

Three is a Crowd

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Overlord_Mordax

We stood in line with the others as a Gill walked around and inspected us. I had the impression that he was, in fact, smelling us. The guy was a creep; tall and gaunt with beady little eyes and greasy black hair that was mainly shoulder length and looked like it had been cut in front of a bathroom mirror. He stuck his pointy nose in our face with an expression of interest and I recoiled inwardly.

‘This is a bad idea, Raza,’ I hissed. ‘I don’t want to be associated with these people.’

Raza smiled out at Gill, washing away my own pensive expression. ‘Just don’t screw this up for me, David, okay? You owe me, remember.’

I did owe her, for spending more than my fair share of the money on a bunch of paperbacks. I hadn’t thought however, that she’d settle the account by inducting us into a vampire coven that looked like a drug addict ran it. It seemed more than a little disproportionate.

I relaxed as Gill gave a little nod of assent after his examination, and moved over to the next person in line. Besides Raza and I there were two more initiates standing at attention in the nightclub’s sparsely furnished and windowless private room, and Gill’s two friends, presumably veteran vampires, lurked in it’s corners and lounged on it’s couch. They didn’t look so sinister as their leader- a short twenty-something guy in ripped jeans who looked like he’d rather be in the club downstairs and a chubby woman who looked like our old English teacher except for all the black lipstick. Our fellow neophytes were a chubby college-age boy and a blonde girl who might or might not have been out of high school.

Raza and I watched as Gill gave the once over to the blonde girl. As he stuck his face down to hers, I thought she looked as uncomfortable I had felt. Gill, with a look of consternation on his drawn lips, took a step back from her.

“Excuse me for this please,” he said, “just a precaution.” He raised his hand before him, palm flat toward the girl, as if laying it against a wall. He closed his eyes. I felt the tension in the room rise. Some of it was my own.

‘What’s he doing, Raz?’

‘Hell if I know. Shh, and let me watch.’

We hung in suspense only a moment longer before Gill’s eyes snapped open abruptly.

“Did Keller put you up to this?” he snarled. “Get out. Get out!”

The woman shrank back at first, startled by his outburst, then reared up in rigid defiance. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

Gill smiled tersely. “Sure you don’t. Even if that is the way you wish to play, I must still ask you to please leave.”

“Fine. Who wants to be in your little club anyway?” she pushed roughly past the man and stomped towards the door.

Satisfied that she was leaving, Gill turned his attention back to those of us still in line. “I apologize for the interruption.”

I think I was the only one who noticed her take the slim, shiny rectangle out of her purse and aim it at him.

“Hey,” I breathed.

Gill turned around toward her just as the flash went off, brightening the room for just an instant with a wave of light that Gill and a few of the others in the room recoiled from.

And then the woman was gone, running down the hallway.

The coven master was almost as fast. “Get that camera!” he barked as he dashed out the door. His two friends sprang to action.

I had no intention of moving an inch to join the weird chase, and from the puzzled look on his face; neither did my companion, the last of the other initiates.

Content as I was to remain, however, Raza overrode my decision almost as soon as I’d made it.

“Arhhg!”

‘Brownie points!’ she replied to my incoherent protest as she took control and sent us careening down the hallway after the photographer and the vampires.

Raza and I are what you might call “joined at the hip” although joined at the everything would be more accurate. To be perfectly honest, which we usually aren’t on the subject, we share a body. People

might get the wrong idea, like we were some kind of mental case, which is why we usually try to (and manage to) fool people into thinking we're 'of one mind'. What's the use in getting people all worked up over something that's not that big a deal? We've lived together so long that we have most things down pat. It's a lot like having a roommate in your head. Sometimes it can be annoying, and maybe you don't get as much privacy as if you lived alone, but that's just the way it is.

If it seems like I'm going out of my way to justify this, it's because there are always moments like this one, when, despite everything you've said, your roommate has ordered pizzas with the rent money and is throwing a loud party despite the fact that your superintendent lives in the apartment across the hall.

And you can't evict them.

Raza had found the determination to pass all three of the other vampires on the stairs, and we were the first to hit the dance floor in the hunt. She came to a halt at the edge of the crowd, surveying them for sign of her quarry.

I took the moment to try to reason with her again. 'Listen, Raza, this isn't any of our business. It's not like she actually did anything wrong. Even if we do catch her we'll be the ones who get in trouble. Police trouble.'

But she wasn't in the mood to listen to me. We caught a flash of blond curls near the bar heading toward the door. Raza took off again.

We collided with the woman just as she passed the threshold of the club as the bouncer looked on. Raza put her arms around the woman's shoulders and grabbed at her camera as I started to wonder how long a possible assault sentence would run.

I always read the newspaper at the breakfast table, and Raza, as a rule, never paid any attention. When she did it was generally to make remarks deriding the frailty of humanity, or to demand to know why I persisted in reading such depressing material. It's something of a pain having a smartass vampire looking over your shoulder 90% of the time, but I'm sure Raza would say the same thing about me, and Julian about the both of us. But breakfast, on the whole, was my time.

I peeled an orange as the milk in my bowl turned the last few flakes of cereal into unrecognizable mush and peered at the classified ads that lay on the table- I had exhausted the rest of the paper before the cereal had given up the ghost.

There were the usual job offerings, of course, but we were all fairly satisfied with our current position, so I barely gave them the once over. The litters of kittens and puppies held more interest, albeit in an abstract sense. Bringing up the subject of pets with our flesh and blood roommate Kelly was not something I was keen on doing.

As my eyes scanned down the page I felt a presence stir in the back of my mind. The sight of an ad in the bottom left corner of the paper had woken Raza and brought her to the front.

