. “You don't have to...”

“Can you, can you free us then? From her hate?” “Aunt's?”

“You know Aunt? Please don't tell her anything. Watch as we dance, and forget our plight.”

I peered closer and saw two naked women, dancing on miniature pools of oil, become engulfed in fire. Burning red

hair occasionally flickered blue, gyrating rhythmically to the crackling of their inner fire. The dancer's yellow light reflected off my eyes, mirroring the color of a hunter's moon. I reached out to the flames, and sensed the chains of a promise binding them to the mirror. Invisible chains had been forged out of an oath they had sworn to Aunt, the matriarch of the Night Hotel.

One of the dancers stopped and looked up at me. "We miss our mother, we miss our home...please."

As the chains that bound her violently reasserted their binding, I felt shock. I had often seen humans stolen from their world and bound to something more real than anything in the Sideways, namely, a promise. It was customary here to trick humans into impossible promises, and then drag them back with us as slaves.

The woman screamed until she, once again, danced. I felt something in the back of my mind. An echo of something I had not felt since I was a child and first met Vera.

The echo grew louder and louder, until I sensed the disjointed orchestra of their pain. I drew in a deep breath and used my power to pull against the chains, using all of my strength. It seemed wrong somehow to me that they were bound, and it hurt pulling that hard. My heart raced, matching the power that bound the two, but the most I could do was loosen their chains and offer them a respite.

"I am so sorry," I explained. "This is all I can do."

With the chains loosened, one woman rested her face up on her pool of oil, gasping for breath. The other cried and struggled against her chains, then leapt from her pool.

Without fuel, her flame began to burn out quickly. I instinctively caught her in my hand, but I didn't have the power to keep her flame lit. As I held her, the flame faded away, the chains vanished, and she began to grow.

In my arms, I held the lifeless form of a beautiful girl. Her emaciated body was covered with tattoos, including one above

her breast that read “*Love will tear us apart 5/29/1977,*” clearly a relic of a life she led before she found the Night Hotel. I held her for longer than I could remember, and soon small splashes of mercury fell on her limp body. I had never seen death, and I couldn’t imagine that anything could be this fragile. I heard a sob from the other girl, still chained to her pool and dancing for her fallen sister.

“Uncle comes. Run!” Shadows warned me before they fled. Behind me, I heard heavy footsteps and felt wood buckle, as something willed the hallway to collapse in on itself, to shorten the distance between us.

Behind me, I heard someone yell, “You shouldn’t break Aunt’s things, child.”

When I spun around, Uncle loomed over me. His seven-foot tall body was made from black onyx and had a myriad of tiny, molten yellow cracks. He wore a silk smoking jacket and had an ivory pipe in his mouth. With one hand, he held my shoulder, his fire searing it black. When he bent over, a small stream of molten rock spilled out from his pipe onto my face. I remember screaming.

CHAPTER 1

Once upon a time, in the land of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, my only pair of pants finally, completely failed me—a crotch tear evolved from easily hidden to pornographic. This was not something that would normally bother me, but I'd promised my roommate I would meet some of his friends later that night—and they probably had things against exposed crotches. The betrayal I felt, in knowing that my pants had just given up on me, changed to disappointment soon after I removed them.

The tear's negative space mocked me, while the rest reminisced about the great times we had over the past three months. I stood half-naked in my converted pickle factory loft's bathroom, momentarily eulogizing my friend—the pants—wishing our relationship had not end this way.

I closed my eyes, reached beyond the human world and into the Sideways for my magic and channeled a fraction of fire from my birthplace—the otherworldly Sideways—transporting it through my body and into the palm of my hand. I played with the glowing ember above my fingertips, gradually feeding it heat from my source, until it grew into a tiny glowing marble. Reverently, I began to hum Johnny Cash's "Ring of Fire," the closest thing I could think of to a Viking funeral song, and lowered the fire onto my jeans.

