

C.A. MOSS

How I Became
a Therapist in
Another World

Vol. 1-4 Omnibus

How I Became a Therapist in Another World

Vol. 1-4 Omnibus

C.A. Moss

Copyright © 2023 by C.A. Moss; second edition, 2024

Cover art by Franshawn Langley

Cover title design by Emily C. Bua

All rights reserved.

No portion of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher or author, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law.

Content Notes

Book 1:

- Homophobia (just one character)
- Depictions of mental illness: social anxiety, anger management issues, codependency, depression including passive suicidal ideation, and PTSD related to death / grief.
- Some scary scenes, mainly monster posturing
- Scenes where a character is followed/watched by a supernatural force
- Light to moderate swearing
- Alcohol consumption; the narrator works in a tavern/restaurant
- Flirtation with multiple love interests for a bit, then one that develops into a wlv relationship
- A threatening moment with a dragon flyover

Book 2:

- Depictions of mental illness / mental health concerns: anxiety, depression, non-specific phobias, guilt/PTSD, substance abuse (brief reference)
- Sexual content: F/F romance subplot, with kissing and implied other stuff (fade to black / not on page).
- Violence: Mention of a character being shot with an arrow (they recover).

Swordfighting and slinging around of combat magic. No one is injured by either of the latter.

- Implied rewriting of reality / magical retconning in-story
- Alcohol consumption; the narrator works in a tavern/restaurant
- Depiction of a domestic dispute/arguing
- Light to moderate swearing

Book 3:

- One demon that isn't especially scary
- Ongoing side plot about magical retconning / rewriting people's memories.
- Sexual content: Similar to book 2, there is on-page kissing (f/f) and vague allusions to other off-page activity.
- Swearing: This time around we have a side character who swears a lot, generally PG-13 level cursing. One character makes a rude gesture.
- Violence: two battles against supernatural snake-creatures. The main characters are also held up by a group of people with swords, though that's more of a "block your path while brandishing a weapon" situation and not a directly-held-at-swordpoint situation.

Book 4:

- Swearing: Light to moderate.
- Sexual content: On-page kissing (f/f); implied m/m attraction, both on-page and mentioned
- Violence: Some indirect threats
- Threatening/scary stuff: A (super)natural disaster-type threat (a hurricane at sea)

- Heavy topics / mental health topics: Discussion of emotional/mental stress caused by social isolation, as well as a mention of depression. A little angst.
- Several mentions of seasickness and a couple of mentions of vomiting (not a lot of detail)
- Mentions of religion, both Earth-based and fictional. The story does not endorse any particular one.

Please read at your own discretion.

Book One, Chapter One. In a Forest

I ced coffee in hand, I strode down the sidewalk in my new fall boots. Another busy day today — weren't they all? I had taken on as many clients as I could, and fit as many sessions into my schedule as possible. I was just hitting my stride as a therapist in private practice, and I wanted to make the most of it. Besides, I knew to leave time for myself, to go out with my friends and have my own life. Some of them had gone full-tilt into Marriage And/Or Cohabitation and Babies mode, so life wasn't exactly as it used to be, but that was okay. We adapted. We grew.

Sipping my coffee, I ran over my schedule in my head. Six sessions, four in my office and two remote. Just enough time in between to write notes and pick up some lunch. Or maybe I'd order in. Nah, there were enough cute spots with great menus around here, and it would do me good to get some fresh air. Enjoy it before it's too cold to go outside, right?

Just one evening session tonight, and then I had the rest of the night to myself. I ought to catch up on my budget, I thought, stepping out into the street. And do the dishes. And call my mom.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't hurt. There was a horrific noise and there was pain — in my side, then my head, which was horizontal all of a sudden, how did that happen? Someone bent over me, a stranger. And then it didn't hurt anymore.

Darkness.

Birdsong.

Birdsong? Pigeons don't sing. My eyelids twitched and slid open. A blurry span of leaves and branches filled my line of sight. Instinctively I pushed at the bridge of my nose to adjust my glasses. They weren't there, but a couple more blinks and I didn't need them

anyway. The rustling leaves overhead were crystal clear, casting cool green shadows over one another, shutting out all but a few pencil-thin shafts of sunlight.

Well, okay. I was not in a forest thirty seconds ago. I was across the street from my office, on a city street. And considering the last thing I remembered, the only conclusion I could make was that I was dead and that the afterlife was, despite every cosmology I'd ever heard of, a forest. Which was kind of nice, considering some of the other afterlives out there.

Hand to my pain-free head, I sat up amid crackling fallen leaves. At first I thought my scarf had come loose and was dragging against the back of my neck, but when I reached up to adjust it, I touched a mass of silky hair. I ran my fingers back through it and combed out leaves and twigs. And no wonder, lying on the ground in a forest. Except that two minutes ago, I had a possibly stereotypical but perfectly serviceable shoulder-length bob. I combed out more leaves and twigs and found the ends of my hair much, much further away than they ought to be, almost dragging on the ground where I sat. Puzzled, I pulled a handful over my shoulder.

This was not... I mean, in college I'd gotten highlights, trying so very hard to look cool and grownup. But even that had been like, kind of reddish-blond at best. This was blue. A clear, cool, oceanic blue with hints of green.

Stop. Quick inventory. Nobody was watching except some birds I could hear but not see. So, no worries about looking ridiculous, patting myself down.

No wings. Not that kind of heaven, apparently. Waist-length hair in a color I'd never even attempted, and I gotta ask this heaven about its conditioning regimen because wow. My face did not feel like mine. All the parts were there, but — something about the cheekbones and chin seemed off. Sharper. And there was still the fact that I could see clearly, which I'd never been able to do without glasses or contacts.

When I looked around, the forest did not produce anything resembling a mirror. Not even a conveniently placed pond. Just trees and some low-lying plants. No sign of a road or civilization or even any hills, really. Just forest. It was quiet except for the birdsong and the whisper of a breeze through the leaves.

All right. Time to get vertical. I stood. Was I taller than I had been? Thinner, too, not wispy, but definitely thinner than I'd ever been. That was weird. I wasn't sure how to feel about it. I'd fought so hard to accept myself and love my body, and I'd had a good decade of enjoying it thoroughly. It felt wrong to just give that up. But there wasn't much I could do about it right now.

The forest breeze rippled the calf-length hem of a dress I definitely wasn't wearing this morning. It was a white sleeveless sheath dress paired with simple sandals, the kind of thing I might wear shopping on a beach vacation. All I needed was a giant sun hat, but heaven hadn't supplied that.

The change in altitude did not reveal anything besides more forest. It stretched in all directions, receding into shadows in the distance. Well... nothing to do but walk around, I guess. Remembering the deft trick I'd seen girls do who had more confidence and longer hair than mine, I stooped to find a couple of sturdy sticks. It took a few tries. But eventually I got it up in a bun of sorts, and off my back.

I picked a direction arbitrarily. Couldn't tell where the sun was overhead, and even if I did, I didn't know where I was going. So — toward that particular tree, like all the other trees. Here we go.

As I walked, I wondered where all of this came from. It was better than thinking about who would notify my mom and my sister. I felt a tickle of panic rise up at that thought, and took a deep breath. Yes, I'll get to that. Eventually. When I'm ready. Right now I'd rather take a walk and think about where my subconscious got all of this scenery. Okay, brain? It's a deal.