Psy. Vamp. Coven Recruiting
11/16 midnite Substance VIP room

"Oh sweet," Raza breathed, setting my half-eaten orange down on the table. "I am so going to that."

'Like hell you are,' I yelled from the back, as soon as I figured out what the ad was about. 'I know you're into the whole vampire thing, but do you really want to go hang out with a bunch of whackos?'

Raza's sudden move to the front had pushed me away from the outside world, passed even the 'passengers seat' and into mindspace, the not-quite place between consciousness and unconsciousness where we went when we weren't controlling the body. I could sort of perceive what was happening to the body, and I could talk to anyone "in-system" but that was it. Right now the space was as Julian had left it, a small windowless living room with a soft carpet and a few pieces of nice furniture, a couch covered in throws and blankets and a lamp. The room didn't have any walls, the edges just trailed off into dark space.

Because Raza otherwise occupied, her mental voice echoed around me from nowhere. 'I resent that; you have no idea if they're whackos or not. David, listen, this could be my big chance to find people like me. Do you have any idea being the only vampire I know?'

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‘It sucks,’ a muffled voice drawled. What I’d taken to be a pile of blankets turned out to be a previously-sleeping Julian who stuck an arm out from under the mass and pulled the cloths off to reveal a seriously-mussed cascade of long blond hair over a sculpted face and aquiline nose. ‘Really, Raza, you can’t set yourself up for lines like that.’

Raza’s laughed echoed through the room. She and Julian got along a lot better than she and I. “’ll keep that in mind Brit-brat.’ She took a breath. ‘David, I’m going to that meeting whether you like it or not.’ And with that, she shut me out of her thoughts.

I heaved a sigh and collapsed into a tartan-upholstered recliner. For a few minutes I gave my attention to the outside world, watching as Raza threw the rest of my orange in the garbage and dumped the dishes in the sink for someone else to take care of later. She put together a lunch that looked like it belonged to an eight year old- bologna sandwich, cookies, and 2 juice-box sized containers of chocolate milk.

Meanwhile Julian was harrumphing and muttering to himself while putting the couch back together and folding his blankets. ‘Brit-brat, indeed,’ he snorted. ‘Who does she think she is, the little harpy.’

The two of them had traded insults since the beginning. I was pretty sure they enjoyed it. If they had separate bodies, I think they’d have a torrid, on again off again romance. As things stood Julian seemed embarrassed by her sporadic and odd displays of affection. When his birthday had come up a few years previously she had asked me “What do you get the man who’s lost everything?”

Julian supposedly was a wealthy British CEO before he unexpectedly found himself rooming with us five years ago. Although Raza and I have been together since birth other people have come and gone. Sometimes they were around for as little as a few days, often as long as months, sometimes years. I was beginning to think Julian would be a permanent addition; he just fit, somehow.

I didn’t know where the others come from, or where they went, or why they had ended up sharing our head. Raza thought they were ghosts or “transient spirits” of some kind and that we acted as a channel or host.

I didn’t know what to think. Sometimes I was convinced I really have made everyone up in my subconscious.

But it didn’t really matter.

I sighed and shifted in the chair. At least when I was in our little back room I didn’t have to deal with the wrong body, Oh, it had been so long I was pretty much used to it by now, god knew how Julian must feel about it. Raza was the only current resident who’s gender matched that of our body, even if it is too short and blond to match her willowy physique and flowing dark hair. She had died our hair so often over the years in a vain attempt to get it ‘right’ that for a while I was afraid it would all fall out.

So I suppose this way I didn’t have to worry about male pattern baldness. It was a steep trade off, however- I’d rather have my pinched nose, freckles, and –ahem- correct equipment, even if the price was worrying about my hair falling out. I thought Julian must feel the same way.

The older man coughed and gave me a look when I caught his eye.

‘You’re thinking rather loudly, David.’ Evidently he’d picked up some of my surface thoughts. We often heard little bits of one another, unintentionally, especially when we were particularly emotion and not watching out for it.

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I have a lot on my mind.’

‘I noticed. Why are you so worried? Let her go to the meeting and have done with it,’ he waved a hand dismissively.

‘I’m thinking of our safety, Julian. I’ve read that some of these people cut each other with razor blades and drink blood. If she gets AIDS we’re all screwed.’

‘Bollocks, you’re worried about your reputation and that’s it.’

It stung, but he was right actually. Raza was not that kind of vampire. Sure, the sun hurt her eyes, and I wouldn’t trust her not to run screaming out of a church again like when we were five, but she’s not into the whole blood thing, fortunately.

‘If by some perverse miracle there is someone you know there,’ Julian continued, ‘you know that they’re there as well, right? So what is the problem?’

I had to concede the point, but I still wasn’t comfortable with the whole thing. It struck me as the kind of situation where whatever was going to go wrong was going to go wrong in the way I least expected it.

“Get your hands of me!” the woman yelled. The bouncer looked like he was about to step in and take care of the problem- namely us- but before he could, Gill came forward and pulled him aside. I couldn’t hear what was said but the bouncer nodded and the greasy vampire stepped toward us.

The woman was struggling a bit, but Raza had our arms firmly around her arms and torso, unless the woman escalated the conflict, it didn’t look like she was going anywhere.

“I think you’ll find, miss,” Gill addressed her, “that as I was in a private location, your taking that photograph without my permission was entirely in the wrong. Should I find that it is put to any purpose in which I disapprove, it will be a matter for the courts. Please do tell Keller I said so.” Now he met Raza’s gaze. “You can let her go now.”

Immediately Raza released her grip. The woman pulled away with one more glare at her malefactors and tried to maintain her dignity as she retreated briskly down the street.

“Is that true?” Raza asked him, “about the picture?”

