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Alfred

Saturday, Oct. 5

I place my card scanner on the desk before waving my customers out the door. They smile and nod in return, and the door chimes as it closes.

Puffing up their jacket collars, they turn into the damp wind and squint before disappearing from view.

I settle in my chair to keep reading, thumbing the well-worn pages with each turn.

A few minutes later, the door chimes again. Two new customers walk in, and one has a dripping umbrella—an obvious sign they're not from here. I'm surprised the thing hasn't broken in two already.

The couple smiles, nods, and starts browsing the shelves.

The man looks plain at first, with brown hair and eyes, but he's wearing long, chain earrings and has a plethora of black rings decorating his fingers. I glimpse his forearms when he rolls up his sleeves and quickly avert my eyes.

The woman is why I can't stop staring at them. She's shaped like a model—lean and so tall that she has to bend down to hear her companion whispering. Her dark skin glows bronze under the bookstore's orange lights, and her purple hair reaches well past her waist. She's wearing all white and purple, complete with matching makeup that makes her look otherworldly, like a painting come to life.

She's clearly used to people staring as well. She smiles politely when our eyes meet a second time.

I look down at the book in my lap.

The two wander to the back of the store, so I stand to check the café and find them leaning together reading the menu.

“—open or not. It might've closed already, love,” the man whispers. His head rests against her shoulder while he stares forlornly at my empty register.

“The café?” I round the counter. “It's open.”

The woman smiles blindingly at me with teeth so perfect they're almost eerie.

I look down at my hands on the counter, surprised my blush hasn't traveled all the way down to my fingertips with both of them staring at me.

“Thank you! Um... Can I get a latte?” he orders, still casually leaning against her.

“No problem. Any flavoring?”

“Uh...” He freezes as his eyes widen in panic.

“Caramel?” the woman offers. They both have American accents. I wonder how long they'll be visiting.

He glances up at her and nods.

“Good choice. And you?”

The man deflates in relief as I take her order now.

“Iced mocha cappuccino, please.”

I nod and then turn to make their drinks. I can feel their eyes on me, making me fumble a few times with the machine. I curse under my breath until I finally get the filter threads to catch.

I'm suddenly warm, so I roll up my sleeves before scooping the ice.

The man pays for both. His fingers are calloused, and I'm curious what he does to earn so many.

I catch myself trying to read the name on his card and angrily turn my eyes to my register. *That's creepy. We don't do that*, I mentally chastise myself.

The register opens, and I press it back closed.

"Thank you!" *Please leave! You're both bad for my health!*

"Thank you," the woman says flirtatiously before sucking the straw with her purple-lipsticked lips. I nearly faint.

She giggles at my frozen, blank stare.

The two turn away, and I watch her bump into him as they walk. He smiles at what she's saying. He looks even better that way.

I sigh, resting my elbows on the counter. When I rub my eyes, I see them leaning against each other. My entire body is shaking from the desire to be touched. I really need to schedule another tattoo appointment.

I seriously debate changing my register system so people would have to hand me their cards. Maybe I can get by with fingers brushing mine every few days instead of getting another tattoo.

Then I remember that I can barely handle people *looking* at me, so it's probably not a smart move to have them handing me things. I scoff at my lack of problem-solving and then return to the front desk.

The two browse for a few more minutes. I hear the loud,

empty straw of her drink and then a sad sigh. One of them whispers something, and they both laugh quietly.

My hands tremble in my lap. I scan the same page of my book for the fifth time. *This is just pitiful. You're not even talking to them.* I shake my head to clear my thoughts.

The pair step up to check out, and she sets a few books on my desk.

"What did you decide on?" I can't help the small talk. I wish they would stay.

"Oh, we couldn't help but get a few things," she answers vaguely.

I read each cover as I add up the total. There's a cookbook, a book on the occult, a fantasy novel, and two bookmarks. One bookmark has "If you were coffee, you would be espresso 'cause you're so fine" on it. The other is a field of sunflowers.

"It's really pleasant in here. Do you leave the lights up year-round, or are you just eager?" she jokes, and I have to haul my brain into conversation mode.

"Um..." *Oh, the fairy lights.* "Year-round, yeah. I put up holiday decorations later, so, uh... Yeah. Just, I like them."

She nods in approval, looking around the store again. "They are pretty," she says almost to herself.

The man smiles up at her, with visible hearts in his eyes.

"Here you are." I slide everything back across the desk.

He reaches forward, and his hand almost brushes mine.

When I flinch away, he tilts his head in silent question. I hide behind a smile while massaging my fingers in my lap.

"Thank you!" she says, sliding my card reader back as it prints their receipt.

My throat closes, so I wave silently as they leave.

I stand and flip the sign to show "CLOSED". It's a few minutes

early, but I could use the break. I haven't been this jumpy in a long time.

