

The Ghost Stations EP

AN INNER CIRCLE SHORT STORY

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I Hope I Don't Fall in Love with You

FEBRUARY 14, 2009

Corbin spotted the line of cars outside Janice's mansion and swung a right to avoid the queue. Kirin had instructed him to pick her up at seven sharp, but he remained unsure what the night would entail. All he knew was that things had changed.

He had money for the valet this time, but figured he'd save himself the cash. Parking on the next street over, he wandered past the line of vehicles, his collar pulled up against the cold. He hoped the coat would hide the contrast of his sweater against the lavish dresses and suits sported by the other attendees. It would do nothing to hide his jeans and Converse. Janice's last party had specified a dress code, and he hoped his attire would not exclude him. He dreaded having to announce himself as an Orphan to every other magician he met that night, but after months of practice, announcing his lack of affiliation almost felt natural.

Almost.

Janice manned the door over Christmas, but he found her assistant Alyssa in the entryway. He had seen little of her since she started learning Janice's brand of magic, but could still recognize her despite her feathered mask. A stack of similar ones sat on the table beside her, and she absently handed one to him before she recognized him.

"Corbin!" Her smile flashed white against the dark red of her dress, and the boy tried to match her energy.

"Alyssa." At a loss for what to say next, he nodded to the masks. "What's with those?"

"Oh, we're doing a whole Eyes Wide Shut thing tonight."

Corbin fought to maintain his grin as he parsed her sentence. He always played catch-up to the obtuse terms other magicians bandied about. Losing several years of pop culture parlance during his stint in the Celestial Ambassadors kept him even further out of the loop, which he suspected was the case now.

"You're not on the list," she finally offered. He noted that she made it a statement rather than a question.

"I'm just picking up Kirin. I can wait outside if that would be better."

"Oh no, we'll find her together." Alyssa slid out from behind her table and took Corbin's arm before he could object. She never remembered his aversion to physical contact, and he gritted his teeth to not pull away as she led him through the entryway and into the house proper.

The place had been brightly lit when Corbin had been there for the Christmas soiree, with glittery seasonal decorations,

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cheery music, and a massive buffet, and he hardly recognized it now. The lights were dimmed, the music tinkled at the edge of perception, and a massive table laden with all sorts of delicacies took up the entirety of the dining area. A few masked attendees loitered around the appetizers, with the rest flitting through the rooms in small groups of two or three. The air felt charged and overflowing as Alyssa steered them deeper in.

“Is this... normal?” Corbin asked.

“The Valentine’s Day Feast is the biggest party of the year. At least, so I’ve heard. I’m so excited to be a part of it, even if it’s in this limited capacity.” She squeezed his arm tighter, and Corbin turned his attention to the couples surrounding them. They felt like magnets being spun around him, and he picked up a piece of their charge every time they passed. Alyssa’s question brought him back to the moment. “How are things with Kirin?”

They’d changed.

Before their trip to New York, Kirin had been his confidante, his sounding board to bounce ideas off of, and shoulder to cry on when he needed one. But their dynamic flipped after both her mother and boyfriend betrayed her, and for the last few weeks Corbin listened to her explore her feelings and helped her untangle them over the long hours. She did not have time to process her emotions before they returned to Dallas, and everything still remained unresolved in her hometown. She went from being queen of the ball to another stranger in a strange land, and Corbin hoped his meager attempts to help did just

that. He was not her only friend in Dallas, but he suspected he might be her closest. She had been a good friend to him, and he hoped he returned the favor.

But then she upended it all when she kissed him in New York.

Up until that moment, he had convinced himself that he saw her only as a friend; that even if he desired her, she would never feel the same about him. He told himself he only had a boy's crush, which would go away in enough time. She disabused him of that notion with a brief brush of lips. He recognized that he wanted her then; that he would do anything to earn her.

The adolescent idea of earning her made him wince. Her now-ex Kurt had recognized his infatuation and had cursed Corbin with the idea that Kirin was bound for greatness in the Inner Circle, while he was just an Orphan with delusions of grandeur. And the venom of Kurt's words still swam in his veins, made worse by the knowledge that Kurt was right. Kirin was destined to become a guiding hand in the Inner Circle, as was expected of the scions of her storied family. She would soon run the world that he just lived in.

And her ascension would kick off the next week once she finished her stint in Dallas and returned home to New York.