He shrugged. “It will make them think twice before doing anything with it, at the very least.”

“Upstairs, before you told her to leave, you read that woman’s aura, didn’t you?”

“Very perceptive,” Gill nodded, “she is not a vampire, and she has little mystical capacity of her own. Yet the scent of magic was on her, a link to a magician, a rival of mine, who was spying on me through her.”

“Keller,” I guessed aloud.

“That guy Keller,” Raza’s words tumbled out of our mouth on the heels of my own reply.

Gill nodded. “What is your name, vampire?”

I felt her thrill at the acknowledgement second hand as she answered, “Janine Lewis, but I go by Raza- Razakel.”

“And why did you decide to join us tonight, Razakel?” his voice captured no hint of approval or disapproval, and I could tell she was unsure of how to continue.

“Because I wanted to meet other vampire, or at least people who wouldn’t think I was insane for saying that I am one,” she smiled, slightly embarrassed by the admission.

He did put a hand on her shoulder, but it wasn’t a reassurance, he simply guided us back through the threshold of the club and towards the relative privacy of the stairway, and the company of his two pals before asking his next question. “And why do you say that you are a vampire? I see no fangs. Does your heart beat? Do you drink the blood of man?”

Raza’s immediate shock turned into livid indigence. “I don’t see any fangs in your mouth either, buddy! Your ad put out a call for psychic vampires, and that’s what I am. I drink the despair of man- his mental, emotional, and very life’s energy and draw it into my own. Direct sunlight makes me feel ill, and sluggish, and if I go for too long without energy I become weak, tired, depressed and physically ill. And that is why I call myself a vampire.”

An unsettling grin split Gill’s slim, angular face, the first smile I’d seen on him all night. He clapped us across the back. “In that case my dear, welcome to the Coven of the Dark Bond. Let me introduce you to Amelia and Osiris. Osiris, Amelia, this is Razakel. She’ll be joining us.”

The grungy young man grunted in greeting, while Amelia shook our hand and rattled off a flowery and mystic sounding welcome.

“Oh, what happened to our other guest? Is he still upstairs?” Gill asked.

“I think he booked,” Osiris replied with a shrug.

“Ah well, I can’t say I blame the boy after the last few minutes. Just another thing that Keller will have to answer for, eventually.”

Raza just nodded acquiescently, but I was curious. “Who is he anyway?”

“A pain in our ass,” Osiris grunted.

“Indeed,” the senior vampire nodded. “Although he is unfortunately a bit more than that. Why don’t we all get a drink, and I’ll tell you some more. You’re of age, I presume, Raza?”

“Yup,” she flashed him our hand stamp from when we’d entered the club.

“Excellent,” Gill proclaimed as he herded us all over to the bar.

“Do me a favor, Raza,” I pleaded, “don’t get wasted and then leave me or Julian with the hangover like last time, okay?”

She laughed. I could tell the night's events had put her in a better mood than usual. 'Don't sweat it, hon. I wouldn't want to embarrass myself in front of my new friends, huh? Hey, where is Julian anyway? I haven't heard a peep out of him all night.'

'I'm right here,' he replied, 'And don't think I haven't been listening. I'm just saving up my comments for a moment when you might actually listen to them.'

'Rum and coke,' she ordered as the bartender passed.

'Why do you always drink that?' Julian continued, 'can't you drink anything without sugar in it?'

'My treat,' Gill purred, handing the bartender money as she handed Raza the drink.

'Oh thank you so much, Gill, you shouldn't though, I mean, I have money.'

'I insist.'

'I think you were right about her not listening, Julian,' I smirked.

He rolled his eyes. 'Honestly, do you think?'

'I have higher priorities than listening to you two chattering,' Raza answered finally. 'Someone has got to talk or Gill will think I'm ignoring him. For your information, however, Rum and Coke happens to combine my two favorite things.'

'Rum and coke?' guessed Julian adventurously.

'Caffeine and pirates.' She turned her attention back to Gill in the outside world as she sipped her drink. 'So, you were telling me about this Keller magician person...'

'Ah of course,' he stirred his own, bright yellow, drink with a paper umbrella. 'As I was saying, he is a rival of mine, a magician who think that he is-'

'Hot shit,' Osiris interrupted.

'A vampire hunter,' Gill continued, choosing to ignore him. 'He got wind of our little group last year and has been a thorn in our sides since. Mostly just petty annoyances, spells, threats, all easily countered. Recently he's changed tactics. He's trying to discredit me. He thinks I'm a 'danger to the community'.'

Alcohol doesn't usually effect me too badly, especially when I'm not the main person in control of the body, but it felt like Raza's drink was getting to me a bit. Maybe the bartender had put a bit more alcohol in than usual.

'Discredit you, how?'

This time Amelia jumped in as Gill took a drink. 'Gill's a professor at the university. If his vampirism became public knowledge it'd go badly for him. Especially since he's up for tenure right now. Isn't that so, Gill?'

He nodded. 'Amelia thinks it would be prudent to suspend these meetings until my position is more secure. Perhaps she is right. I can't do it though. One can't keep away from ones kind; it's hard enough keeping one's nature a secret all the time. But you know that... besides, I've come up with a way to beat Keller at his own game.' The vampire smiled at us again, and continued to gaze on our face as though admiring himself in a mirror.

'Sweet,' Raza raised her glass and drained it. She sucked on an ice cube. My focus was going a little off; the noise in the bar seemed to swim in and out.

'Now that I've answered that question, perhaps you can answer one of mine,' Gill twirled the little umbrella between his thumb and forefinger. 'How is it that you have three souls?'

And that when I realized he had done something to the drink.