While I was connected to the Sideways, the endless possibilities it granted me felt intoxicating. I could hear the Shadows whispering their gossip and the fire begging to grow larger. I chose to ignore them this time and concentrated

instead on the fire consuming my pants. The flames wanted more power, a chance to spread their embers across the apartment, consuming everything in its beauty. I pulled away, dampening the heat until only cool ash remained. I released my connection to the Sideways and immediately felt my body depress, aching for more.

I gathered the ash into my hands, opened a window, and whispered, “Be free, jeans.” The ash gracefully drifted into the bright, postindustrial outline of my lovely neighborhood. If you looked closely enough, you could see the ghost of the old factories and warehouses that had been converted into artists’ communes and bars. Not long after the artists claimed it as their own, a breed of young professionals, with fresh faces and smart ties, followed. The fresh-faced people quickly decided that the artistic community they moved into could be improved, as soon as they got rid of those annoying artists. They slowly converted old communes and lofts to condos, featuring reclaimed wood and ample wine storage.

Personally, I loved living in my converted pickle factory. Artist lofts never came with pools.

It was while I was saying my goodbyes that my roommate and best friend Thom returned from work. It is almost impossible to maintain cool when your custom-tailored-suit-wearing roommate catches you half-naked, leaning perilously halfway out of the floor-to-ceiling windows, freeing his jeans, at 6:00 PM on a Thursday. I like to think I did a good job anyway.

“Sup?” I said, playing it cool.

“Are you mental? Why are you naked?” Thom asked.

“Not naked, I’m wearing underwear,” I said, pointing to my briefs. “In compliance with the Nudity Treaty of last month.”

Thom always wore custom-tailored suits (sometimes, I think, in bed), and was what most people would consider classically handsome. Thanks to his impeccably groomed dirty

blond hair, strong British features, dark blue eyes, and, what NYU girls have alleged, a sexy British accent, I was forced to agree. At 6'2", he was regrettably taller than me, but that was okay because I was still skinnier. Don't judge, if you don't live in New York. Thom owned a small tech startup company, which he used to fund his dabbles in technomancy.

Technomancy was exactly what it sounded like: a little-known form of human magic based in math and technology. Human magic was the manipulation of the fabric of the world. They could alter physics or biology but remained answerable to the forces of their world. I explain more about technomancy later, but I wanted to note that it was much more impressive that Thom willingly and consistently chose to have a job. He had attempted to explain to me, more than once, that having a job and going to work was not a choice, but I chose not to believe him. Whenever I needed money, I just bent probability until I found someone who was nice enough to give it to me.

"I ran out of pants," I said.

"So..."

"I'm going to get new ones." "How?"

"Oh, the usual way—find the designer store that is more than happy to give me a new pair of pants," I replied, and smiled.

"That is cheating, mate. You need to pay."

"I don't care how it works for other people. I have a system."

"It's not a system. It's stealing."

"Horseradish! Don't judge my system. I am leaving!"

"Here," Thom said, grabbing a pair of his pants from his room. "At least cover up."

"See?" I held a finger to my nose, "A system."

After changing into Thom's boring khakis, I looked at my reflection, found it annoying, and hated it. I started to pull fire

from the Sideways, forming a tiny blue ball of flames inches above my palm. With a small exertion of will, I shaped the fire into a pair of cloth scissors. With my right hand, I grabbed the fiery instrument and gave the offending khakis an evil, mad-doctor-inspired smile. Before I could correct the pants, my roommate slapped the fire right out of my hand.

“Don’t you fucking dare. Those are J Crew and I like them the way they are.” This was not the first time I had decided to edit some of Thom’s clothing. He might have been angry from earlier in the year, when I borrowed one of his blue suit jackets and turned it into a flame-blackened vest for a party.