Her imminent departure gave him an out, and Corbin thanked the heavens her drugged state kept her from remembering their kiss. Some part of him was still sore that it had sent his world atilt, yet the act had not mattered enough for her to recall. Perhaps that explained why he kept the kiss a secret. They had somehow maintained their friendship despite the blurring

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of lines, and Corbin planned to see it through until next week, when she would be bound for glory and the whole unfortunate situation would again be out of his hands. He just had to keep Pandora's box shut a few more nights, and everything would return to how it had been before.

But then Kirin had texted, insisting he pick her up for Valentine's Day.

"Kirin," Alyssa called, and Corbin spotted her across the room. Kirin had redyed her streaks blue within the first few days of returning to Dallas, but it was her only obvious embellishment. She wore faded jeans and an understated sweater beneath her jacket, yet she still managed to take his breath away.

He noted that they were the only two in the whole house not wearing masks.

"You were supposed to stay in the foyer." Kirin aimed her statement at Alyssa.

"I couldn't let Corbin wander unescorted," the girl countered. "And I wanted to take a peek behind the curtain while we looked for you."

"Looks like you found me." Kirin studied his face, and Corbin feared it reddened as her gaze turned to Alyssa's arm linked through his. They stepped aside to let a giggling couple pass, who did not bother to keep their hands off each other as they fled the room.

"This going to be another orgy sort of party?" Corbin asked.

"Orgy?" Alyssa did not sound opposed to the idea.

“Is that what you think happens here?” Kirin kept studying him, and Corbin wanted to be anywhere but there.

“Well, kind of.”

“And that’s where you think Janice draws her power from?”

Corbin glanced around the room, at the intertwined groups of twos and threes. The air felt hot and wet and weighted with want. “It’s not sex?”

“She’d just post up in a strip club if that were the case,” Kirin answered. “Janice draws power from desire, which can certainly include sex, but isn’t limited by it. She taps into the longing we all feel for things, people, and sensations, and increases it as best she can, while skimming some off the top for fuel. But the thing about desire is, it’s best when it’s simmering rather than reaching a full boil. You keep the hint of it going for hours and hours, rather than a single instance of release.”

“Anticipation is better than consummation. At least that’s what my schoolmarm always said.” Janice’s warm twang drew his attention to her arrival. With Kirin’s new information in mind, Corbin reappraised Janice and her choice of dresses, which offered just enough promise of cleavage to dare him to break eye contact. Her glittering diamond earrings fought to surpass the wattage of her smile. “While it’s always good to see you, Corbin, I’m afraid you’re not on the guest list this evening.

“I thought we could sneak him in for a moment,” Alyssa answered. She still had not released his arm, and Corbin felt warmer than he knew he should. Janice could enchant others

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with her sheer presence, and Corbin wondered what her newest student had mastered in the last few months.

Corbin noticed that Kirin watched Alyssa watching him, while Janice watched Kirin in turn.

“What are you up to tonight?” Janice finally asked Kirin.

“Oh, nothing.” Kirin pressed between him and Alyssa, stealing his arm away. “My indentureship is over, it’s Saturday, and Corbin’s taking me out for one last hurrah. Being straight edge is a double-edged sword, Corbin. It also means you’re permanent DD.” She gave him a wink that made his heart skip a beat. “Come on, rambler, let’s get rambling.”

Kirin confidently led him by the arm past the dozens of guests on their way back out of the house, and for once Corbin did not want to pull away.

He only feared how he would make it through the night without falling for her again.

2 To Catch a Thief

Kirin looked more at home on the threadbare seats of his secondhand CRX than she ever did in Janice's mansion, which felt odd to Corbin after experiencing the relaxed luxury she grew up in. But Kirin could make anyone feel comfortable as she slipped from one disparate social milieu to the next. Janice had the same ability, and Corbin wondered if it was innate, earned from years of practice, or something more unnatural.

She kept secret where they were headed, only telling Corbin when to exit on I-30, then the turns needed to land them outside a downtown art gallery. Kirin, thankfully, did not take his arm as she paid for the exhibit. He again felt out of place in his sweater and jeans, but if the crisp suits and plunging dresses bothered her, Kirin showed no sign as she bought herself a wine at the bar.

"I don't know how you make it through exhibits sober," she said after sampling her red.

"This is my first one."

"Then let's make it memorable."

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As they wandered through the rooms, she asked him what he thought of the paintings. Corbin fought to form opinions but continually came back blank. He liked art; at least he thought he did. Corbin knew when he found paintings to be beautiful or ugly, but lacked the language to describe how or why. He suspected Kirin was fluent in that foreign tongue, but she held hers as she spent no more than half a minute perusing each one.