When I woke up it was with a blazing headache and the instant knowledge that it had been more than one night. It was the sheets. They had been changed, but they were far from fresh and clean. I looked blearily around the room (it was messier than I'd left it) and made a count of my body parts (all there) in order to assure myself that everything was okay. It didn't look like I'd been robbed or murdered, which was a blessing, but I wasn't ready to be relieved yet. I groped around the top of the dresser and found my glasses and cell phone. I put the glasses on and peered at the date on the small screen. It was 7 am of the 21st. I was missing five days.

'Shit,' I groaned. In recent years our memory had been pretty consistent. Even if someone had done something and I was totally unconscious, the memory would be there when I woke back up, albeit kind of detached, and second hand, like the memory of a TV show. It had been eight years since I'd had a total blackout of even a full day. Before that we'd all kept a detailed journal for one another's benefit.

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I lay back down for a moment, and searched our head for the others. The back room had gone completely amorphous which led me to believe that whoever had been in control, the rest of us had been totally out of it. But had it been Raza, or Julian, or someone else entirely?

Much to my relief, I didn't feel the presence of any strangers, or old friends who had moved on, but I didn't find Raza either and that worried me. I could feel her there in an abstract way, she wasn't gone but her presence was like a distant star, comforting, but ultimately meaningless.

'I feel like someone replaced my skull with styrofoam,' Julian moaned, 'and then hit it repeatedly with a cinderblock.'

'I take it you just woke up too,' I sighed. 'It's the twenty-fist, Julian.'

'Is it? Hell.'

'I think we were drugged too. Raza's still out.' I sat us up and leaned heavily against the headboard.

'I'd say not,' Julian disagreed. 'Not many drugs will put you out for that long and leave you with a head to ache. Besides, it looks like someone was up and about, and drugs affect the body, not the mind. I think the charming Mr. Vampire put us under a spell.'

'What? Are you serious?'

'If not then that was one hell of a hangover,' he replied dryly. 'Look, he didn't lay a hand on the drink, but he did maintain eye contact for quite a while right before I went out. You know I'm no mystical fool, David, but you and I both know that even Raza has some... unusual talents.'

Knowing who was calling before the phone rang, finishing people's sentences, making herself unnoticed, it was true Raza did some weird stuff, but I wasn't ready to say that it was achieved with magic. Still, if Julian couldn't find another plausible answer, then I would probably have to accept the one that he offered. 'Okay, say he did something to us that way, what did he do?'

Julian shrugged. 'Mind control, possibly. But more likely he just put the two of us to beddy-bye and left his fellow vampire at the helm. I wonder what she's done in our absence.' Julian swung our legs over the bed and readied us for what the day might bring.

Kelly was in the kitchen. There was a pot of coffee mad and the aspirin was on the table and bacon and eggs were sitting on the stove.

'Sheesh Jeannie, you weren't kidding last night, you look like crap.' Our dark haired roommate gave us a sympathetic look as she piled breakfast on to two plates.

'I fell like crap,' Julian agreed, pouring himself a cup of coffee, 'Kelly my dear, you are a godsend for making all this.'

She shrugged. 'You did all the chores this week, how could I say no to breakfast? I hope you're not contagious though.'

Julian shook our head. 'Don't worry. But I haven't been acting oddly the past few days, have I? Aside from the cleaning?' He popped two aspirin and followed them with coffee. Cleaning was very out of character for Raza.

'No, I don't think so. Um, why do you ask?' she carried both plates to the table and set one down in front of us.

I decided Julian wasn't being very subtle, so I jumped in instead. 'I just hope I didn't do anything to make you feel uncomfortable.' I banked on the fact that Raza seemed to find new ways to disturb and alarm people once a week.

'What, you mean that guy you had over? Jeannie, honey, I have guys over all the time sketchier than that, and you guys were pretty quiet,' Kelly grinned at us around a mouthful of bacon.

We blanched and Julian took a swig of coffee to cover the uncomfortable silence.

'Dear God,' he muttered, 'she had sex with the vampire man.'

'I'm going to be ill,' I squirmed at the thought. 'If that's when she did I'm glad that I don't remember it.'

'I think we'd best have another shower before we go. Dear God.'

'I gotta run,' Kelly announced, wolfing down the remainder of her meal. 'But oh, hey, this was in the mailbox for you this morning.' She fished an envelope out from the pile of bills and credit card offers on the table. 'Well, see ya.'

We finished eating before we tackled the letter. The way the morning was going so far neither of us wanted to risk seeing something that would put us further off our breakfast. The envelope wasn't stamped, and it didn't have a return address, or even an address at all. It just said 'Janine'

The letter inside was brief.

Janine

I would be pleased if you would visit me in my office this evening (Perrault Building, 1400) I have information that may be vital for you. Please forgive me for contacting you in this fashion.

Michael Keller

I stared at the signature in disbelief. Midway through reading, I'd just assumed that it would be from Gill. He taught at a college, and thanks to Raza he might well know where we lived, but how in hell did this guy know?

'How the hell does he even know our name?' I demanded.

'I've no idea, but I'd say we'd better find out, wouldn't you?'

Work seemed to drag on forever; this was partially a result of the anxiety of my current situation, and partly because I had found that I was now supposed to be working on a new project that I had no memory of starting. Fortunately, Raza, if it was indeed Raza who had been working there the past few days, had left some notes, so I wasn't completely lost.

Arriving at the college was another matter. We'd finished school four years ago, and in another state entirely, so Julian and I spent at least twenty minutes wandering around the campus trying to find someone who would give us reasonable directions to the correct building. When we finally found it, it was completely by accident as we were heading back to the parking lot. It was with great trepidation that I knocked on the wooden door of room 1400, but it opened almost as soon as I had.