My system is probably what most would consider cheating, but I would be damned if I’d ever admit it. I had already made far too many concessions to my friend’s sense of right and wrong. After a particularly long conversation, I even stopped igniting subway musicians’ instruments as punishment for their perpetual abuse of “folk music.” I still don’t understand how allowing them to continue whiney acoustic -guitar -playing fits within the whole good and bad thing people (like Thom) keep mentioning. But you know what humans say: *when in Rome, do as the Romans*. Though in Rome that would mean a murderous bloodbath, followed by a good old-fashioned orgy. Humans confused me.

It wasn’t just silly morality that worried Thom about my “system.” Though lacking any form of government, magic was still highly regulated, locally by guilds, and internationally by the Inquisition. The Inquisition, not to be mistaken for the Spanish Inquisition—though like its predecessor, it is often unexpected. Based in London, the bureaucratic organization is rumored to resolve many of its issues with the pointy end of a knife. To them, all mages must be accredited wizards by one of *their* universities, which means they tend to frown on all magic that does not involve chanting Babylonian, the enforced language of magic, and scribbling it on floors. Though not yet openly

hostile, they viewed technomancers, such as Thom, as mad scientists, and a consistent threat to their laws. Most of the Inquisition's laws were put in place to keep magic covert from the rest of the world. Being thrown into bonfires proved bad enough during witch-hunts, and no mage wanted to find himself on the wrong end of a Seal team.

To wizards, I wasn't even a threat. I was the fairytale monster they warned their children about—a sorcerer.

"You could always go to Greenpoint," Thom suggested.

"I don't want to go to Greenpoint. Why can't I just find a store in Soho that will give me pants?"

"We were trying to diminish your larceny, if you don't remember."

"Stupid New Year's resolution. It's not larceny if they give it to me."

"The way you go about it, it is," Thom said.

Usually, if I need pants, all I do is grasp the lightest connection to my source and channel my power of probability until I can follow its threads to a store willing to give me free stuff. Without too much effort, I can twist the strings of probability into getting my way, either by finding the perfect thing to say, or by influencing the chances that a store manager sees things my way and gives me pants. The ability to follow probability also helps reduce time spent shopping, by instantly narrowing my search to finding whatever pants would make my ass look best without trying them on. Some people would say it is a waste to expend power on bar tricks and clothes shopping. Some people are stupid. I have yet to meet a practitioner of magic that has never used arcane knowledge to help get their genitals touched.

"Sorcery's not supposed to exist, Damon. Every time you flaunt it, the Inquisition gets closer to discovering you. Don't think all those store managers you have been ripping off haven't started to wonder why they keep giving away five

hundred dollars of merchandise to a random stranger.”

“I’m not random; I am an incredibly good-looking stranger.” “The Inquisition doesn’t care how good-looking you are.”

“They should,” I said, pulling fire from the Sideways until it engulfed my hands.

I sculpted it into a floating jail cell window, with fiery bars, mimicking a prisoner in jail. Maintaining the fire required a constant connection to the Sideways, so its energy poured into my body, intensifying everything. I felt like I’d just drunk ten cups of coffee and the world slowed as though trapped in amber. Thom, my best friend, was getting annoying.

“Stop it! Shite is serious. It is dangerous enough to practice technomancy; I don’t need you bringing more attention to us.”

“Don’t know why, it’s all humany magicky, isn’t it?” I said, releasing my connection and watching my flames dissipate. The energy I once commanded was now replaced by an equivalent wariness.

“Not to them,” Thom said, staring at his feet.

My stomach grumbled, another one of the annoying day-to-day struggles of living in the human world. I had forgotten to eat all day after discovering a treasure trove of kitten videos on the internet. We didn’t have kittens in the Sideways. Well, we did, but they talked back and always spoiled the ending of whatever book you were reading.

They also ate souls, but that seemed universal.

“Thom,” I called from the kitchen.

“What?” he answered from his room

“What is that emotion called when you are hungry?”

“That’s not an emotion! Hunger isn’t...” Thom stopped his explanation, and I think I heard a sigh.