I hadn't expected any specific sort of afterlife. We hadn't been raised religious in any serious way, and as an adult I focused more on the "feeling of connection with the universe" bit than "what happens when we get hit by a car crossing the street" bit. It hadn't seemed important to me. Other people's beliefs were important insofar as they shaped the decisions and feelings of those who believed, and I was always fascinated to hear about those. But my own, well... I hadn't given it much thought.

So: forest. When I was six or seven, I'd gone camping with some of my cousins, who were more used to this outdoorsy sort of stuff. I remember a hike that was actually really fun, and wading in a creek, and an unthinkable number of mosquitoes. Good job, subconscious, editing out the mosquitoes.

The hair, though, that was weird. I didn't have any particular connection to any person or fictional being with hair like that. If anything, it reminded me of a few clients I'd had when I'd worked in youth services. One drew elaborate manga-style fight scenes in a notebook when he didn't want to talk. One, after giving single-syllable answers for three sessions, started to talk to me when I asked about the show on her T-shirt, which depicted

a crowd of big-eyed kids with wildly colored hair. And apparently magic powers. I heard all about it eventually.

They were good kids. They all were. But I'd worked with so many, and so many adults before and after them. Why had that come up now?

So far I had: Camping trip with cousins. And randomly selected clients' entertainment preferences. Okay. At least it was peaceful and beautiful. You could do worse, I guess.

Then my stomach growled. What? Why would you add hunger into the afterlife? Food, sure, what's the fun of eternity without occasionally enjoying a bit of chocolate or some good barbecue, oh dang it, that only made me more hungry.

Plus... other people. I hoped I'd find some other people sometime in eternity. I crossed my arms against a sudden shiver. If this was some higher power's idea of overcompensating for those times I felt burnt out at the end of the day, well... I'm sorry, karma or God or whatever. I take it back. I love people. You just have to know your limits, that's part of the whole deal.

These were not good shoes for walking in a forest. They were good shoes for strolling along a promenade. But the ground was level and mossy, and the worst I had to traverse was a few drifts of leaves. I made good progress. Across what, for what distance, I had no idea. Maybe this forest was infinite.

Finally I spotted a bright spot in the distance, off to the left, and changed my course straight for it. A wisp of rising smoke, a new scent in the air — and finally a clear view. A stone cottage stood in a clearing, in a pool of golden sunlight. In front of it, a fence made of branches and twine surrounded a tidy garden full of cultivated plants. Off to the side stood a stack of firewood as high as my shoulder. Smoke rising from the chimney meant a fire inside, right? It meant people. I couldn't stop grinning as I walked up the path of mossy stones and knocked on the blue-painted wooden door.

After my second round of knocks, the top half of the door swung open. If I'd stopped to wonder what sort of being I'd imagine living in this darling little house, I would probably have overshot the age by thirty or forty years, but otherwise the owner of the house was perfectly suited to it. She was a woman maybe ten years older than me, forty-five or so, with a long dark-purple ponytail falling over her shoulder. The top half I could see was dressed in a black bodice with embroidered leaves and flowers climbing up and down the seams, and layers of necklaces made of earthenware and wooden beads and polished amber.

She gave me a cautious smile. “Hello. Are you here for a charm?”

“I — don’t know what that is,” I stammered, thrown off by my own voice, higher and softer than it should have been. “I mean, in context, anyway. I’m sorry, I seem to be lost, and this is the first building I’ve seen. First anything I’ve seen. Except for trees. Uh.” My name bumped up against the back of my throat. It seemed... strange to say it. That name belonged to someone I didn’t seem to be anymore. Which was ridiculous, my identity wasn’t the same as my looks. I was a being of pure energy or whatever now, wasn’t I? I could be a being of pure energy with a normal human name. “I’m Catherine.”

“Hazel,” the woman said.

“Nice to meet you, Hazel,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you down in Crystalbrook,” she said from behind the half-door. I thought I saw a shimmer in the air around her, like light reflected off water onto a wall. But then it was gone.

Hazel’s voice was soothing despite the trace of caution in the words. There was a kind of intentional softness about it, like she made an effort not to speak too loudly. Its underlying pitch was low, and between that and a couple of other trivial things I realized she was probably trans. So that was nice; it would suck to spend eternity without other, as my friend Devin would insist on saying, members of the rainbow mafia around.

Damn, my friends. Ugh. Another thing I would think about later. It’s not compartmentalizing, okay? It’s prioritizing. I was hungry and lost in a forest. I couldn’t stop to think about Devin’s attachment to annoying slang.

Because Hazel had just asked me a question. Something about Crystalbrook. “I don’t know where that is,” I said. “I just, uh... woke up in the forest a little bit ago.”

“Oh!” Her attention sharpened. “A Visitor?” There was a weight behind the word that gave it an invisible capital. “Maybe you ought to come in. I don’t think I have any charms that would suit you, but the kettle’s on.”

She swung the bottom half of the door to meet the top, and yes, of course her ensemble was completed with a long, sweeping black skirt. I almost forgot to admire it as I stepped after her into the cottage.

I had to get the afterlife to make me one of these. A fireplace took up a wide span of the opposite wall, and a copper kettle hung on a hook over the flames. All of the other walls, except where round windows looked out into the trees, were lined with packed bookshelves. Bundles of herbs hung in rows from the ceiling, lending their aroma to

the smell of books and potpourri. There was even a striped orange cat loafing on an upholstered armchair.

“Have a seat,” Hazel said, motioning to the chairs around the table as she headed for the fireplace. I took a seat.

In a minute, Hazel brought over a ceramic teapot and filled two earthenware mugs with tea. I cupped my hands around mine as I expressed my thanks, not really needing the warmth so much as the comfort.

“So, um...” I bit my lip as Hazel settled in across from me. “I’m a Visitor?”

“Ah. It seems so.” She studied my face. “Though you may be simply cursed with memory loss. Can you remember anything?”

“Oh sure, I remember plenty. Just not... here. Or in this body.”

Hazel leaned back. “You were in a fantastical world, and then — here?”

“Well...” “Fantastical” was highly context-specific, wasn’t it? I considered her casual mentions of curses and charms. Then I considered antibiotics and the internet. “You could say that.”

The woods witch nodded decisively. “Visitor, then. This happens sometimes, you see. People show up with amnesia, or say they’ve recovered memories of a former life. Visitors tend to have powerful magics, as well. For good or ill.” She made a small hand gesture I didn’t recognize, as if to ward off bad luck. That shimmer flashed through the edge of my vision again. Silver. Like a ribbon curling through the air, just for an instant.

“I don’t think I have any magic,” I mused. “Would I know if I did?”

“You’ll know when it manifests,” Hazel shrugged.

Just then, my stomach decided to manifest an especially loud grumble, and my cheeks flamed.

Hazel chuckled. “Hungry?”

“Sorry,” I said, and picked up the tea. It would be too hot to drink, but I needed a distraction.

Oh. The dark surface of the tea was reflective enough. I stared into the mug as Hazel got up again.

That wasn’t my face. Not at all. Wide eyes, some dark color I couldn’t determine through the tea-tinted reflection. Pale skin, that much was pretty similar. Fine features, not a single line. I mean, I moisturized, but genetics and stress were catching up with me as I closed in on forty. Now I looked no older than twenty.