Corbin did not know what to make of the diverse styles. Some seemed realistic enough that he peered closely to spot the brushstrokes, while he could not discern the subject matter of others until he read the placards beside them. One image caught his eye—a nebulous swirl of dark grays and blacks, with white streaked through. Entitled “The Maelstrom,” it looked like nothing at all, but he spent several moments studying it, only to realize that Kirin had moved on to the next room.

“Find something you like?” she asked when he arrived, then led him back to the painting to explain why it enraptured him. Corbin could find no specific reason, and Kirin simply shrugged. “You’re right; I can’t explain it either. But I like it.”

Something felt off about their similar responses, and Corbin unfocused his eyes to let the auras come. The painting had no nimbus of its own; only living things did. But a design glowed the white of magic, hidden from view under the layers of paint. Corbin could not recognize the symbol from his brief—and exceedingly unsuccessful—enchantment lessons he forced Isaac to give him after the NYC incident, but knew he stood in the presence of a glyph.

He felt the brush of a foreign aura before a blurred female form sidled up next to them and turned to see another white glow surrounding her. “Kirin,” the new woman said. “I’m honored you’d miss one of Janice’s get-togethers for this, and during the Feast, no less.”

Corbin heard the trading of air kisses as he returned his vision to normal and spied a woman whose black dress nearly matched the midnight shade of her hair and mascara. It bore lace that might have been fashionable in prior centuries, while her ears exuded so many mismatched silver earrings that Corbin wondered how her lobes did not graze her shoulders. She turned a slow eye his way but did not smile. “And who’s this?”

“Corbin. Orphan.” He had grown used to some form of reaction to his lack of a faction by now, but the woman gave no hint that it bothered her.

“Selene. Circle.” She extended her hand not holding her wine his way, and he gave it the briefest of squeezes.

“How’s the painting doing?” Kirin asked. Selene scrutinized him a moment more before languidly trailing back to her inquisitor.

“It didn’t take any prizes, but there’s some haggling going on, which is good for my bank account.”

“I really like it,” Kirin responded. “Corbin did too, although he doesn’t know why.”

“It has an enchanted glyph under the paint,” Corbin answered. Selene’s eyes shot to him, and he knew he had her full attention now.

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“It’s the glyph for desire,” Selene finally answered. “And it creates just that in whoever sees it, although the glamor doesn’t transfer through to photographs, which is why judges love my paintings, but they never make the cut when they compare their notes and have to explain why they should win.” A hint of a smile creased her painted black lips. “How did you spot it?”

Corbin considered how much to reveal about his auras when Kirin answered for him. “He studies under Isaac.”

Selene’s pencil-thin eyebrows rose as she took a sip of wine.

“How much is that glyph going to cost whoever buys it?” Corbin asked. Both Selene and Kirin’s faces creased as they considered his incomprehensible question.

“A few car payments, but not a whole car. Not a worthwhile car, at least. I take it you object.”

“Yeah. Kind of. I guess.” His mind flicked back to Kurt using his symbolic coins to force people to do his bidding. Corbin had accepted the act then, but those times had been to save lives. And they were for trinkets like keycards, or getting a cabbie to agree when they changed their destination several times. The damage done had been only in the dozens of dollars rather than potentially thousands of them, and he wondered if magnitude might affect the morality of the act more than the end aim.

“It’s no big deal,” Kirin assured him. “Magicians do this sort of thing all the time so we can exist in the mundane world with the minimum amount of effort while getting to focus on our magic. It’s kind of hard to unwind reality when you’re also holding down a day job. And it’s not like Selene’s doing

it to some rando off the street. These are the people who go to galleries for their Valentine's Day dates. They're here to buy art. If they didn't buy hers, they'd just buy someone else's, so it's basically a victimless crime."

Corbin wondered what the artist passed over in favor of Selene's enchanted canvas might think, but held his tongue.

"I have to say, I'm utterly impressed by the star-power you're walking around with lately," Selene said. "Living under Janice's roof, and now Isaac's assistant; you're a good girl to know, Kirin." Selene took another sip, and her desire could not have been more obvious than if Corbin had etched the glyph on her forehead himself. "What are you two doing later?"

Kirin inspected the woman, then took Corbin's arm. "Just wanted to swing by to say, hey. Corbin's taking me out for the rest of the night, and we're just getting started. See you around."

"I certainly hope so."