The person who had opened it looked about sixteen years old. He had short, bright red hair, freckles, and blue eyes, and was wearing a very rumpled white dress shirt and blue striped tie.

"Um, is Michael Keller in?" I looked up to the number on the door, wondering if I'd gotten the right one.

"That's me," the boy replied to my surprise. "You're Janine, huh."

"Yes. Uh, look, this can't be right. I don't mean to be rude, but is this really your office?" There was no way in my mind that this could be the same Keller that big vampire Gill was having a problem with.

The kid looked apologetic. "Yeah, uh, technically it's my dad's office. I'm sorry if the note I sent gave you the wrong impression of me. Come on in and I'll try and explain."

'Well, this just got about three times weirder. Still think we should go in, Julian?'

'There's no use standing around outside after all we went through to get here. I hardly think that he's armed to the teeth.'

It was no ringing endorsement, but with that reassurance I followed Michael into "his" office; it was a cluttered mess. There were filing folders all across the floor, shelves and desk, and books in similar places. What looked like an empty potatoes chip bag was lying beside the trashcan. Michael didn't comment on the mess and neither did I. He gestured for me to sit in the chair in front of the desk, and he took the one behind it.

"Would you like some coffee, or soda?"

We shook our head. "No thanks, look, can we cut to the chase for a minute? Forget why you contacted me, how do you even know who I am? Or where I live?" Maybe I shouldn't have been quite so blunt, but the fact that this kid was more than a decade younger than we were physically had really amped up my agitation level.

Michael pulled something out of his pocket. "I thought you'd probably ask that." It was a piece of paper which he unfolded and set on the table; the photograph from last night- well, five nights ago.

"So?" I said, "it's just a photo."

He nodded. "I used this photograph as a focus for a psychic link, so that I could investigate all of the people in it."

I stared at him in disbelief. "Okay, so how did you really find me?"

He frowned. "You don't believe me?" He took in a breath. "Your name is Janine Marie Lewis, you didn't want to be at that meeting that night, and you're possessed."

"What?" I demanded on the heels of Julian's slightly more polite, but no less shocked, "Excuse me?!"

"You're possessed," he repeated. "I saw that clearly when I read your aura through the link. Obviously the demon isn't active now, or you wouldn't have been able to cross the wards on my doorway."

"Oh, obviously," Julian muttered snarkily.

Michael ignored him. "But anyway, there's a demon inside you. The thing that I guess considers itself a vampire."

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If I had been skeptical of this guy before, it was nothing to the way I felt then. He was crazier than Gill, which was saying a lot. The only thing that was keeping me in my chair was sheer horrified curiosity.

“Raza isn’t a demon,” I sputtered, “She a, a...”

“Annoying,” Julian broke in as I struggled to find the correct word. “Mr. Keller, can you please tell me how on earth you came to be convinced that I was possessed?”

I wondered if Keller noticed the subtle shifts in posture and tone as Julian took the front.

“As I said, your aura was how I knew. It’s tripled, which is not normal, and one of those auras is very dark.”

Julian laid our hands in our lap. “And you expect me to believe this? What evidence do I have that you’re not some lunatic who’s trying to cold-read and con me for whatever reason- a very old con indeed. And you are a known enemy of someone that I have associated with- to wit, the vampire leader Gill.”

The boy nodded. “It’s true, you don’t have any reason to trust me except that I am an enemy of ‘Professor’ Guillaume Matherson; and of the force that has drawn you to him.”

Julian raised an eyebrow. “For just a moment, let us presume that I am possessed. What does it concern you?”

“Well, for one thing, I can perform an exorcism. You’ll be free, and in return you can spy on Guillaume and help me bring him down.”

The invitation clicked into place, but I was stunned for the third time that evening. Julian laughed. “You expect me to believe that you can perform an exorcism? And on a spirit you know next to nothing about, but one who to the best of my knowledge has been dwelling in this body since it’s birth? Mr. Keller, do you perhaps see something unethical in that proposition?”

He shrugged. “It’s a demon. Inhuman monsters of incalculable evil don’t have rights in my book. Not even squatters rights.”

‘Julian,’ I hissed, ‘is this guy serious? I mean, come on, he’s just a kid. He may have Gill convinced but it must be playing some kind of game to him.’

‘Well he certainly seems serious, if over-dramatic about the whole thing. I think he’s styled himself a holy crusader, as Gill implied. I think it’s rather amusing. And he wants to use us as his personal spy. I think that could be good for a laugh, don’t you?’

‘You’re not suggesting that we go along with it, are you?’ the implication alarmed me.

‘What’s the harm?’

‘The harm? For one thing, and this is just to start, what if he actually manages to exorcize Raza?’

‘Do you think that he can?’

‘That’s not the point! I mean, you just said how immoral that would be-’

‘Ms. Lewis?’ the boy broke into our conference.

‘Sorry, I was just thinking,’ I replied hastily. “You’ve given me a lot to think about.”

He nodded. “I get that this would be a big step for you. I’m gonna go get myself a coke. Sure you don’t want one?”

I shook my head, and interpreted this to mean that I could rejoin our mental pow-wow.

‘Well?’ I prompted. Julian had settled back away from the action and was seated pensively on our inner couch. Evidently he’d put the back room together again while I was occupied earlier in the day.

‘Well, I suppose it’s not my call to make but what would it matter if he did send her off someplace else?’ he waved his hand vaguely, ‘You’ve both said people come and go on their merry way before.’

‘Yeah, but not Raza,’ I said slowly. ‘I can’t tell her to take a hike. I can’t. You know it’s her body as much as mine.’