“Thom, I’m also angry at my hungry. I even knew that anger was an emotion before I got here.”

“I am at least 80% certain you are fucking with me.”

“Hanger,” I said, suddenly proud of myself. “Thom! I invented an emotion! Hanger.”

“That’s not a thing, just cook something.”

“Or...” I sat on our couch, reached out to my source and felt for the strings of probability, concentrating on the one that would solve my hunger, and then took a nap.

I woke up an hour later to a knock on our door. Thom beat me to it; annoyance was etched on his face when he opened the door to find a delivery person wearing a party hat, holding a pizza.

“Um, like, congratulations on winning our free pizza and beer delivery contest.”

“What’s that?” Thom asked, glaring at me.

“Well, I didn’t know we had it, but it is a contest that you won. And if you win it, you get free pizza.”

“And beer,” I added.

“A contest,” Thom growled. “That we entered.”

“Never done anything like this, but enjoy your free pizza and beer.”

“No balloons?” I asked, disappointed.

“They broke in the car. You guys.” The delivery guy glanced at Thom, then down to my bare legs and neon blue underwear. “Have fun.”

“Thanks!” I said, taking the pizza. Thom, still disapproving in a way only a Brit can be, shoved cash into the guy’s hand and shut the door.

“Happy now?”

“Much, thanks. Do you want some pizza?” I held a slice in front of Thom.

“How much probability did you have to bend to fabricate a contest that we won?”

“Pizza, beer. Worth it.” I threw him a can of Six Points, a favorite local brewery of ours.

“Promise not to do this again?” Thom sat and bit into a

slice of pizza.

“Totally wrong, immoral even. Only for emergencies. I was acting out the emotion of hanger; I thought you would be proud.”

“Hanger is not one of the emotions I wanted you to connect with,” Thom said, pointing at my pair of amazing neon blue underwear. “Put on the goddamn pants.”

About ten minutes later, I stood in front of Thom for inspection. Because of Thom's height and belt size, I was practically swimming in his evil kakis.

“I hate them.” I crossed my arms, pouting. “How about I just buy you pants?”

“What’s it going to cost?”

“A favor,” Thom said. After living with me, he had begun to realize how my mind operated way more than I was comfortable with.

“I like free pants; I don’t like owing favors. What kind of favor?”

“A Greenpoint favor. Susan called. She needs my help with something.” A well-known technomancer who experimented with alchemy, Susan was one of the few people in our area Thom considered a peer. She often gave me free beers from her bar while she talked shop with Thom. I approved of her as a human.

“Nope.”

“You know I paid rent this month, and last month. I’m quite certain favors are owed, regardless. This way you also get a pair of pants.”

“Fine.”

Thom waited for me at the door, his cell phone already queued up with map directions to boutiques in Greenpoint, a neighborhood half a mile north of our/his apartment. Greenpoint had become a neighborhood defined by the term “hit or miss.” Formerly the hottest real estate for angry, drunk

Polish men to congregate in, in recent years Greenpoint had begrudgingly accepted a young population of artists and professionals, who wanted to participate in Williamsburg's explosive bar scene, while simultaneously belittling the gentrifying phonies and yuppies who actually lived there. In the past ten years, Greenpoint had also attracted a small, tightly knit community of wizards and technomancers. The community tended to ignore the guilds and espoused basic ethics, which is commonly considered, in the magical community, as the best way to stay broke. Most of the practitioners in Williamsburg either had wealthy parents or had figured out how much easier it was to simply turn lead into gold, figuratively speaking.

"I just hate hanging out with your Greenpoint mage friends. I have to pretend to be all boring and, well, you know."

"Human."

"Yeah. Also, I still hate these khaki pants."

"Well, I can up my offer to magic pants."

"Those exist?" I asked, trying to hide my excitement. "If you are lying to me, I'm going to shut it down."

"I know a bloke..."

I'd stopped listening. I was pretty sure Thom was lying, but the allure of magic pants proved too strong.