Corbin thought Selene aimed the statement at him, but Kirin pulled him away before he could make sure. She released him as soon as they left Selene's eyeline, and Corbin wished she had held on a bit longer.

"Should I give her your number?"

"Huh?"

"I mean, I'd give you hers, but I know you'd never text. She likes you."

"How do you know?"

"Besides the obvious?" Kirin sighed. "I've been studying under Janice for almost a year now, learning a few of the tricks

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she's willing to teach to an outsider. And one of them is the Call of Yearning, which is basically the ability to sense what people desire. Which is why I can say without a shred of doubt that Selene was into you."

She continued on a few steps before she realized Corbin had stopped dead. "What?"

"Nothing," he lied. Fear coursed through him as he realized Kirin could read his mind. She could be doing so at that very moment, and he ordered himself not to think about their kiss, no matter what. Which only made it shine at the forefront of his mind in what he feared would be telepathic neon letters.

Kirin had been dealing with those closest to her keeping secrets from her for weeks, and she could now easily see that he kept one too, not just about the kiss, but about the fact she and her mother shared the same psychic scent as Mister.

Terror swirled up from his stomach, sucking away all his thoughts until he realized it had been several seconds of silence as Kirin watched him.

"Come on," she said. "The night's still young."

3 Feb. 14

He would have been at a loss to describe a shitkicker bar if asked to five minutes ago, but Corbin recognized The Last Round Saloon as one the second they stepped inside. Why the cultured Kirin would pick an establishment with barrels for tables clustered around the peanut-shell-strewn dancefloor eluded him as he tentatively followed her in through the haze of cigarette smoke. Most of the cowboy-hat-wearing attendees congregated around the bar as a band lugged their gear onto the stage. The banjo and standup bass meant they might be treated to good music, although the tunes were the last thing on his mind as Kirin searched for a vacant table. Her new ability made him doubt his every thought and what it would mean for her to be partial to them.

She snagged a barrel near the back and gave him what she probably meant as a comforting smile. He found it anything but and feared she gazed straight into his brain. Corbin searched for something to say but came up empty. Talking to Kirin had

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been so natural for the last few months, but now that he had her undivided attention, he found his tongue tied in knots.

A dark-skinned girl approached, her red-tipped hair hidden by her pink cowboy hat, the shadow of which could not hide her low-cut tank top. “Kirin,” she called, then set three shots down and engulfed the girl in a hug.

Kirin returned it before nodding to Corbin. “This is my friend. The one I told you about.”

“Corbin. Orphan,” he offered.

“That’s cool. It kind of rhymes.” The stranger encircled him with her arms before he could object, and Corbin marveled at how welcoming it felt. Comforters on blustery winter nights never felt so warm, and he almost whined when she ended the embrace. “Vivian. Circle.”

“Viv’s another of Janice’s disciples,” Kirin added, and his sensation suddenly made sense.

“Don’t call me that. It makes it sound like I studied at her feet, gazing up adoringly while she spouted parables.”

“Well, didn’t you?”

“Only for a while.” Viv’s laugh tickled the insides of his ribs. “Janice was all about storing everything we harvested. Always disciplined, stoking and saving the energy up for big magics. Me, I’m happier with the actual release of what I collect. It makes for smaller feats, but everyone gets to have fun, at least.” Her smile lit up the room. “Now, who wants to have some fun?”

Viv snagged her shot of liquor. Kirin clinked hers and added Corbin’s, downing them one after another with the other girl.

“He’s DD,” Kirin explained before letting out a belch.

“Hot stuff.” Viv smacked the makeshift table, then collected the three glasses. “How long y’all sticking around?”

“Depends on how many of those you bring around,” Kirin answered. “I was hoping we could hang after closing, if that’s cool.”

“Normally I’d just go AWOL, but this is one of the biggest nights of the year.” Viv turned to Corbin. “I sort of do this on the side so I can follow my passion during the day. I make sure everyone has a good time, and the tips mean I only have to work a few days a month. Big nights like tonight or Paddy’s keep me cruising for a long while.”

She said the most mundane things, but Corbin fought to keep from smiling along like a besotted fool. He could easily get lost in Viv’s brown eyes, and he suspected she wove want around her just like Janice did; only without a hint of subtlety. Afraid he was making an ass of himself staring at her, he looked to Kirin for a visual reprieve, but she only gave him a wink.

“How long have you been together?” Viv asked.

Kirin grinned. “We’re just friends and Corbin’s just a good guy.”