My hands won't stop shaking as I lock the door and turn off the lights. I clench and unclench my fists, wondering if the man thought I was rude for flinching away from him. Maybe he thought I didn't want to touch him. Maybe he thought I was disgusted or scared or rude. Maybe he—*Okay. There's no use in this. Relax.*

I steer my thoughts toward their books instead. I bet she wanted the occult book. Maybe he chose the cookbook then. She probably chose the coffee bookmark since it's flirtatious. That means he probably picked the sunflower one. I wonder who chose the fantasy novel.

I finish closing and head upstairs.

My thoughts wander to the occult book they bought. It's a fun one, but it isn't very practical. Most of the rules in it are better taken as recommendations. One of the rituals calls for the reader to use their real name when talking to spirits, which seems reckless to me. I only keep it on the shelves because it has a detailed list of magical properties in foods, which none of my other books have.

I toy with the idea of getting a magic-related tattoo again. Despite becoming a regular at the shop nearby, I haven't built up the courage yet. I always schedule with the same apprentice when I crave closeness with someone. I'd hate to change the air around our routine by weirding her out with a witchy tattoo request.

My muscle memory has taken me through the steps of changing clothes and heating up leftovers on its own. I reenter the present while stirring my food and turning on the TV.

I daydream through a rerun of *Doctor Who* and get up to grab

a drink as an ad plays. It's for a documentary on modern-day witchcraft, and that's when I get suspicious.

"Are you trying to tell me something?" I ask the open air. Really, I'm asking for a sign. *First the cute couple, then the occult book they bought, him almost touching me, and now this ad... What else have I missed?* There have been too many rare occurrences happening today for me to believe it's all chance. Usually, these things happen over a couple of weeks, not all on the same day.

The second I think that, I remember it's October. Maybe I'm just reaching. There are bound to be more strange things happening in my birth month anyway. It doesn't mean I'm being guided to some magical fix like I've been manifesting.

But then the ad freezes, and my TV goes black.

"Oh. Really?" I stand in silence, in the dark, for a moment. *What are you trying to show me, universe?* "What do you want me to do?"

Still talking to no one.

I check the stove to see if the power went out, but it didn't. Only my TV turned off.

"Maybe I should look for some way to..." I mumble, searching on my phone. *Something like "occult and friend..." or "witchcraft and lonely."*

I find a ritual someone anonymously posted several years ago called "Love Spell for Lonely Witches." It's so cliché; I laugh out loud. The noise echoes in my empty apartment, making me cut it short.

Despite my doubts, I do have everything the ritual requires. I wonder what stage of touch-starvation involves turning to strangers' witchy internet blogs but then start setting up for the ritual anyway.

"Just embrace the cringe, Alfred. Embrace it," I mutter as I

grab salt out of the pantry.

It takes a few minutes to check my wards and open a circle. Several candles are lit, so I can see what I'm doing. The clashing scents give me a headache. I haven't done a proper ritual in a while—at least since graduating from university.

The Latin words have their phonetic spelling beside them. Normally, I would look up what they say exactly, but I'm too tired tonight. *I doubt anyone will be listening anyway.* I'm used to telling myself these rituals won't work to soothe my nerves. *I hope it isn't rude to anyone... Questioning the intentions of the original blogger should probably happen before you're reading their spell, but...* "It should be fine," I whisper.

I finish reciting the words on my phone screen, dip the athame in the chalice, and let the water drip down my arm. I wave the athame through the smoke of one of my candles and then set it back down. It's more specific with these movements than the protection spells I've done in the past.

The last step is to close the circle, so I pace the one I've made in my living room and then start cleaning up. I think ahead to tomorrow, a Sunday, so the store will be open. I wonder if the spell will send someone new my way, or if the universe expects me to try to socialize. I snort at my immediate panic that that might be the case. Hopefully, if it works at all, doing the ritual is all the action I need to take to get over this loneliness.

"I wonder if it'll work..."

"It did!" an excited voice cheers from behind me.

"What—" I spin around so fast that I almost slip and fall on the hardwood flooring.

There's a woman in my apartment.

"What the *fuck*?"

She has horns.

“What are you *doing in here?*”

And blue skin.

I rub my eyes until I see stars and hope she'll be gone when I open them again.

Her laughter echoes around me. Then I hear her move, a swish of fabric.

I open my eyes to see her walking toward me, and instinctively step back.

“Well, you did invite me, dearie.”

“What?”

“You were so sweet! Inviting little ol' me.” She fake-swoons with her hands to her chest. She drops her facade and her hands to question me. “You don't know what you did, do you?” she asks plainly. Her natural voice is lower than the fake one she used at first.

“Um...” I should tell her to leave, but I can't.

She offers me her hand to shake. Her fingers are black like they've been dipped in soot. “Nice to meetcha! I'm Ket.” She winks.

I lift my hand and see the water trails on my arm have darkened to black.

Her hands are ice cold, and I shiver from the contact and the temperature.

Her freezing touch still lights up something in my brain that makes me want to jump into her arms and be held forever—the usual.

“*What* did I do?” I rub my palm to gain some of my warmth back.

“You're my new pet, dearie!”