Hazel set something heavy on the table, and I jumped, sloshing the tea. I set down my mug abruptly. “Um. Like I said, this isn’t my body. I haven’t really seen my face yet.”

“Not to your liking?” Hazel asked carefully.

“I-I mean it’s fine, it’s nice, I think, and I’m happy as a woman, it’s just — strange. And young. I’m thirty-five, really. Was.”

Hazel laughed, and took the lid off the ceramic jar she’d set on the table. She set a handful of cookies on a little plate and passed them to me.

Wasn’t there a myth about the food of the underworld being gloriously wonderful? Or was that the food of the gods? Either way, Hazel’s cookies qualified. I think I full-on squealed after the first bite. They had cinnamon and ginger and brown sugar and they were crispy at the edges and yes, see, heaven needs cookies like this. I finally tasted the tea I’d been staring into, and that was a little bitter and flavored with some more herbs or spices — anise, maybe? — and made a lovely contrast with the cookies’ sweetness.

I raved between bites and sips. My stomach finally stopped complaining. And when I’d finished the plate of cookies, I sat back and folded my hands over my newly-mostly-flat belly and felt halfway normal for the first time since I’d woken up.

“Thank you,” I sighed. “That was just what I needed.”

Hazel gave a courtly little nod. “That’s what I do, stranger.”

“Oh — what is it you do, exactly?”

“I figure out what people need,” she replied cryptically, then clarified, “I’m a witch. I make charms and potions.”

“That’s fascinating. So it’s magic?”

“Just a trace,” she said. “Nothing burns or goes stale before its time, that kind of thing. It’s nothing.”

I laughed. Tried to. Giggled, really. “Where I come from, there doesn’t seem to be any magic at all, so that’s impressive to me.” To be fair, some people believed in it. I just didn’t. Not even astrology or tarot, which was a top tier violation of the Gay Lady Code, but it just never spoke to me. Other people could get into it all they wanted, I wouldn’t judge.

Hazel’s ponytail slid across her shoulder as she tilted her head. “So what do you do, where you came from? Do you remember?”

I considered the string of letters after my name, each set hard-won with hours of study and underpaid clinical work. And nobody here would have any clue what they meant, would they?

“I’m a therapist,” I said, and at her blank look, went on, “A counselor. People come to me if they have emotional or mental issues they want to work on. And I listen, and help them talk through...” I trailed off. Hazel’s expression had gone wide-eyed, almost frightened. The silver streak flickered, and I blinked.

Hazel’s voice was hushed. “You’re a demon slayer?”

“A what?”

The streak flickered back in like lightning, solidified, coiled around the wood witch. Silver talons dug into her shoulders. I staggered out of my seat, pushing the heavy wooden chair back. A shape as long as I was tall, long and snakelike with at least six legs that I could see, circled around Hazel and dug its claws into her. Its skin was mirrored silver, reflecting a jumble of warm browns from the wood and muted greens from the herbs around us, and even a glimpse of my strange blue-green hair. A row of burning red eyes opened along its back, glaring in all directions. I yelped. My heart hammered.

At first I thought I was going to puke, which would have been a waste of cookies and tea but understandable under the circumstances. The feeling strengthened, and no, it felt like my lungs were going to burst, like I needed to scream until I was out of breath. My body hummed with tension. Finally I couldn’t hold back anymore and stopped holding it in.

I didn’t scream, though.

A sphere of glowing blue energy expanded from my chest. It swallowed me and Hazel and the silver monster and the table, until we stood under a humming dome of light. I staggered as the tension dissipated, and stood uneasily.

Inside the dome, the table was gone, and the woven rugs under it. The ground was cracked earth, and wind whipped around us, pulling the sticks out of my hair. I grabbed for them, and then lost them to the wind. They flew away and burned up as they hit the dome with a purple flash. I could see the cottage outside the dome, farther away than it should have been, blurry, the colors dulled. The orange cat stood up on the seat of the armchair, tail high, puffed up in anger or fear; its expression seemed frozen in time.

Hazel slumped on the ground. The silver creature hooked its claws into her, too many eyes staring and blinking all along its body. I reached out to grab it and pull it off, not really thinking about what I intended to do after that. But my hands passed through it as though it, or I, weren’t real.

The wood witch made a sound halfway between a laugh and a sob. “I should have known.”

Should have known, the thing echoed, in a rumble of overlapping voices like a distant crowd.

“What is it?” I made another grab at it, because what else could I do? The wind howled in my ears. My hand passed through the creature again.

“It’s a demon,” Hazel snapped. “It’s my demon. It’s what I deserve. Why do you think I’m out here alone?”

Out here alone alone alone, the demon murmured. Its silver body shone, and its eyes glowed brighter at her words.

I could imagine the serene tapestries I’d collected, the pillows on the couch, the frequently restocked box of tissues. I could hear a dozen clients’ voices. *I deserve this*.

What could I do, empty-handed, knowing nothing about this place or this horrible creature or about this woman and her struggle?

What I always did. What I was good at.

I sat down, cross-legged on the bare dirt. Back straight, hair whipping around my face in the gale.

“Hey, Hazel?” I tried to sound as gentle as I could and still be audible in the wind. “I know you don’t know me very well. But I want to help. Where I come from, my job was listening to people, and helping them figure out how to solve their problems or live with them.” I rested my hands on my knees, gripping them a little to feel more stable. “So I guess you could say... my clients fight demons. And I help.”

Hazel wasn’t a client, though. And so I really shouldn’t be doing this. But this wasn’t really therapy, either. That involved a lot fewer literal hell-creatures. I’d figure that all out later.

She just laughed under her breath, an exhausted sound that the demon picked up and layered into overlapping echoes. Its mirrored curves rippled.

“Can you tell me where this thing came from? Why it’s bothering you?”

“It’s what demons do,” Hazel said flatly. “They feed. On those who pull them in.”

“Pull them in?” Ugh. I sounded like the demon for a second, echoing her words. But I wasn’t mocking.

“With weakness.” *Weakness*, agreed the demon. “Fear. Despair. It draws them. And they feed.”

This demon's behavior certainly bore that out. It glowed with satisfaction at Hazel's defeated tone.

"How do you, um, get rid of them?"

"I don't." Hazel straightened up from the ground, propping her body up on her hands. I could see a demon's claw piercing between the layers of necklaces. "I get out into the woods where nobody can bother me, except when they want something, and at least then I can be useful. But they still whisper behind my back when I go into town for supplies."

Whisper whisper whisper.

Wherever this was, I thought, it wasn't heaven.

"I can see them *watching* every step I take. Like they're waiting for me to say something foolish." The demon's many eyes narrowed as it drew in power from her words.

"You have just as much of a right to visit that town as anyone," I said.

"I suppose," Hazel muttered. The demon hissed. Its reflective skin dulled, brushed aluminum rather than polished steel. A couple of the eyes blinked. Did the wind just calm down a little?

I ran a hand over my hair. "Are there any people in this town that you trust?"

Hazel nodded. "Some. Of course. Some suppliers. And my regular customers." The demon's hiss turned into an angry rattle.

"Do you think any of them might walk along with you, next time you go in for supplies?"

She didn't reply for a minute, mulling over the suggestion, not agreeing with me or with the many-eyed horror. I shifted my position, realizing as I did so that grass had sprouted across the ground under the dome. Just a fine haze of green, the dry dirt still visible through it. But it hadn't been there a minute ago.