Corbin could not tell if she meant it as a compliment or a dismissal. Kurt had said Corbin was no more than a pet project to Kirin, one to keep her entertained while sequestered in Dallas, and he certainly felt like a pet as the two girls appraised him.

“What bug crawled up his ass?” Viv asked.

“He just found out I can do the Call of Yearning.”

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“And?” Viv reacted to Kirin’s statement as if being told it would be windy tomorrow.

“And it’s like reading minds,” Corbin blurted. “How do you trust someone who can read your mind? How do you know they’re not doing it all the time? It’s like insider trading, but with your brain.”

The girls tittered at his assessment.

“I’m still breaking him in,” Kirin explained.

“Clearly.” Viv turned her attention to Corbin. “It’s not like reading minds at all. More like poker, where you learn to pick up on facial clues and tics, all while running the odds in your head. It’s not much more than glorified observation, which is why most magicians don’t bother with it.”

“Because most guys only want one thing,” Kirin said.

“Because most guys only want one thing,” Viv echoed.

“In a lot of ways, it’s not much different from your auras, and how you picked out Selene’s glyph when no one else could,” Kirin pointed out.

“What’s Selene up to these days?” Viv asked. “Haven’t seen her in ages.”

Kirin ignored her. “You’ve got this whole hangup about your auras and not touching people because they don’t know you’re touching them with your aura, and you’ve really got to get over that way of thinking,” she told him. “I mean, it’s sort of... honorable, I guess, that you don’t want to feel you’re taking advantage of them, but it’s also holding you back. You’ve got something most other people don’t have, and it gives you an

advantage, but there's no reason to handicap yourself because you feel bad that no one else has that same something that makes you special. It would be like if you were a great hockey player because you could skate faster than everyone else. You shouldn't skate slower just so others can have a chance, and you damn well shouldn't stay off the ring because you feel bad for them."

"Rink," Viv corrected. "I'm pretty sure they play on rinks."

Kirin kept her attention focused on Corbin. "Stuff like auras, or reading emotions, or even minds, is pretty normal stuff for being a magician in a world of mundanes..." She gestured at the crowd surrounding them, "...and you've got to stop thinking of yourself as 'normal' like all of them." She reached out to take his and Viv's hands. "You have to be normal like the two of us."

"And how are any of us normal?" Corbin pulled his hand away. "How is any of this normal to anyone?"

"Now you're getting it." Kirin's grin split her face.

Viv shook her head, sending her curls twirling. "Enough of the smart talk. You game if I come by with another round?"

"Indubitably." Kirin added another wink.

Viv sashayed away with their empty glasses, only to return a few minutes later with a beer and three more shots. Kirin did two with their hostess before Viv spun off to see to her customers.

The girl could certainly work the room, and Corbin soon understood how she supported herself for weeks on only a few hours of work. Each smile seemed tailor-made for its target, each effortless laugh making its mark known in their bones that

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they stood a chance with her. She could make any sad sack with a fiver to his name feel like a king. Viv spun the promise of more around her like a seamstress with bolts of cloth, and Corbin could have spent the whole night watching her work if the niggling doubt that she worked him over just as easily hadn't entered his head first.

Viv swung by with shots and a brew two more times, with Kirin more than happy to take them alongside her. Kirin's face speckled red by the time the band came on. They opened with an upbeat tune far removed from the old-timey country Grandpa Jay played, or the inscrutable alt-country Isaac insisted would redeem the genre. Several women and a few brave men converged upon the dance floor, while the rest of the gents sought bravery at the bottom of their glasses.

The dance floor swarmed several songs later when Viv strutted through the crowd, arm extended to Corbin. Her sway promised to make up for any lack on his part, while her smile said she wouldn't even notice his inability.

"I can't dance," Corbin insisted instead of joining her.

Kirin took Viv's hand without missing a beat. Hoots and hollers greeted the ladies as they reached the center of the dance floor, which only increased as they dissolved into giggles at a shared misstep. The cheers increased as they found their groove and reached a fever pitch when they took their show to the top of the bar. Corbin thought the roof might come off when Viv leaned in for a kiss.

Kirin wholeheartedly returned it.

Their display continued for another song before Viv got back to work and Kirin took a spot at the bar. Her eyes never left the other girl, and Viv clearly felt the same, judging by how often she returned to Kirin's side, her hand quickly sneaking out for furtive physical contact.