‘But doesn’t she always say how much she hates this “pathetic human body”? I think she would welcome the chance to push off to another plane of existence, and if you think you miss her, well I may be the Johnny-come-lately of this little company but all I’ve seen the two of you do is argue about who gets to do what when.’ Julian’s expression was distant and inscrutable. I couldn’t tell if he was just playing the Devil’s Advocate, or if he genuinely thought that it was a good idea. Then another possible motive crossed my mind,

‘Do you want to be exorcised, Julian? I mean, to get you back to your real life or whatever?’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Me? Mercy no. What if I’ve died or something? I’m not on Santa’s Good List, David,’ he confided, ‘and I think I’ll take my chances here, thank you.’

I sighed. ‘If Raza was here right now, I mean, here enough to give us a response we could just ask her. But man, that would be too easy, right? I hope she’s okay. What if that vampire nut did something to her mind?’

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‘It’s possible,’ Julian admitted casually, ‘well, at least as possible as anything else that’s going on right now.’

I noticed the door open again and lifted our head. Michael had returned and was carrying a bottle of cola. “Have ya thought it over?”

I pursed our lips, and drew a deep breath. “I don’t think this is going to do a damned thing, but I’ll let you try it.” A smile began to spread over his face and I quickly raised a finger. “But if I tell you to stop, the whole thing better be over, understand?”

He nodded vigorously. “Of course, no problem. That’s a no brainer.”

I took another deep breath. Even I was a little surprised that I’d actually agreed. I felt more than a little silly letting a kid like him attempt an exorcism on us. But what the hell, no harm, no foul. “So when do you want to do it? I’m free this Wednesday...”

“How about right now?”

I blinked. “Now? Uh, now? Don’t you have to prepare mentally, or get some supplies? Bell, book, and candle and that stuff?”

“This isn’t a Catholic exorcism,” he explained, “you don’t really need all that stuff. It’s just a focus for the power of the exorcist’s mental energy. You just let me into your mind, and the power of my will forces the demon out.”

Maybe it was just me, but Michael Keller seemed extraordinarily over-confident of his ability to complete this supposedly difficult magical practice. I knew it couldn’t work in reality like it did in the movies, because otherwise you’d hear about it all the time, but still...

“Oh, well, what if your father needs to use his office?” I had expected a good long time to dwell on my decision, and possibly to rescind it. I wasn’t keen on the idea of going through with it that very minute.

“Nope, dad is teaching until nine tonight. That should be plenty of time. Nobody else will come in, but I’ll lock the door if it’ll make you more comfortable.” Michael reached down beside the desk and started rifling through a black backpack.

“So, how does your dad feel about you doing all this new-agey stuff?” I had a sneaking suspicion that his father didn’t know. Back when we were that age Raza had had to keep all her magic books, tarot cards and the like hidden; our parents would have thrown a fit if they knew. They’d barely even been okay with me playing Dungeons & Dragons on the weekends. But then, I guess there’s a lot of stuff our parents were happier not knowing about us.

Michael shrugged. “He doesn’t have a problem with it. I’m going to light some incense.” He pulled a ziplock bag of it out of the pack. “Will it make you sneeze?”

“No. Not unless its made of cat hair.”

He laughed. “Me too. Why don’t you go ahead and relax, okay? Is that chair comfortable enough?”

I nodded and settled back in it. I even closed my eyes. I heard footsteps, and a click as Michael presumably locked the door.

‘Why are we going through with this?’

‘Because you want to see what will happen?’ Julian supposed. ‘Personally, I’m on the edge of my seat.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Hey, what did you mean about not being on Santa’s good list?’

He smirked back at me. ‘Ah that. Ha. I’ll tell you when you’re older.’

There was the distinctive flick of a lighter and a slightly tangy, buttery smell began to fill the room. I heard footsteps again and felt Michael standing behind us. There was a warmth around our ears and the hairs stood up on the back of our neck. He probably had his hands on either side of our head.

“Janine?” Michael’s voice was low, but close, and he spoke in a slow, calming tone. “I want you to listen to my voice, and clear your mind of other thoughts or images. Think of nothing but the sound of my voice. Just breathe in, and out. I’m going to lead you down into a trance. Follow the sound of my voice, deep down.”

I took one especially deep breath.

‘Ready, Julian?’

He nodded, and I started to release my hold on even the reality of the backroom, trying to think of nothing, and to head towards that meditative state of a mind afloat in darkness.

As Michael spoke I realized how warm and melodic a voice he had for such a young man, but I banished that thought too as I was led deeper into the trance state.

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It could have been minutes; it could have been an hour. In the darkness I felt two other minds sharing the embryonic emptiness with me. One was closer at hand, a rich, almost musical presence with the warm scent of polished mahogany, tempered with sea salt. The other presence was almost lost on the horizon. It gave the impression of great wings, and burning ice, and chortling laughter. It was distant, but seemed to be growing closer like a hurtling comet.

Michael's words were nothing now but a wash of comforting acoustic surf, which, as the comet of being approached and grew, resolved itself into something bright blue and shining beside us; something pure like snow, but sharp and determined as a knife.

The red presence loomed up before us, bringing the smell of smoke. It was familiar now, but focused not on me, but on the blue mind, which had concentrated itself like a diamond of energy.

The comet reached us, and all I could feel was the reaching, enveloping crimson that grasped and stabbed with a candy cane bite.

And then the memory hit.

Raza blinked. The back of her mind, normally full of at least a dull pulse comparable to radio static, had fallen strangely silent. It was a sensation she hadn't had in all the years since she and David had broken past the amnesiac turn-taking of their early youth and begun to share consciousness. It was the feeling of being alone in her own mind, and it was bliss.

She knew immediately who was responsible. Her gaze snapped up to Gill who was smirking into his drink. "What did you do?"