"Those feelings might stick around," I said. "And it's all right if they do. They aren't your fault. They have a name for it where I come from. It's very common." The name *social anxiety* wouldn't mean anything to her, an incantation without power.

She still hadn't answered, but the grass still grew, softening the ground. The dome above us hummed quietly, and the wind had dwindled to a gentle breeze.

"All right," Hazel said. "I'll try it."

Alone, the demon insisted. *Weakness. Despair.* But its echoing voices were more distant now.

Hazel glanced up toward me, and I smiled. The tarnished creature wrapped around her twitched uncomfortably. Hazel reached up, took hold of it, and pulled it loose, as though she were peeling ivy off a wall. With a rustling, whispering noise that made a shiver run up my spine, the demon disintegrated.

The dome above us burst in a shower of sparks, and the cottage rushed back in. I took my seat at the table and heaved a sigh.

“It’ll be back,” Hazel said quietly, and sipped her tea.

I did the same. “I know you can fight it.”

She smiled wryly. “So this is what you do?”

I scratched the back of my head, blushing again. “I guess so.”

“Heh. Demon-slayer. I knew it.”



It was only early afternoon, it turned out. And I didn’t want to impose on the only person I’d met in this world, but I didn’t have anywhere else to go. So I tagged along while Hazel went out to gather potion components in the woods.

“Should I try to blend in?” I asked, as we followed a path I couldn’t see but she knew by heart. “Is being a Visitor something people accept?”

“Hmm. Most do. Some may find it...” She looked up into the trees, searching for a word. “Daunting. I suspect your biggest issue may be other Visitors. Some can be... territorial.”

“Ah. ‘This town’s not big enough for the both of us,’ huh?”

“It’s a market town,” Hazel shrugged. “One of the larger ones in this region.”

I let it pass. Not important. “I guess the powers would give me away eventually, wouldn’t they.”

“Eventually, they might.” She looked over her shoulder at me. “You look like a human otherwise. So if you wanted to keep it secret, you might be able to.”

I stumbled over a tree root in my surprise. “Human as opposed to...?”

“Elves or orcs or beastfolk,” she said casually.

Uh-huh. So I died and went to... a ren faire. Or something. “...Interesting.”

“Your name isn’t typical,” Hazel said. “Not for humankind nor any of the other folk. So you might want to change it.”

“Hmm.” I looked down at this unfamiliar body again, as we walked. It seemed fitting to choose a new name. “What would be typical for a human woman?”

“Well, something like Aerlynn or Hilgred, around here,” Hazel said.

Maybe. I thought about Hazel’s name. Nature names were a classic. Ask my friends Tall Moss and Short Moss, who had a whole argument about it because Moss R. had been in the group longer, but Moss C. had had the name longer. So eventually someone started calling them Tall Moss and Short Moss, and they united in their annoyance at the rest of the group.

“Your name is pretty,” I said. “Nature names are nice. People have those where I come from, too.”

I’d caught up with Hazel’s longer stride, so I saw her blush. “Oh, well, that’s more common among elves, actually, but uh, you can if you want to.”

Hmm. Problem was, I knew essentially nothing about nature. I left that to Tall Moss and Kaylie and the rest of the group who went out camping while the rest of us continued to sweat through summer in the city. Fern? Rowan was a tree, wasn’t it? I considered and discarded the idea of calling myself Sapphire. It was pretty, but I didn’t want to be defined by something so obvious as my new hair color.

What kind of name did I want? Catherine was fine, a little old-fashioned; I usually went by Cat outside of work. Which went along with my hourglass figure and hipster glasses brand of femme. Vintage, rather than old-fashioned.

A memory swam up out of my head, and I knew.

“Lavender,” I said aloud.

“Lavender?” Hazel smiled. “Is that what you want?”

“I think so.” A warm feeling spread through my middle. “Yes. My grandmother grew lavender in her back yard, when I was a kid. I remember the scent of it so well. Would that be a strange name here?”

“Hmm. People might...” She ducked her head. “Think you chose it.”

“I did choose it, so.”

“Okay then,” she said. “Nice to meet you, Lavender.”

“Nice to meet you, Hazel.”

Chapter Two. Welcome to Crystalbrook

I'd needed to sleep eventually. Since I didn't have anywhere else to go, Hazel piled up a bunch of blankets and pillows on an already comfortable-looking sofa, and I slept like a log. And when I woke up, I wasn't somewhere else. I was on the sofa, with the cat curled up on my chest. Over breakfast — pheasant eggs, toast and sauteed mushrooms, along with more tea — Hazel drew me a map to town and insisted that I take some money. For my services, she said, clearly making an excuse of it. My dress didn't have any pockets — again, not heaven — so I carried the handful of coins in a little bag on a string around my neck, tucked under the neckline. I could feel the weight of it as I walked along the trail through the trees that became a path and then, eventually, a dirt road.

The sun rose in the sky. A new day. I hadn't woken up in oblivion, or in my old life, or in some cloudy wonderland with fluffy-winged people in togas. I had a new life now, somehow. I'd try to make the most of it.

I still hadn't processed what happened. I knew that, frowning as I walked along the edge of the dirt road. In the distance, cows and sheep grazed in a field, and I watched them as I turned my thoughts over. It didn't feel safe to sit with what happened, not yet. I wanted a place to stay where I could have some privacy and stability. Hazel's hospitality had been greatly appreciated, but that wasn't the same.

I'd find a home. Then I'd come to terms with what happened to me.

Which was why I found myself approaching the charming market town of Crystalbrook. The stream that probably gave the town its name rushed past across the farmlands, spanned by an arched stone bridge. A cart pulled by two horses clattered across the bridge, its wooden wheels rumbling over the stones. I stepped off to the side to let it pass, and

returned the driver's wave. At first I thought the driver was human, but then I saw the pointed ears.

The cart pulled past me. It was loaded with wooden crates and barrels. Before it pulled too far away, I managed to trace *Sugar* on the side of one of the barrels. The letters were full of unfamiliar shapes, but the meaning still rose in my head. Huh.

A light breeze lifted my hair as I walked across the bridge's arch. On the other side, the bridge met a cobblestone road lined closely with one- and two-story houses. Ahead of me, I saw more pedestrians and a horse-drawn cart or two, and a family of geese ran past at an intersection. Not rush-hour traffic by any stretch, but a lively morning. I folded up Hazel's map and tucked it into the bag around my neck. Whatever happened next, I'd reached my destination.

After a couple more blocks, I stepped into an open square where merchants sold all manner of goods from tents and stalls — fruits and vegetables, bundles of wool tied up with twine, stacks of firewood, even a stall full of crystals and charms. When I paused to admire this last stall, a hissing sound made me jump, and I looked up to the tent's roof to find a dragon no larger than a Pomeranian eyeing me suspiciously. It stretched its little wings out, lowering its head on a long neck to study me.

Don't stick your fingers out where they can be bitten off seemed like good advice for dragons as well as unfamiliar dogs, so I suppressed my urge to wave and say *Nice dragon* and just hurried on by.

The breakfast Hazel had cooked this morning would keep me satiated for hours to come, so the food stalls weren't tempting right now. And I worried about what lodging would cost. So the coins in my little bag stayed put, even as I passed a stall full of brightly dyed clothing. I had to bite my knuckles and walk faster. But I made it.