Corbin contented himself with observing them from his abandoned table. Part of him hurt to see Kirin again choose someone else over him, but he also knew he had just dodged a bullet. Yet her hookup left him with a new dilemma: Kirin clearly planned to stay until closing time, and he suspected she would soon share Viv's bed. But he had promised to drive her wherever she wanted that night. It was meant to be Kirin's last hurrah, and he refused to leave her, even if she had forgotten him.

He knew she could handle herself far better than he could, and the bar seemed safe enough until closing in two hours. Viv having worked the crowd into a frenzy, along with the blaring music and cigarette smoke, wore him thin, and Corbin chose a reprieve outside. His enchanted ID would guarantee him reentry, and Corbin pondered the morality of so blithely using it as he stepped out into the cold.

The temperature had dropped much further than he expected, but he refused to go back into the lion's den so soon. Although his car was not much warmer, it at least cut the wind. He fumbled for his iPod with frigid fingers, wondering what it would tell him about the fateful night.

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The initial drumbeat gave him no hint, but he soon recognized the triple-guitar assault and distinctive vocals of the Drive-By Truckers. They painted a scene of a breakup, and Corbin nearly rolled his eyes when the chorus begged to “*be my Valentine*”. He frequently had trouble decrypting the iPod’s meaning, but this one seemed far too on-the-nose. But the more he thought about it, the more he wondered about the unhappiness of this fictional couple on this fateful date. He wondered if he should have kept a closer eye on Kirin when she suddenly banged on the hood of his car.

“What the hell!” Her breath steamed around her. “Did you just ditch me?”

“Clearly not.” Corbin yanked his earbuds out and gestured to his parked car. “I just needed a minute.”

Her face softened. “Then take it inside where it’s warm. Viv really wants to get to know you.”

Corbin stared at her through the windshield, her face flushed and her sweater askew. She blew a stray blue lock from her face, then tucked it back behind her ear when that proved futile. His chest nearly compacted with the same pang he felt in New York, but he pushed it away in favor of insight. “Are you trying to set us up?”

“What?” Kirin had the decency to look affronted before she winced. “Yes. No. Maybe?”

“Does maybe mean yes?”

“Maybe?” She shut her eyes and nodded to herself. “Yes. Definitely yes.”

“Why?” Corbin hoped his question conveyed the full depth of his confusion.

“Because she’s cool. You’re cool. It just makes sense.”

“I am the exact opposite of cool,” Corbin insisted. “It makes no sense whatsoever.”

“Not true. Well, sort of. Which is its own kind of cool.” A slow smile spread across Kirin’s lips. “And she’s damn hot. You’d be...” Confusion creased her brow. “I mean, the two of you... Oh, I see. Huh.” Her face fell. “It wasn’t you I was thinking about.” She opened her eyes, fear spreading through them. “I got to get out of here.”

Corbin finally agreed with her assessment for the first time that night. “I’ll get you home.”

“No.” Kirin squinted at her phone. “The Feast’s still going full swing, and I’d only puke all over your car.”

“That would only improve it,” Corbin joked.

“Too drunk for home,” Kirin insisted. She cast about until she pointed to a bright yellow sign in the distance. “Get me to a Denny’s.”

4

Always On My Mind

Corbin had made a few nighttime forays to the Denny's off I-75, but never so late into the night, leaving him unprepared for the crowd that awaited them. He recognized the ever-present night shift workers, and a few pretend poets and scensters, but could not make heads or tails of the table dressed as if they had stepped out of the Middle Ages, or the fellow with a top hat who wore a score of stuffed animals attached to plastic chains draped over his shoulders.

Then there were the drunks, like Kirin. He did not think she could make it the full thirty minutes required for a seat, the wait which she extended by insisting on a booth in the center of the restaurant rather than the seats that opened up faster at the bar. He could have overruled her, but it was their last night out together, and so he made sure she got what she wanted.

Corbin ordered coffee and water for the two of them, then passed his glass to Kirin after she finished her own. He knew the drill from the nights when Isaac went too hard and tried to

keep her focused on the menu. But her eyes swam as she flipped between the same two pages over and over again.

“Janice warned me about this. About how the Call can feed back on itself. If you use it too much, too long. Instead of noticing what they’re feeling, you start feeling it too. Said it’s worse when two do it at the same time.” She took another big gulp of water and chased it with coffee. “Wasn’t kidding. Glad I got away from Viv before we kicked off that orgy you were so worried about.”

“Seriously?”

Kirin smiled wanly. “Would have been a threesome at least, which would be a weird start to things.”

“Because you were trying to set me up with her.”

