

The Bookstore

There was a small bookstore, far down the road from the main shopping district, nestled in between non-descript storefronts, with unwashed windows that only let little light into the space beyond. Most people who passed it barely took any notice. Those that did were often smart enough not to enter. Then there were the few, the ones for whom the store was there in the first place. They, often shrewd characters, would come into the store, make vague inquiries to which the store clerk would respond in kind.

That's what the owner had told Corey at least.

On their first day at work it quickly became apparent that the owner hadn't worked in the store for decades. It was true, the windows were dirty, but it added charm to the place, the light flooding in through the large front window became warm and made the room seem cozy. Customers came into the store all the time, not everyone bought something but it was never truly deserted. The clientele was varied, from people who came with purpose, to window-shoppers, to people who felt fated to enter the store. There were no wizards in pointy hats, or strange men in trench coats, not even a forest witch as Corey had hoped.

They appeared utterly ordinary.

So did most of the books for that matter.

Sure there was a suspiciously large selection of medicine and nature books, as well as mythology and spirituality, but all in all, fairly normal. Except for a few books that Corey took extra good care of, the real deal.

The ones that could not be tamed. No matter how often she lectured them.

They ignored the moving shadow in the corner of their eye most days.



Corey was sitting behind the counter, leafing through *So You Got Yourself A Ghoul — Now What?*, when the woman came in. Corey looked up, still processing reading the words ‘*Do not give it a name, it will get attached to you, if you already gave it a name, well, you can't just run now. I hope you are ready to be a parent*’, and made direct eye contact with the beady eyes on a very naked chest of an eight foot tall demon prince. Corey knew their demons, so they were sure that this one was, in fact, a prince. Only a prince could have that many eyes. They could count six just on his chest. It was only slightly off-putting, honestly. Corey looked over to the woman that stood slightly in front of the demon prince, currently beaming at them.

“You can see him then.” It wasn't truly a question.

Corey nodded anyway.

“Good, that’ll make things easier.” The woman took out a familiar looking book Corey was sure they hadn’t sold in quite some time. “I bought it last night,” the nightshift then, “tried out this ritual right away and got this one showing up at my apartment.”

She jabbed a finger in the prince’s direction. The demon in question looked vaguely annoyed. An interesting expression on such an inhumanly beautiful face.

“You see,” the woman continued, “this is a horny demon—”

“Incubus.” The demon frowned now.

“—and I’m very asexual—”

That was unfortunate. But still, the eye candy—

“—and very gay. I literally have no use for him.”

The demon was glowering.

“I’m sorry but we have a no returns policy for things that haven’t been directly purchased,” Corey said. Though, really, they could definitely do with a hot demon prince, if duty called for it.

“No, no,” the woman said, “I wouldn’t have thought so. I need something to get him back into the hot tub he calls home without making and fulfilling a deal.”

“It would be much easier if we just—”

The demon’s voice was smooth and melodic but the woman interrupted him as if she wasn’t at all affected by it. “You’re doing absolutely nothing for me. In fact, less than nothing. Your eye-things freak me the hell out.”

The demon huffed, and Corey had never seen a demon be that perpetual before. It was kind of eye-opening. Pun intended.

“Give me a moment,” Corey said, “this is only a summoning book. I can get you a banishing one.”

“Thanks,” the woman called as Corey hunted for the book they had in mind. “Can I exchange them? I don’t think I’ll need the summoning book after all. Hot-and-Bothered over here told me that no, a succubus can’t make non-sexual deals either. Quite disappointing I have to say.”

Corey did not think it wise nicknaming a prince of hell, but hey, what did they know, they’d never summoned one of their own before.

“That’s possible, sure.”

It would also return the book into their possession quicker than if the book had to make its way back on its own.

When they were left alone at the front of the store again, they became aware of a presence once more. They could definitely see the shadow now. Corey actually hadn't read a lot on Shadow People, guess that was on their to-do list now. The shadow became cocky and darted forward, almost touching them but Corey turned in just the right moment, avoiding it.

The shadow sulked. They ignored its antics and went back to their book.



Corey just turned the sign from 'closed' to 'open' when a tiny girl with bright blue hair came into the store. In the backroom an entire palette of newly released gardening books was waiting for them, the coffee maker was making noises it really shouldn't be making which meant they'd need to take care of that if they wanted to stay awake today, and the newly arrived books, one made its way here from Nairobi, were impatiently awaiting new customers to dupe.

The tiny girl, she must've been in her late twenties but she was smaller than Corey's ten-year-old sister, wasn't what grabbed Corey's attention. No that honor belonged to the six foot tall hell hound on a thin pink leash.

"Hi," the girl said, coming toward Corey who'd make their way behind the counter. "Do you have any dog training books? Like Caesar Milan but for hell hounds?"

Corey was too stunned for a moment to reply. The massive hound tilted its head at her, a move almost identically copied by its... human? Owner? Can one own a hell hound? Corey would've denied such a thing but then they also wouldn't have thought hell hounds were keen on wearing leashes but this one seemed to have no problem whatsoever with it.

"Don't worry," the girl added after a moment, misinterpreting Corey's silence, "most people will see a Corgi."

"Right," Corey said slowly, "there are some training books for other species. I'd assume small dragons are probably the closest you'll find here, I'm sorry."

"No, no, that's fine," the girl assured them. "You have books about general demonology as well, right?"

Corey nodded, always remain professional their colleague had once told them, "Over there, to the left."

"That's great, thanks!" The girl turned to the hound, "C'mon, Emma, we'll go look around."

The hell hound trotted after the energetic girl without hesitation.

Corey should really stop being surprised by these things.

The shadow hummed to get Corey's attention.