A few more blocks later, just past a raucous game of kickball between half a dozen little kids, I found some potential lodging. It loomed over the houses around it, at least two stories of brick and timber and scrolled decorative trim. The painted sign hanging above the door said *The Two Claws Inn*, arching around a crest of two paws meeting in a handshake. Remembering what Hazel had casually mentioned about beastfolk, I took a deep breath and opened the door.

It was a pleasant summer morning outside, but inside the air was cool and smelled like baking bread. My eyes took a minute to adjust to the dimmer light, cast by lanterns hanging from the walls and from beams in the ceiling. When I was able to see, I recognized

the layout of the room as a bar, or a restaurant: round tables scattered across most of the room, booths along the walls, bar across the back with stools pulled up in front of it. *Inn* meant a couple of different things, back in the day, didn't it? Hmm. I had been hoping for some sort of hotel. Maybe they had those, too.

"Bar's closed," a low, rumbly, slightly muffled voice called. A big, dark head poked out from a curtained alcove off to the side behind the bar. I did my very best not to jump. The rest of the bear followed, filling up a good bit of the space behind the bar and nearly reaching the ceiling. "Or are you looking to rent a room?"

"I was hoping to rent a room," I said, biting off *sir* just before it left my mouth. I wasn't entirely sure I could correctly gender a talking bear; wouldn't any bear voice be low and rumbly? The bear wore a dark red vest covered with embroidery. Not much of a clue. "How much are they?"

"Four silver a night." The bear picked up a glass delicately in one set of claws and began to polish it with a towel.

Hazel had given me twelve silver coins. Enough for three days. Not counting food. I bit my lip. It was probably reasonable; I wasn't questioning her gift or the price of the inn. But math was not on my side.

So... I needed a source of income that was more reliable than waiting around for someone beset with demons to come by. I'd worked in restaurants in high school and all through undergrad. My skills were rusty, but I bet they'd come back.

For example: I put on my winningest smile, hoping it looked as winning on this face. Maybe even more. "By any chance, are you hiring waitstaff?"

The bear looked down a long, furry nose at me. "Perhaps. New to town?"

"Yes. But I worked in restaurants for years—" Uh, it was unlikely this sort of world had child labor laws. So that might add up after all. —"back in my old town."

"Hmm." The bear set down the glass and started on another. "What brings you this way?"

I'd love to know that myself. But now that I was here, I had a real answer. "I'd just like some steady work, and figure out what to do next."

"All right. Suppose a trial run wouldn't hurt. When can you start?"

"Right away," I chirped.

The bear picked up something from behind the bar and walked around to the front with a slow, deliberate bipedal gait. I looked up from the bear's enormous back paws to see what was being offered to me: a bucket and a cleaning rag.

I took them. My smile didn't waver. No problem.



While I wiped down tables and swept the floor, I managed to wring some chitchat out of my new boss. It turned out he wasn't unfriendly, just taciturn, and seemed quite willing to answer any of my newcomer's questions. His name was Gustav, and he managed the Two Claws with his partner Rene. The inn had been around for generations, but they had added a restaurant since going into business together. Now the bar/restaurant brought in most of their business, having become a social hub for Crystalbrook; the rooms upstairs only occasionally hosted traveling merchants or a Visitor passing through on an adventure.

I nodded knowingly at this, and asked about the local cuisine.

I got plenty of opportunities to find out that evening. As the sun began to sink outside, a person crashed through the front door so suddenly that I dropped my broom. Scrambling to pick it up, I felt myself blushing under the new arrival's scrutiny. She was easily six feet tall, muscles on muscles on... plenty of other features, with short dark hair and sage-green skin. A bit of a smirk exposed some *very* prominent teeth.

"Evening, Yahz," Gustav rumbled from behind the bar.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure?" The orcish woman continued to smirk.

"New server, probably." The bear closed the book he'd been reading.

"Oh, no, we'll shatter this little thing." The orcish woman swept into a courtly bow in front of me. "Milady. Please accept my apologies for what is certain to transpire this evening."

Was this... was this flirting? I wasn't used to reading the expression on a mouthful of tusks, but I could swear it was. So I curtsied. "Ma'am, I assure you I am more resilient than I may look at first." Besides, "little"? I'd gained a good six inches of height in this whole escapade. Still, she could've picked me up in one arm and done a bicep curl.

"Lavender," I added. "Pleasure to meet you."

“Yahzghash,” she said. “I’m the chef here. And the only kitchen staff. Till Guus and Rene get me some help,” she added loudly over my shoulder.

“Yes, yes,” Gustav said absently. “Lavender, bring that broom here, would you? It’s nearly time.”

I did, and then washed my face and hands in the kitchen tucked behind the bar. The Two Claws didn’t have any uniform to give me, but Gustav scrounged up a human-sized apron. Meanwhile, Yahzghash poked at the fire Gustav had laid in the enormous potbelly stove and laid out some knives on the counter. Recognizing a routine in progress, I stayed out of the way, and followed Gustav back out into the bar to await our first customers of the night.

If the Two Claws were located in my previous city, it would be full of people my former age, taking pictures of their food and trying to impress one another about their knowledge of microbrews. The humble decor was misleading, is the thing. The drink menu was limited: ale, mead, cider, and half a dozen spirits, which hardly anyone ordered. Gustav mostly pulled tankards of ale and cider from the giant kegs behind the bar. Once I hit my stride, I ran drinks all over that stone-floored dining room like a pro. Which... I was now. Kind of. I was constantly on the move. I enjoyed the view of some nice-looking ladies and some nice-looking gentlemen and some nice-looking people whose gender I couldn’t quite pin down but who cares anyway.

But the real draw of this place, it turned out, was the food. I carried trays and trays of food out of Yahzghash’s kitchen, pot pies and hearty soups and fresh baked fish and steaming loaves of bread and giant bowls of salad. Tonight’s menu was short enough to fit on a chalkboard behind Gustav’s bar, but every single item looked delicious, and people ordered all of them.

Between tables I ran back into the kitchen with a fistful of coins I’d gotten as tips. The chef was majestically at work at the stove, so I steered clear, fishing the money pouch out from under my sundress. The coins joined those I’d gotten from Hazel, and the pouch lay heavily against my chest.

Four silver a night for a room — could I afford it after all? I had to go somewhere. Still. I’d worry about that later. Yahzghash turned and pushed a platter of sliced chicken across the worktable toward me. Right, the table in the corner, all the guys with the fancy velvet suits and capes. I grabbed a serving tray and loaded it up.

The guys in the velvet suits ordered a truly staggering amount of mead, complained about the countess they worked for and all the suitors traipsing around her castle, and tipped me in gold. A catfolk woman knocked over a shot onto the floor and innocently cleaned her whiskers as I brought out the mop. A group of orcs played dice in the table in the corner, and one claimed my presence was lucky, that he threw sixes every time I passed by. I said I couldn't stick around, but I blew on the dice for him. There was a small lover's quarrel and a couple of drunken makeouts in shadowy corners, unrelatedly. Someone, I wasn't sure who, stepped on my sandaled foot with a very heavy boot.