“Well, you weren’t into Selene.” She said it loud enough to draw a few eyes from the medieval table next to them. “I mean, it’s a real shame, because they’re both pretty cool. What about them rubbed you the wrong way?”

“You could tell?” He hoped his sarcasm wasn’t too overt. Her eyes said otherwise.

“Yes, of course. It’s hard to find a match for you, you know?”

“I don’t, honestly.”

“Well, enter tonight as exhibit A. It shouldn’t be so hard, but I swear you’re making it so.” Her wavering gaze narrowed, and he again feared she peered into his head. “Do you already have someone in mind?”

“No.” He told himself he told her the truth. “I’m more concerned about why you feel the need to set me up.”

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“Because I’m leaving, and I wanted to get this out of the way for you. I just wanted to give you a good one.” Corbin hoped he hid his flinch from the same phrase she used right after their fateful kiss. “I want you to have something nice, like a relationship, something the rest of us got to grow up with, something normal.”

“Normal? You tried to set me up with a girl who cheats plebs with enchanted paintings, and another who gets a whole bar dancing just so she can get better tips.”

“Yes!” Kirin looked anything but abashed by his accusation. “Yes to all of that. This is normal stuff to us magicians, and you have to come to terms with that. We’re not straddling two worlds like some people want to think. Us legacies, we know that we just have to pass as mundane, but the non-legacies like you and TJ, you start out in the mundane world and imprint on it as what the world is supposed to be like. Kids like you want to keep a foot in both worlds, but there comes a time when that gets too hard and you have to step fully into the Circle. Sure, you still interact with the mundanes, but they’re not the normal part of your existence; dealing with other magicians is. In some ways, you’re lucky you didn’t get a normal upbringing. It sounds weird, but you’re lucky all your friends and family are in jail, since there’s nothing holding you back from being a magician full-time. You don’t have rent or debt, or have to worry about keeping up with the people who knew you back when. You can fully escape into our world without looking back, and

I was hoping that finding you a nice magician girlfriend would help you take that last step.”

“You wanted to set me up so I would be more like you?”

“Yes. And no.” She sucked more water to steady herself. “I also wanted to make amends.”

His blood went cold as Corbin feared she knew more than she had let on. Reusing the same phrase from that night should have tipped him off already. “Amends for what?”

“I don’t know exactly, but something’s changed between us since New York. And I’m pretty sure I did it, since you wouldn’t. So, I’m hoping you’ll help me make this right, whatever it is.”

She looked so earnest that the familiar feeling stirred in Corbin’s chest. She cared for him, which brought back the pang of longing. Then he remembered what Kurt had said about her being destined for great things, and how she would never see Corbin as more than a little brother.

Or a pet.

Kirin squinted again, and he wondered if this was what he looked like when he looked at auras. “Are you doing the Call of Yearning right now?”

“Yes.” Her voice sounded strained. “And I know you’re hiding something, something that’s really weighing on you that you want to be free of. And if you need to let it go, you let it go.” She sucked back a snuffle that nearly burst into more. “But if you need to keep hold of it, I get that too.”

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Corbin appraised her for a change. “I thought you’d be against keeping secrets after what went down with Kurt and your mom.”

“Kurt and Graciela are separate from you, even if you did get sucked into it.” She knocked emphatically on the table. “But if there’s one thing you remember from tonight, it’s that magicians always know more. They can be psychic, or have spells, or slip through time, or... or whatever, but they always have something that you don’t. Like your auras or me using the Call.

“That means they always know something you don’t. And chances are, you don’t know what it is that they can do until it’s too late to do anything about it. That’s just baked into how we live. And that’s why you can’t waste time focusing on what they can or can’t do. Instead, you focus on whether you trust them as a person or not. Otherwise, you end up alone and twisted into knots. You have to move past that, to take that first step.” She instinctively reached for his hand, then stopped herself. Corbin wondered why he didn’t extend himself the last inch separating them. “And I trust you, Corbin. So, if you feel there’s something you can’t share with me, I’m not going to pry. I respect your decision, but I also look forward to the day you feel that you can share it.”

She attempted to maintain eye contact, but still swayed slightly. Corbin turned the idea of coming clean about the kiss over in his mind. Kirin deserved to know, but he feared that if he unburdened that first secret, others might spill out. He had bought himself his job as Mister’s gofer by keeping the scent she

and Mister shared secret. His trip to New York added Kirin's mother to that list, and he wondered about the aftermath of unburdening this information when Kirin leaned forward.