Apparently they were playing tag now. At least Corey was pretty sure that was what the shadow thought. They'd read up on the beings: playful at first, deadly the longer they were around. Energy draining. Possession. The book told Corey to call a professional, but really, who did they think Corey was? They were a bookstore clerk; they couldn't afford a freaking professional.



Everyone always said the angels were the real problem. But no, Corey had found that angels were elusive, they almost never made contact with humans, no matter how much said humans wanted it. The real culprits, the bad ones, were neither demons nor angels, but vampires. Fucking vampires.

They loved humans, not just in order to feed but also because humans loved them. Humans had some messed up notions of vampires, fostered by the media: that they were just like humans but with a blood kink and a philosophical mind from decades of experience.

Those assumptions were incorrect. Vampires were a fucking hassle. More dangerous than demons and not at all willing to make compromises in order to get what they want.

In short, they were the assholes of the preternatural world.

When Corey came into work they did not sign up to dealing with this mess.

Early that day a guy bought a book on vampires. Not some badly written work of fiction, not even a highly crafted novel a little too close to the truth, no, a real one.

"I thought I'd hidden it better this time," they muttered as they rung up the customer.

The guy scrunched his eyebrows together, already looking pissed off for some reason. "Hah? What are you talking about? It was right on that table. A toddler could've picked it up."

Corey glared at the book, the book of course acted all innocent now that it had gotten what it wanted.

"Just...be careful please."

The guy snorted, "Sure, sure."

At that moment Corey knew it was going to be a long day.

They were shelving new arrivals when the guy came in a second time, four hours later, with a very obvious band-aid on his neck, a dazed look in his eyes, and a very pretty witch who let him lean on her.

Corey sighed, already resigned to spend the rest of the day on this issue, and greeted them.

"What can I do for you?" they asked with as much enthusiasm as they could muster, which wasn't much to be honest.

“Hi! You sold this idiot a book about vampires earlier,” the pretty witch said. “I’m Cleo and the idiot is Worick.” He glared at them, much like before. “I’m taking a gander here and say you’re aware that this stuff is real,” Corey gave her an unimpressed look to which the girl, Cleo, smiled. “Well, I’m currently low on some ingredients. Do you, by chance, have anything on hand?”

“Depends on what you need.” They had emergency rations in the back, in the first-aid kit, when one of the books bit a clerk, or zapped them. Also paper cuts were a bitch to deal with.

“I’m mixing something disinfecting, the poison’s already out,” Worick grimaced at that, leaning heavily against one of the shelves, “so I’d be grateful if you had some eucalyptus and neem leaves. My usual supplier isn’t available on such short notice.”

Corey hummed, “Should have some of that lying around, I’ll go look. Give me a moment.”

“Take your time,” Cleo said brightly. She turned to her friend, “Why did you buy that book in the first place?”

Corey tuned out the reply; they didn’t need to know what motivated their customers to do the things they did. Cleo thanked them when they handed over the ingredients, insisted on paying for them as well.

“We already have the vampire in the trunk,” she said. “Catching these toothy bitches is always a hassle.”

“Keeping them locked up isn’t easy either,” Corey said. “Are you sure they’re secure? I really don’t need one loose so close to the store.”

“I’m pretty good at this whole magic thing, if I do say so myself,” Cleo smiled.

“What’s your plan for dealing with Hannibal Lector-lite?”

“If I say: ‘stab him until he willingly gives Worick his blood’, will you judge me a lot?”

Corey shrugged, “No. A bit, though, I’m not gonna lie. There are better ways.”

“I’m just out of dead man’s blood. So this is really my only idea. Hope he dislikes getting stabbed even if he doesn’t bleed, it has to be uncomfortable, right?” She looked over at Worick who scowled.

“I’d say so,” he muttered. “Sure didn’t feel great getting bitten.”

“Should’ve thought about this before you went and tried to make a vampire help you with your history thesis. You nerd.”

Corey was just able to keep from snorting at that.

They said, “I have a friend who’s dead, so I could just ask her if she’s willing to help. Might go quicker.”

Cleo looked delighted, “You would? We’d be eternally grateful!” She paused, considered, “Well, not *eternally*, if everything goes as planned. But still very.”

Worick groaned and rubbed his eyes, he still looked a bit lightheaded.

Corey hummed, “I’ll give her a call. It’d make me feel better if you stayed by the trunk until she gets here, though. If that’s alright.”

“Right, don’t wanna have bad publicity for a store with real magical items,” Worick muttered but wandered outside regardless.

“You know,” Cleo said, already turned toward the door, “the shadow started glowering. That’s not a good sign.”

Corey sighed, “It’s fine. I’ve just been ignoring it since this morning so it’s pissed at me. We have a deal though.”

“You made a deal with a shadow?” she asked wide-eyed.

“Yeah, no draining energy until I’ve eaten, and no possessing me if that means I’ll be exhausted the next day.”

Cleo stared at them for a long moment, “You know... I could get rid of it for you.”

“I already named it, so there’s that.”

“You named it?”

Corey nodded, “I had help from an acquaintance. Its name is Ray.”

“Ray the shadow.”

“Yep.”

“Not to interrupt this riveting conversation, but I feel like I’m about to pass out,” Worick called from outside.

“And whose fault is that?” Cleo didn’t even turn around to look at him.

“The vampire’s who tried to have me for lunch.”

“Liar.”

Corey listened to their bickering as Cleo ambled away. They got their phone out and called their friend, she was dead but not really, yet still dead enough for her blood to qualify, before sighing. This didn’t turn out too bad.

They turned to Ray, “Want to take over while we start inventory?”

The shadow looked unimpressed back at them but Corey’s vision slowly faded to black nonetheless.



The End