Midway through the night, after the dinner orders had slowed down, another guy in a cape banged in through the door. I set down a tankard and glanced up. Just a kid, maybe seventeen, with wild black hair. His outfit was all black edged in silver, thick with buckles and jeweled accents. I wondered if he'd missed the group from the countess's castle; they'd headed out a while ago.

He stalked to a table in the middle of the room and sat down by himself. I whisked over and took his order — grilled salmon and water, sparing me the whole ordeal of figuring out what the minimum drinking age was here and if they even had one. When Yahzghash finished the order, I brought it out to his table.

"I don't know you," he said, instead of anything one might usually say in that situation, such as *thanks* or *can I get a slice of lemon*.

"Oh, yes, I'm new in town," I said, as though I hadn't said it thirty times that night. "My name's Lavender. Crystalbrook's such a lovely town."

"Sir Solan," he said, as if I should know that already. "Mageknight." At least the title was fairly clear from context.

Then he dug into his grilled salmon, clearly uninterested in further chitchat, so I moved along to another table. Over the next half-hour, as I ferried drinks and plates around the dining room, I sensed the mageknight studying me — not the gossipy curiosity or playful flirting I'd sensed from others throughout the night, but a keen, suspicious glare.

Visitors can be territorial, Hazel had said. So was this guy another one? Someone who had woken up from the real world into this place?

There was no way to ask in a crowded bar, and I wasn't sure I wanted to start proclaiming my identity yet anyway. So I pretended I didn't see it. I cleared his table when he finished and accepted his payment to turn over to Gustav at the bar. He didn't tip. Not a single coin.

Outside, a big silvery moon rose. The flow of customers rose and fell and then slowed, until finally Gustav watched the last one leave from his place behind the bar. I straggled up, allowing my fatigue to show at last, and climbed onto one of the bar stools.

“How’d I do, Boss?”

The innkeeper calmly polished the bar with a cloth. “Quite well,” he said. Reaching behind the bar, he fished out a pawful of coins and deposited them in front of me. I beamed and scooped them up. My little money bag was near to bursting, and sure, most of it was copper, the smallest-value coin of the realm. But a reward for a job well done is a beautiful thing.

“Are we done, Boss?” Yahzghash called from the kitchen.

“We’re done,” Gustav confirmed. “Come on back, Lavender.”

A good meal is another beautiful thing. Yahzghash laid out an epic spread of leftover food, and I nearly kept up with the six-foot orc lady and the talking bear. While I yawned over my last empty plate, the swinging door let in a fox about as tall as me, wearing a dark green tailored jacket.

“Morning, darling,” he greeted Gustav with a kiss on the snout. — Okay, so *that* kind of partner, too. Cute. He snagged a slice of bread from a basket. “Morning, Yahz. And who’s this lovely addition?”

I introduced myself, and of course this was the other proprietor of the Two Claws, Rene. He would take over running the place tomorrow. Today. Whatever time it was. I yawned again. Yahzghash cleaned up her stove and counters and headed out.

“So, uh... I guess I ought to reserve a room.” I pulled out my money bag. “Four silver, right?” Half of what I’d made tonight, not counting tips.

Rene and Gustav exchanged a meaningful look. “We’ve got some space in the attic,” Rene said apologetically, with a flick of one ear. “It’s not bad, really. We wouldn’t charge you a thing.”

“Hate to take back your pay on your first day,” Gustav rumbled.

So I accepted the little lantern Gustav gave me and followed his fox husband up three flights of stairs to the attic. Rene led me between the stacks of boxes and barrels to the far end, where a little guest room had been set up — just a bed and a table and chair, but I was so tired that I honestly did not care. I assured the fox innkeeper it would work for me, and he went back downstairs.

The string holding my money bag was beginning to chafe the back of my neck. I pulled it over my head and set it on the table, along with the lantern. Kicked off my sandals. Well, that was the entirety of my worldly goods, sorted out. I blew out the lantern and collapsed onto the bed. Just a little bit dusty. But not bad, actually. Not bad.

Chapter Three. Just Your Friendly Local Demon Slayer

I woke up to the sound of birds chirping, and to sunlight streaming across my face. Squinting against it, I lifted my hands, and then wound a lock of the long aquamarine hair around my fingers. Yep. Still here.

Last time I actually was twenty-ish, I would have rolled over and gone back to sleep for another four hours. But apparently my brain didn't get the memo, because before long I was up and stretching.

The white sundress didn't seem too wrinkled after a night working in a tavern and then being slept in. Magic, maybe? Extremely trivial yet very useful magic? Still, I yearned for a change of clothes. And a bath would be nice, too. I bent forward in another stretch, then leaned back. My hair wasn't tangled, either; it slid silkily back over my shoulders. Okay, definitely magic. Though it would be nice to pull it back for a change. This place couldn't have invented elastic, but I would be fine with some ribbon or something.

If I didn't have to start work till three hours past noon, as Rene had mentioned last night, there would be plenty of time for all these items on my new to-do list.

First, I sat at the table and counted out my little pile of savings. I had no idea what clothes cost here. They would be handmade, and I knew that wouldn't come cheap, rightfully so. I couldn't fill a whole closet. Just some alternatives to my arrival outfit.

Leaving some of the money stacked up on the table and the rest in the bag around my neck, I slipped my sandals on and headed down all those stairs to the bar. Rene sat behind it now, writing figures in a big ledger book with a quill pen.

"Ah, Lavender, good morning! I hope you slept well? The kettle's on in the kitchen, and some odds and ends for breakfast."

“Quite well, sir, I was tired right out.” My stomach grumbled, betraying my interest in breakfast. After that dinner last night? Come on, stomach. This body ran through fuel like an SUV. Maybe magic revved up your metabolism.

Still, there was no point in passing it up; I went back to the kitchen and filled up on the bread and cheese and blackberries and tea laid out there. If meals were included with this job every day, it really was a lucky find. Seemed that way.

Once I was satiated, I asked Rene where to find the bathroom. There was a confusing back-and-forth in which I clarified that I knew where the toilets were, down the hall, but not a bathtub *per se*.

The fox innkeeper seemed a little nonplussed, but gathered that I came from a further town than he’d originally assumed, and explained how it worked. There were kettles involved. And old-fashioned wooden washtubs. I considered the three flights up to the attic.

“Maybe later,” I said. “Before I start work. I think I’ll do some shopping first.”

It was still early in the morning; in the market I’d passed through yesterday, merchants set up their awnings and laid out their wares. A bakery was already hard at work, wafting delicious smells out whenever a customer opened the door. I passed a blacksmith where an orc man hammered some iron into a horseshoe at a blazing forge, a grocery where a human woman set out cabbages and parsnips in neat displays, and house after house decorated with flower boxes in the windows.

I thought about my neighborhood, my office, my Thursday schedule. Which I would miss, now. Forever. My chest tightened with sadness, and I swallowed hard. All my adult life, I’d striven to balance my career and my social life and my personal interests, and all of them were gone. Being a therapist was my life’s work, the thing that felt the most like making a difference in the world, and all of a sudden it felt as though I’d hardly gotten started.

Someday, could I work here as a therapist? Would the people in this world even know what it meant? Could I have a little office in one of these buildings and advise elves and orcs and beastfolk on their emotional issues?

I remembered Hazel’s demon, mirrored and malevolent. I remembered the power that had risen in me to create the space for Hazel to combat it. How common were those demons in this world? Even if they were rare, they seemed to add to people’s suffering, and I wouldn’t stand for that.

