

## CHAPTER 1

Another question mark bloomed on Celia's forearm, bigger and bolder than the others. The ink unfurled in an oily black stretched-out tentacle, wrist to elbow, the dot on the bottom a furious splatter. An hour ago Celia had still tried to hide Anya's messages by tugging her shirtsleeve down. An hour ago she'd still cared that she was in a busy shisha lounge, surrounded by people who might notice the strangeness of Divine tattoos appearing, then vanishing, on her skin.

But lovely absinthe made cares like that disappear.

Celia pressed her finger to the angry splotch on the bottom. *I'd tell you where I am, Anny, if only I knew!* Her gaze drifted over the haphazard collection of empty glasses on the table in front of her. "Huzzah, absinthe."

The rest of the room was alive with clusters of pretty people doing flirty things: enjoying their drinks and smoke, unwinding after a long day of doing whatever it was normal people did all day. Shimmering tenors, as individual as fingerprints and much more visible, shone around each body. Tenors were usually the boldest thing about a person's look, but there in the lounge their glint and vibrancy blended in the fog of shisha smoke that swirled from the colorful hookahs. Glasses clinked, laughter swelled, and everything fluttered: colorful sleeves, loose pants, long hair, light from a hundred candles, jingly jewelry hanging from ears and wrists and necks.

With her black everything— short hair, suspenders, tie, top hat, attitude— Celia stuck out like a monochrome stain amid all the color and life. Judging by the lounge owner's fluency in scowls, they'd finally noticed.

Not bothering to right her awkward sprawl, Celia smiled as they approached.

Or maybe it wasn't a smile, but a frown.

Whichever way was up. Whichever way was down.

"Time to move on," they said, their voice a deep baritone.

No, time to take a hostage. Pulling the hookah to the floor, Celia clamped the large bowl between her legs and hugged tight around its neck. They wouldn't muscle her out with so much expensive blown glass at risk. "A few more blasts, good soul," she said, jiggling the mouthpiece in her hand and then putting it to her lips.

The smoke trapped in the bowl tasted like all the people who'd touched the pipe that day, swirling together. *Dia*, how long had she been sitting there, doing nothing but staring?

The owner raised their caterpillar eyebrows as Celia struggled to hold in a violent cough. "You've had the green fairy; you've had some shisha. Now out you go, Lalita."

A flush crept up Celia's neck. *Fragile bird, my nimble little ass.*

A few people had turned their attention toward the standoff, and as Celia hugged her hookah tighter, the lounge owner's lips formed a grim line. "Here, hire a gondola and get home."

As they dropped her own krops back on the table— each copper coin etched with the creepy four-faced image of the Divine— the edge of a black tattoo peeked out from under their sleeve. Both reminders of "home," the place no amount of absinthe could erase. Their big hands found her armpits. They lifted her up, an arm wrapped around her waist, and eased her out of the lounge.

On the wet street, mist replaced pink smoke, darkness replaced candlelight, gray streets replaced warmth and color. Someone shouted nonsense or poetry from a nearby balcony, their voice echoing in the night. As they rambled about a love gone wrong, (or perhaps their cat was missing?), Celia considered transforming the lament into a duet. *Woe to the inklings who cannot escape! Mumble, mumble, rhymes with escape . . .*

Another voice interrupted. "Cece!"

Anya. That same angry friend who'd messaged Celia all night. A twinge of guilt flared to life, and Celia stifled the urge to dart back into the lounge.

As she strode toward Celia and the owner of the lounge, Anya's black hair lapped at her shoulders in tidy waves, her midnight-blue top hat perched perfectly straight. A buttoned-up trench coat flared out behind her thighs, and her umbrella doubled as a walking stick, tapping a rhythm into the cobblestones. Anya looked perfectly composed. Then, and always.

Long and low, Anya muttered "*Dia . . .*" under her breath as she approached. The lounge owner startled at the curse, dropped Celia's arm, and took a step back, reacting as if Celia was the devil Anya had just named. Their look of shock was quickly replaced by one of anger and *youth these days . . . no respect*. They turned and stalked back into their bar, violently brushing the stain of blasphemers off their coats as they went. If Celia's loitering hadn't banned her from coming back, Anya's curse just had.

Stifling a smirk, Celia bowed. "My love, my love, you've found me. The smoke was pink tonight. The shisha was happy." She swore the smoke changed color depending on the shisha's mood, logic be damned.

Anya steered her away, but they made it only around the first corner before Celia grabbed the nearest wall and painted her boots with a swirl of green fairy absinthe. *Huh, looks exactly the same coming up as going down*. She knocked her feet against the brick wall and wondered if someone would lick it later, grateful for a free drink.

Anya rubbed Celia's back, her words tight despite the calming gesture. "You're a disgusting creature, Celia Sand."

That wasn't news. Groaning, she pushed away from the wall and prepared herself for the lecture.

The air around Anya flickered in an aura of red hues. Everyone projected a tenor— an oscillating personal spectrum of gender in myriad colors. Tenors showed something infinite about a person and gave it over to concrete, manageable language: He, They, She, or No Thanks to Any of That. There were as many tenors as people in the world, and Anya’s tenor burned so familiar that Celia would have recognized it in a crowd of thousands. She knew Anya better than she knew herself, which meant that even before meeting Anya’s gaze, Celia knew she’d find a withering stare.

“You’re almost at the docks,” Anya said, grinding her teeth so the sound crunched its way up Celia’s spine.

Celia blinked in surprise— and a fair bit of pride— that she’d made it so far from the temple without remembering any of it. That explained the stronger than usual stench of fish.

“I know you got my messages,” Anya said. “Why did you ignore them?”

“I di...

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