"I turned them off for a moment," he answered. "Are you angry?"

"I don't know yet," she replied, keeping her tone even. "Why did you do it?"

"So that you and I could have a private chat. My friends won't be listening either." He waved the two other vampires away. Amelia headed off for another part of the club, while Osiris simply moved further down the bar and ordered another shot.

Gill turned back to her. "Are you going to answer my question?"

Raza took a swig of her drink. "I'm not sure I can answer it as well as you'd like."

"Well, do your best," he said with a smile, putting a long, slender hand on her shoulder. She crunched an icecube between her teeth.

"David and I were born in the same body. I think it's a punishment for what I did in my last life," she stared bitterly into her empty glass.

He raised an eyebrow. "What did you do?"

"I was a vampire. A real vampire."

"Ah. I take your meaning. This was also the case with myself, although I seem to have escaped your bad luck. But you said David and that only accounts for one of the souls." He ordered her another drink.

She chuckled dryly. "The other one's Julian. David and I seem to pick up minds like other people take in stray cats. It's ridiculous. I mean, sometimes I don't mind, at least it's something to distinguish me from all the rest of the sheep out there," she gestured around at the bar patrons, "but a lot of the time it's like, okay kids, out of the poor and let me have some peace." She drained the second rum and coke in one go. "I mean seriously, you'd think my head was a damn train station."

"It must be very frustrating," Gill commiserated.

"No matter what I do, I always have someone second guessing my actions. I mean, David didn't even want me to be here tonight. And half the time I have the peanut gallery chiming in and commenting on what I'm thinking. Body time is at a premium because everyone has something that they want to be doing. I even have to run my dates by David. It's like living with your mother, forever." Raza waved the bartender over and ordered another. She reached for her pocketbook but Gill preempted her once again. Apparently he was still paying, and that was alright with her. "How long is this going to last? The thing you did to my head?"

"Two days at best. If I saw you every day I could keep it going for maybe two weeks, but eventually they would begin to reassert themselves."

She laughed hoarsely and grinned as Gill's sharp features were outlined in the pulsing, churning lights of the dance floor. "Well I guess you've got I new best friend, because I want those two weeks," she drained her glass again, slammed it on the bar and stood up. "Come on, dance with me."

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Later in the dark as Raza lounged, catlike, across the vampire's bare chest and slender stomach he asked her a question. "What if it could be made permanent?"

For a moment Raza's tired, rum-besotted mind lumbered over the meaning of the question. "Two weeks," she said, rubbing her head against his upper arm, "you said it would only last two weeks."

He ran his fingers through her chin-length blond hair. "True, I've no power to banish spirits from this world. But I know someone who has. And then you could let your hair grow out."

"Mmm... That would be nice. What's the catch?"

He laughed. "The catch, my perceptive pet, is that it's Keller."

She blinked. "Keller hates you," she looted down at the blankets dejectedly Gill grabbed her chin and forced her to meet his eyes.

"And that's why we trick him into it. He will have already discovered much about you through his spying, I know how that miserable urchin's mind works. You will not feed for five days--"

"Five days?! I'll practically die!"

He put a finger to her lips. "It is what is necessary for you to be free of your companions," he spat the word as though it were foul, "when you are in that weakened state I will send your mind to sleep, while the other two awaken. Keller will sense them, I will make sure he does, and I will guide the path of his thoughts. It will be easy, it is something he will want to do- he will want to exorcize you from this body, and I will make sure that your fine boys go along with our plan."

Raza was hanging on his every word and his wolfish smile, "and then?"

"And then you, your spirit ravenous, will devour his mind."

"That's it? How will that help? She pouted, "That'll help you. I want to help you, but..."

He laughed again, a rich, and talon sharp sound. "Have you ever heard what sometimes happens to people when they come back from a near death experience? Certainly some come back from the bright light, but some don't come back the same. They don't really come back at all. They have a new personality, mannerisms, tone... memories. The old soul has departed, and a something else has rushed in to fill it. A walk-in, it's called."

For a moment Raza looked into his sparkling dark blue eyes uncomprehending, and then she grinned almost as ferally as he, and pressed her mouth to his.

I woke up with a worse headache this time. It was like someone had stabbed me in the temples with an ice pick, and I didn't want to open my eyes for fear of what the light would add to that pain.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Just a minute," I tried to say, but it only came out as a labored "mmmff..."

"Just a minute," someone else said. The voice was familiar. I felt hands on our hips, someone reached into our pockets and pulled out a clinking object. Keys? I couldn't move effectively enough to stop them.

'Did you get the number of that steamroller?' Julian moaned dully, 'I think my spine has melted.'

There was a click, the door squeaked open, and two sets of footsteps came forward. I had to open my eyes now. I managed it, but I just saw the ceiling, not my ceiling.

Keller's office.

I tried to sit up. It was a bad idea, and I didn't get very far. Our spine lit up with pain and I had to agree with Julian's assessment. I closed my eyes again.

"You'd better check on him," someone muttered. It wasn't the first voice, and it wasn't as familiar.

"David?"

It was Raza. It was good to hear her voice again. It had a strange, too-loud quality, but thank god she didn't get exorcized.

'Raza, you're back,' I sighed, 'just when I was wondering where you'd gone.'

She didn't reply.

'I don't think she heard you, David,' there was a note of warning in his voice.

'Raza, you okay?'

"David, you okay? Are you awake?"

'What do you mean am I awake? Uh, hello?' someone put their hand on our shoulder and shook us gently. I dared to open my eyes again.

I started to scream. Looking up at your own face can do that to you. ~~It She It~~ The figure of Janine Lewis put her hand over my mouth to stifle the outburst. I struggled to sit up, ignoring the pain that shot through our head and shoulders as Julian swore incoherently.