But what could I do about it?

I kept walking, passing a church to a god I didn't recognize, a stable with horses and carriages to rent, a doctor's office, an alchemist's shop with a window display of bottles in every hue. It really wasn't that small of a town; I never passed down the same street twice in my wandering.

Finally, I found a tailor's shop. The tailor was an elderly elven man, with a young male orc apprentice who dwarfed him at the counter. I repeated my "new in town" story, and said I'd like a set of clothes or two — nothing fancy. The tailor looked me up and down, rubbing his chin, and asked a few questions about the sort of work I did and my budget.

I said I wanted to keep the style simple, covetously eyeing the dresses on the mannequins near the window — two layered and beaded masterpieces in emerald green and wine-red. I had absolutely nowhere to wear such a thing. Sighing, I focused on the present.

At first, I kept my order practical. Underwear and socks. I had my measurements taken and ordered some work pants and a button-up shirt that would suit the days I had to clean the restaurant. I got a couple of ribbons to tie my hair up. I asked the tailor for some recommendations for shoemakers in town. Finally, I couldn't hold back anymore and went for the rack of sample dresses.

The tailor's shop had a fitting room in the back with three tall oval mirrors arranged facing one another. I absconded with an armful of dresses and closed the door behind me. The sundress got shucked off my head and left in a pile on the floor. The cream-colored fabric of the first sample dress felt a little rough against my skin in comparison. Flashing back to the time I'd let my friend Marius drag me to the renaissance faire, I wiggled the bodice down over my head and shoulders and got it seated around my torso. A long, fiddly bit of adjusting the laces followed. It snugly cinched the dress around my body. I took a deep breath and looked up into the mirrors.

I mean.

That wasn't me. A hand lifted to brush back my hair, and it wasn't my hand and it wasn't my hair. And that still felt wrong, on some level. But.

This body lacked basically everything I'd once had in the chest department, but the bodice did the very best it could. I turned to admire — lament — well, to inspect my slimmer hips and... A swish of the knee-length skirt confirmed it. All right, it was pretty excellent from this angle too.

Facing front, I smoothed the bodice down over my sides. I'd never been this willowy type. Eventually I'd come to terms with that, after wasting way too much time in my youth feeling inadequate. I knew how to dress my real body, and enjoyed doing so. But... it might be fun to learn how to dress this one, too.

Even in a neutral color with dashed lines and measurements inked into the fabric, the dress was flattering, and more comfortable than I might have guessed at first. I had to order one. At least one. — Settle, Cat — Lavender. Just one for now. Save up for whatever your new future holds.

First, I flounced around the fitting room for a bit, until the tailor called through the door if I needed assistance. Blushing violently, I hurried to unlace the bodice and return the first dress to its hanger.

I tried the other two I'd grabbed with a little more speed. The first was too much like the sundress I'd landed in — fine, but I already had one. The third was similar to the first, with longer sleeves and a calf-length skirt. I had my decision after all.

Most of the clothes were custom-made, so I would have to wait for them. The tailor took a few more measurements and jotted down notes about what I preferred. He had strong opinions about what colors would suit my hair and skin, however, so I conceded to those. In the meantime, his apprentice packed up what could be gathered ready-made from the shop: the underthings and socks, the shirt, and the hair ribbons. Considering other outfit options, I asked whether they carried any ready-made skirts, and found one in a muted purple-gray color that fit fine.

Hugging my paper- and twine-wrapped bundle, I found the shoemaker's shop the tailor had recommended. Here, at least, there were enough ready-made options in stock to suit what I needed. I wasn't looking for anything elaborate here either; I didn't need the tall heeled riding boots with tooled designs in the leather, no matter how pretty they were. I got some simple slippers and some sturdier shoes that would go with the pants and shirt. The shoes and my order at the tailor's had nearly wiped out my cash reserves, so I turned back toward the Two Claws.

Along the way, I passed through the market again. It was a bit after noon, and the stalls were crowded with shoppers. I waited for a rider on a gray horse to pass before crossing to the center of the square.

A voice rose in a shout somewhere off to my right. "*I said, get out of my way!*"

I turned instinctively. A flash of red tickled the corner of my sight. Near one of the stalls, two human merchants pulling goods in hand carts had nearly collided. One cart sat askew on the road, one wheel up on the curb; its owner sat stunned next to it. The other merchant stood menacingly over the first, hands drawn up into fists. Around his hunched shoulders, a hulking shape shimmered in the air.

The pressure in my chest began to build. Not in front of all of these people! I hurriedly set down my packages and took a step toward the arguing merchants. “Sir? Maybe you ought to—”

“WHAT?” The standing merchant whirled toward me. My vision clouded, and I clutched my chest, desperately hoping to contain the power welling up inside it.

Too late. I couldn’t hold it. It burst forth, bubbling up into a shimmering dome. The carts and the other merchant were displaced like a funhouse mirror, further away than they should have been. The noises of the market cut out, replaced by a roar of wind. The cobblestoned street under us was now parched earth.

The demon manifested, looming over the merchant’s head: a massive creature of cracked rock and oozing lava and flame. Its face was a jumbled pile of rocks, and I couldn’t see any eyes at all, just a jagged gash of a mouth. I blinked. Did they all look different, then? Was this a clue to the sufferer’s condition, or was it unrelated?

“Who are you?” the merchant growled.

“I’m a — a therapist,” I said. “My name is Lavender. I can help you learn to control the demon. If you would like help. If you don’t, I’ll be on my way.”

The man tensed his shoulders, and the demon gouted flame from its glowing seams. But then he looked at the ground, and at the other merchant he’d threatened. He took the cap off his head.

I took another step forward. “Everything inside the magic circle is secret. It’s — it’s a sacred vow, for the person who wields this power.” And it was. It was a silly way of putting it, but it absolutely was. I didn’t have consent forms here to sign. Instead I raised my hand as if to a mirror. “Do you agree to talk with me?”

The demon rumbled like a distant earthquake and puffed up, swelling as though fueled by deeper fires inside it. The merchant scowled at my offered hand. I waited. No pressure. I had to trust that if he said no, the magic would disperse. It had to, if it were truly a manifestation of my own abilities.

“How do you control it?” the man muttered.

“It depends on where it came from,” I said, realizing as I did so that there might be a literal angle to that statement now as well. I meant that it depended on the source of the emotional state that drew it, not whatever hell dimension spawned the demons. But I also nodded at my hand meaningfully. “You don’t have to tell me your name, sir. But you do have to agree to speak to me.”

“Fine,” he growled, and met my hand with his. A flash of light washed out from the point of contact, and the swirling dome over us solidified into a soft blue energy field, blocking out the view of the marketplace. The wind calmed and the ground smoothed over, becoming bare soil. Ready to grow.

I sat down, glad my new body’s joints were happier with this position than my old one’s would have been. The merchant remained standing, arms folded. Behind him, the lava demon cast orange shadows over his shoulders.

“How long has this demon followed you?”

He scratched his head. “I had to have been fourteen, fifteen. Just starting to work on my own.”

“What was it like?”

“Fine at first. Made me feel like I was righteous.” He paused, looking off into the distance. “Powerful, you know? Which is a great feeling, ‘specially at that age. Because you’re trying so hard to grow up.”