"*Ken-wor*," she whispered and tapped his leg with her finger. Corbin's limb went numb as she shot to her feet fast enough to send her glass toppling over. Water spilled into his lap, but he could not get away from it. The whole restaurant turned to look at the two of them, and Corbin would have fled if he could stand.

"Oh, fine, make me look like the crazy one," Kirin hissed.

"You're doing a pretty good job of it yourself, sister," the man in the top hat sniped from the bar. A few patrons laughed, but Kirin's hands balled into fists.

"Fine then. We're over. Through."

She stormed out of the restaurant, all eyes on her. Corbin would have gone after her, but she had ensured he could not. Kirin had paralyzed him when they first met, which only ended when she released the spell. He wondered how long his legs would remain useless, and if he could even drive his stick-shift home if forced to crawl to his car.

"Here."

Corbin looked up to see one of the Middle Ages girls next to him, a wad of napkins in her hand. She had arrestingly pale eyes, which he could not decide were gray or blue. He took the offered paper and dabbed at the water slowly spreading across his crotch.

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“That’s not going to be enough.” The girl pulled her outer layer off, which consisted of a long strip of black and green material with a head hole. It exposed her faded t-shirt, which displayed a kitten with a red arrow painted over its right eye.

Corbin took the offered cloth, but did not press it into his groin. “I don’t want to get your clothes wet.”

She snorted a laugh. “You’d do me a favor. It’s going in the washer as soon as I get home. And looks like you could use it.”

“Thanks.” Corbin mopped at the remaining water as she watched from the edge of the booth.

“I’m Ziggy,” she finally offered. “That’s what everyone calls me, at least. Not my mundane name.”

Corbin returned to her arresting eyes. “Mundane?”

“Sorry. It’s a silly name for people who don’t do what we do.”

Corbin considered her choice of words and wondered if she had just declared to him. He glanced to her companions, who watched the two of them from the next booth. All were dressed in the same black and green motif from centuries past. She followed his look.

“There was an event today. That’s why we’re all in garb.”

“Event?”

Ziggy hemmed for a few seconds. “We sort of do the whole foam swords thing.” She said it like admitting to a chronic illness, but Corbin still could make no sense of it. “Like in Role Models, but not as cheesy.” She seemed to understand that she heaped more nonsense terms onto the pile. “It’s like a live-action D-and-D thing, so there’s spells and stuff.” She

noticed Corbin's reaction. "Not like real spells, just colored sock balls, although I'm pretty sure there's some out on the field who believe in magic. And... I'm not making it make more sense, am I?"

Corbin did not know how to answer that.

"I'm sorry about your girlfriend."

He returned to mopping his jeans. "She's not my girlfriend."

"Yeah, I picked up on that. What happened?"

"I honestly have no idea. We were fine, then this." He gestured to the upset glass. "I've never seen her fly off the handle like that before."

"Yeah, she always seemed so cool."

Corbin found himself staring back into her eyes. "You know Kirin?"

"That's her name?" Ziggy's smile frayed under his scrutiny. "I never hung out with her or anything. She just always said 'hey' in passing. Asked what we do here every Saturday, and I told her." She trailed off as he tried to get a handle on the situation.

"She knew you'd be here this Saturday?"

"I guess." Ziggy looked from him seated in his booth to her friends, then to herself uncomfortably hovering over him. "Anyway, you looked like you ended up alone when you didn't expect to be alone. Not that it's wrong to be alone, but... you know. That looked rough." She rolled her eyes at her own words. "Want to join us?"

Ziggy's offer and her connection with Kirin made him suspect the latter's hand, and Corbin brought his auras on to

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examine her. Ziggy bore the red, yellow, and blue of all living things, but not the white that denoted magic. Nor did her friends. They were mundanes in Corbin's world of clandestine magicians, even if this group used that same word to distinguish themselves from the rest of society. They clearly didn't consider themselves mundane, but to Corbin they were gloriously normal.

He caught a glint of white from the parking lot, and Corbin returned his vision to normal to spot Kirin grinning at him from between two cars. She blew him an exaggerated kiss, and Corbin felt the use of his legs return.

"Yeah, if you don't mind, I think I would."

Ziggy took the first spot in the booth, forcing a fellow with a goatee and long hair bound up in a black wrap to scooch to make room for her guest. All eyes turned to the newbie.

"Corbin. Orph..." He had grown so used to introducing himself to other magicians, he had forgotten how it usually went.

"Corbin James," he told them, which felt like the most normal thing in the world.