“What the hell is going on?” I demanded, tearing the hand from our face, “is this a nightmare?”

Never ask that. If you can ask that question, it means you aren’t dreaming.

“I thought I told you to gag him,” said Gill, the other speaker, from where he lounged in the corner of the room.

“I didn’t have time,” Janine hissed at him, and then said to us “Just shut up okay?”

“Hell no!” I shouted more quietly this time. I didn’t think we could fight off both of them if they decided they really wanted us down. “Just tell me what is going on! Who are you?”

The face I’d seen in the mirror for two and a half decades softened slightly, but not much. “David, it’s me, Raza. You’re having a kind of... out of body experience.”

I slumped my shoulders. “The exorcism? Hell. I knew that kid would screw it u. Where is he? I’m going to give him a piece of my mind!”

“More than a piece,” Gill snorted.

Raza growled a warning at him. “Just stay laying down, okay David? Keller is, uh, gone.” Raza was looking more concerned. A little panicked even.

An out of body experience would explain how I was seeing our body from, well, the outside. Lots of people had experiences like that; only usually the body was asleep, or unconscious, because unlike ours, it didn’t have another mind to work it.

“It figures. I bet the kid left while we were still in a trance,” I grumbled. Leaving someone alone in that state was a very irresponsible thing to do. “So, if this is an out of body experience how do we fix it? And why do I hurt so much?” I thought for another moment. “And what is he doing here? As a matter of fact, why can he hear us?”

“Just keep calm, okay, David, everything’s fine.” Raza’s tone belied her words. It was the same tone she used whenever she had done something rash and selfish that screwed us all over.

“Raza...” I began, but I wasn’t quite sure what to follow it up with.

She glanced down at me, almost apologetically, and I followed her gaze. That was when I saw that my shoes were not my shoes, and my pants were not my pants. A quick check revealed that neither were my hands the hands the hands of my inner self, nor the ones that I had always known, the hands that Raza was now wringing anxiously in front of me.

They were Michael Keller’s hands.

I almost passed out again.

‘Steady, David,’ Julian murmured, ‘we go out again and the Dracula twins will be gone when we wake up.’

“What the hell did you do?” I wailed helplessly. Now I noticed the strange effect the different vocal cords had on my own voice, it was recognizable, but slightly changed in timbre.

Gill stepped brazenly forward from where he had been skulking in the corner, preempting any response Raza might have given “We have made a transfer in order to, how shall I put this, help alleviate the housing shortage.”

I glared at him, and sprang unsteadily upward. We were too short, and the limbs were all the wrong sizes. We would have fallen if Raza hadn’t reached out to steady us. As soon as we were standing I shoved her hand away roughly.

“How dare you?” I demanded. “You did this on purpose? What did you do to Michael?”

Raza started to speak, but once again Gill cut her off and paced menacingly toward us. “As she said, Michael is gone. The brat was foolish enough to believe he could perform such an advanced ritual, and more foolish still to believe he could trifle with me and mine. Thanks to his actions, and my own plans, I am rid of an enemy with neither a drop of blood spilt, nor an inconvenient body to explain. Razakel has her body to herself, and you have been moved to what I am sure you will see is a most suitable alternative.”

I was seething with anger that rendered me speechless. I should have spat in his face.

Raza spoke up in a quiet tone. “Is Julian there?”

I just nodded curtly, but Julian wanted to make his own reply. “You’ve shown your true colors,” he said, his British accent sounding much warmer with a male voice, “so why are you still standing here. Is it guilt? Well, what you’ve done tonight is theft and murder.”

For a moment Raza seemed abashed, but then her eyes turned to steel. “It’s not theft, it’s taking back what’s mine. And you were ready to push me out just like we did Keller, or else we wouldn’t have

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been able to.” There was a note of betrayal in her voice, and it was my turn to feel a pang of shame. She turned to Gill. “I’m done here.”

“Very well,” he smiled tersely, “give the boy his keys.”

She took the office keys from her pocket, the same ones she must have taken off us a few moments before, and tossed them on the desk. “I’ll mail you your CDs and stuff, Gill knows the address.”

Neither of us replied. There didn’t seem to be anything we could say. The vampires left us sitting in an unfamiliar room, in an unfamiliar body. I considered going after them, but I knew it would do no good. No one would believe the crime they had committed, and there was no way to put it right. Instead, our new body slumped miserably in the chair, I reached back and probed our minds’ new home. Its basic structure was almost the same; it had a backroom space, blank and unformed, and in one corner I found a cash of all sixteen years of Michael Keller’s memories, fragmented and without anchor. I would have to familiarize myself with them if we were going to assume his life.

That was a chilling thought stepping into the life of a boy who no one could know was dead or gone away. Raza had taken everything from him, his life, his friends, his family, and his body, dumped them into my lap, and now I had to take responsibility for them.

‘At least we have his memories. God knows what we’d do without them,’ Julian muttered. ‘It’d be a barrage of doctors and all sorts of unpleasantness.’

I swallowed a lump in my throat. I felt a terrible and sad new burden, a duty to do well as Michael; to make sure that no one was disappointed in him, or missed him, or knew that he was gone.

We stayed in the office for over an hour. I let Julian, familiarize himself with the workings of the body; having found himself in a strange new one once before, he wasn’t as shell shocked by this experience as I was. I stayed back and tried to organize thoughts, my own, and those that Michael had shed. Julian finished drinking the soda Michael had bought. It had gone flat.

It was when Michael’s father, tanned, with a warm face and grey hair, opened the office door and greeted his son without knowing he had gone, that the first shallow selfish thought of the ordeal caught up with me.

Michael Keller had freckles.