“Oh, definitely. Kids get up to so much trouble, trying to grow up as fast as they can. Do you have any of your own?”

At this, his face fell, and after a frustrated moment of trying to find words, sat down on the ground across from me. His hands hung down between his knees. The demon hovered over him, gloating.

“I do. Three and five.” He almost glanced behind him. A rivulet of white-hot molten rock dripped from the lava demon and dematerialized before it reached the man’s neck.

“It scares the kids,” the merchant said, his voice hitching. “It comes out, you know, sometimes, and it scares them, and that only makes it worse.”

The lava demon flared bright. So the children could see it. Could everyone see these demons? Perhaps so. But seeing a problem isn’t the same as knowing what to do about it. That was as true here as anywhere I’d ever been.

“Your children can be a reason to fight it,” I said. “I’m sure it will be best if they have less exposure to such things. But more importantly, they can have a father without this presence taking a toll on him.”

His hands curled back into fists. Turning around and half-rising, he yelled at the demon, “Curse you, ruining their lives too!” It only grew at the accusation, flaring up with goutts of flame.

I took a deep breath. “Sir. From what I’ve learned about demons—” let’s skip the fact that it was two days ago — “they don’t create the, let’s say, the situation. They’re drawn to what’s already there, and add to it.”

“You’re blaming *me*?” He wheeled around, and the demon loomed beyond his head, leaning toward me.

Sure, the lava dripping part was new. But I’d had chairs thrown at me, curses hurled in my face, even spit at once or twice. This wasn’t even my tenth rodeo. “I don’t think in terms of blame,” I said calmly. “Just actions, and consequences, and responsibility. But because of that, I believe you can control it. With practice. And maybe even drive it away someday.”

Predictably, the demon reacted by roaring and hissing steam out of the cracks in its stone hide. But the man sat back down and listened.

And we started to talk.

In the strange, diffuse light under the magic bubble, I couldn’t tell how much time passed. Enough to talk about how it felt to lose control of his anger, about how he’d learned to deal with it by yelling, how that never really helped for long. Enough time to try out some breathing exercises, to talk about other ways of expressing feelings, to consider how a bad moment might be allowed to pass by instead of fueling itself and growing.

It was not enough time, it turned out, to drive off his demon. It remained hovering behind him, glowing malevolently. But I could swear it had shrunk.

It’ll be back, Hazel had said. But no difficult problem was fixed all at once. That didn’t make the attempt futile.

When the merchant had run out of things to say, the ground was carpeted in grass. I shifted to sit on my heels and bowed my head. “Thank you for your time today. I know you can keep up the fight on your own, but if you ever want to talk with me, I work at the Two Claws Inn. Okay?”

The merchant nodded. “Okay.”

I got up, he got up, I felt the magic dome dissolve, and the voices and hoofbeats and footsteps of the market flooded back around us. The demon-ridden merchant offered a hand up to the merchant still sitting on the ground by his cart.

“Sorry, Stefan,” he said gruffly. “Wasn’t your fault.”

I stooped to retrieve my package. Around us, I saw people whispering to one another. One mimed a dome with their hands as they did. Gripping my shopping haul against my chest, I made a quick exit between the stalls and into the surrounding streets.

It seemed little time had passed, but my magic had been witnessed all the same. The merchant could say what he liked about our meeting, or keep it a secret if he wanted to. I’d keep quiet and see what happened.

Back at the Two Claws, I finally requested that hot bathwater from Rene, and lugged a washtub and two steaming kettles up to the attic room. It wasn’t exactly a day at the spa, but it helped me unwind after this afternoon’s events. Afterward, I washed the white sundress and all the underthings that the afterlife had gifted me, and draped them over some nearby crates to dry. I got dressed in the dusty-purple skirt, the off-white shirt, and the flats I’d bought, and pulled my still-damp hair up in a high ponytail. Then I ran down the stairs to start my shift.

It was a busy night. Both Gustav, freshly awoken, and Rene were on the job; Rene helped me wait tables while Gustav minded the bar. Yahzghash kept the culinary excellence flowing out of the kitchen. I had pockets to slip my tips into — maybe this was heaven after all.

But I began to overhear some gossip.

I swear I saw a flash of light in the marketplace, and then that jerk Karl stopped his bellowing for once.

Really? Think she’s a mind-mage?

Oh no, she seems so sweet. Doesn’t Karl have a demon, could she be a demon slayer?

Oh maybe, maybe...

It seemed everyone knew about demons. I filed that tidbit away while I cleared a table. But not everyone could deal with them. Maybe if I focused on that aspect, I could explain what my work meant. Though I didn’t want to only deal with demons. A nice long conversation about boundaries or anxiety management, seated on a couch in an office, would almost seem relaxing right now.

Patrons with less tact asked me about the incident, eyes hungry for intel. I smiled and brushed off the questions and refilled more drinks. Eventually Rene retired to bed, leaving me to work the floor. That gave me more opportunities to escape awkward conversations, slipping from table to table as needed.

But at last the night ended, and I flopped down on a barstool once again. Gustav poured a glass of cider and pushed it toward me on the bar.

“Well?”

I was already halfway through a sip. Lowering the glass, I saw the weighted look the bear innkeeper gave me. He wasn’t asking how my night went.

I glanced toward the door to the kitchen. Nothing against Yahzghash; I didn’t know her all that well yet. I didn’t really know Gustav all that well either, but I was ready to extend some trust.

“Okay,” I said. “I don’t know what you heard, but yes, there was an... incident in the marketplace today.”

He tapped a claw on the bar, waiting.

“All right, so it turns out I’m a Visitor. I guess. The morning before I came here, I woke up in the forest, and the day before that, I was another person with another life in another world. I’m a lot older than I look. Thirty-five.” Would that sound young or old to a bear? How long did bears live? I would have to find a book, in a library, to find out. Or ask an extremely rude question. “Anyway, I don’t want any trouble, I promise. I really do just want a steady job and to figure things out.”

“Visitors,” Gustav grumbled. I heard more than a little *Here we go again* in his tone. “It sounds like you have some powers, then. I heard a great deal about some demons.”

“Yes. I can make this kind of...” I held my hands out, miming an expanding bubble. “Magic field, where people can fight their demons. And I can guide them on how to do it. It’s... sort of what I did in my old life.”

“Huh,” he said. It sat somewhere in the huge space between *That’s impossible* and *Duh, everyone can do that*.

“And,” I went on, “if people have problems but not *demons*, yet, I can help with that too. Though that’s more just with talking and all my training. Not magic.”

“Hmm. So maybe you can stop them from attracting demons in the first place,” Gustav mused.

“I might, I suppose.” If I could help people fight whatever harmed them, that’s what I loved to do. Demons or not.

“*Hub,*” Gustav said, which was somewhere between *I won’t tell another living soul* and *This needs to be yelled from every street corner.*

I could see he needed time to ponder this, so I slipped off the stool and headed for the kitchen to fill up on Yahzghash’s cooking and finish the glass of cider.

That night, by lantern light in my little attic space, I sat in the middle of the room and breathed deeply and tried to summon the magic on my own. It didn’t come, and then it did but it fizzled out right away, and then it engulfed the inn, popped out of existence, and left me with a headache. So I blew out the lantern and crawled into bed. I just had to keep practicing.