

Cold Hands, Colder Heart

*A Bonus Story for
Our Frail Unholy Light*

Holly

“So I leaned into your kiss, and as you drank my life down, I never noticed how cold your hands were around my heart”

**—Excerpt of the chorus of “Cold Hands, Colder Heart”
by Death of a Beloved**

My heart pounded in time to the drums. Bodies pressed close on all sides, pushing me ever closer to the edges of the faerie circle in the middle of the dance floor.

If my friend wasn't currently whirling around at dizzying speeds within, I would have fought for a spot a bit further away in the crowd. I caught a glimpse of Raquel's crimson braids in the lights.

I should have joined her... The thought crossed my mind a second before a green-skinned faerie spun her deeper into the circle. Raquel caught my gaze as she whirled past on the next circle and gave me a thumbs up. She was still having fun.

Good. I would just camp here with our drinks until she was ready to get pulled out. It was probably for the best that I didn't jump in the ring. Raquel had dragged me to the show as a distraction from my recent breakup with my boyfriend of four years. I didn't need a distraction. *I* had broken things off, and it was for the best. If he didn't want to follow me to the east coast, fine. We weren't meant for each other. I could couch surf at Raquel's for a few weeks until the move and just, not think about him.

The next song started; the lead singer switched from screaming to a crooning wail. He clutched the mic stand to himself like a lover, his voice carrying the intimacy of pillow talk. The music wound its way through my mind, the magic in each note finding a home in my head, then my heart. I let it move me. I didn't need to be in the faerie pit to let loose; his voice was enough.

Someone crashed into me.

I went sprawling. There were curses as the wine splashed on the people near me. I groaned on the hard wood floor.

The woman on top of me pushed herself up. I was immediately struck dumb by her. She had a classically beautiful face, soft like a renaissance painting, framed by pitch black hair. Eyeliner in the shape of glittering spiderwebs framed light eyes that seemed to steal the colors of the stage lights.

Before I could catch my thoughts, her lips were on mine, sweet like bruised fruit and faerie wine. The way she moved her lips was equally intoxicating. I found my thoughts blissfully scrambled once again.

The kiss didn't last nearly long enough before we were pulled to our feet by the others around us. I waved off the health checks from concerned strangers. At least pit rules stayed consistent across music scenes.

The woman seemed to come back to herself, tried to yell something over the music. I gestured that I couldn't understand her. She took my hand and pulled me away from the pit. I tried to protest, but just as I couldn't hear her, she seemed to not hear me, and there was simply no fighting her grip. I hoped Raquel wouldn't tire until I could find my way back and that she wouldn't hold it against me too much.

"Shit, I did more damage to you than I thought," she said when she stopped us in the entrance to the bathrooms. The music, while still loud, was slightly less overwhelming.

"What do you—?" I trailed off when I saw the mess of my once white blouse. It was sticky and red with spilled wine. Oh salt it, I'd liked this top...

"Let's see if we can clean you up." She was already pulling me into the bathroom.

"I think the shirt is done for..."

The inside of the bathroom was unsurprisingly pretty empty. With the band outside really winding up into the middle of their set, most people were on the dance floor. It was a lot easier to hear in here, too.

"You haven't seen the kind of magic I can work with stains" the woman said with a dazzling smile. She ushered me to a stall. "Toss the shirt over the top. I'll have it fixed in no time, promise."

Despite plenty of warnings built from years of watching way too many '90s teen movies, I sighed and complied, tossing my stained blouse over the top of the stall. I wrapped my arms around myself to fight the chill and kept an eye on her through the gap between the door and the wall. At least if she tried to bolt with it, I could give chase.

She did not try to run. Instead, she busied herself at one of the old sinks, running the cotton under the cold tap. The only time this venue had anything close to hot water was in the dead of summer.

"What's your name?" she called.

"Uh, Holly?" I answered.

"Do you not know your own name?" Her voice was teasing.

"No, just surprised by the question, I guess. What's yours?" I rubbed my hands along my arms. Oh hells, when she handed the shirt back it was going to be cold and soaked. Why did I think this was a good idea? How was *she* sober enough to be trusted with stain removal? Sober people don't just kiss random strangers they fell on. I was nowhere near drunk enough to have gone along with this.

“Aileen,” she answered and gave the blouse a rough shake. I couldn’t tell fully from my vantage point but it didn’t look stained anymore. She muttered a few words in a lyrical language I didn’t know and the air picked up in the bathroom, a small tornado swirling around her briefly before dying just as quickly.

Wait, was she a witch? I hadn’t felt the telltale buzz of another witch when our hands had touched. That didn’t mean she wasn’t something else, some kind of fae maybe?

“There it is, good as new.” She tapped twice on the door and flipped the blouse over the top of the stall. I took it with an embarrassed thanks, slipped it on before exiting the cramped stall. It was good as new. Better than new even. How in the—?

“I swiped a few charms off my witch friends,” she said, somehow reading my thoughts. “They work on everything from hair dye to all shades of wine.”

“T-Thank you,” I stuttered, thoughts scrambled once more at the sight of her. In the soft incandescent light, her eyes were the grey of a winter morning. Her all black clothes hugged her hourglass figure. I couldn’t tell whether that was her natural shape or just the corset she wore. Regardless, I was drawn to her. She was a flame and I a hapless moth.

“It’s the least I could do.” She waved it off. “Especially after you were so kind as to break my fall.”

A choked laugh escaped my throat before I could stop it. “I’m sure one of the guys next to me would have been a better safety net.”

She shook her head. Rich copper strands of hair fell from the twist, curled around her neck. Coupled with the top layer of black, it gave her a distinctly vampy look. Or, maybe I was just confusing goth with vampire. No reason to get hung up on subcultures I didn’t belong to. Vampires were extinct outside of fiction, leaving only costumed pretenders behind.

“Trust me, I would much rather have landed on a pretty witch who knows how to use her tongue than some muscle-headed idiot.” Her lips curled into a catlike smile as her eyes made a lazy trail over my body.

Heat flooded my neck, my face, my ears. What was I supposed to say to something like that?

“So, what are you doing after this?” She asked, leaning back against the sink. Her curvy legs seemed to go on for days. My mouth went dry.

“I, um, I mean, my friend and I were going to grab a bite somewhere...” Midnight pancakes were a holdover from our college days and there was a 24 hour diner not too far from here. Neither of us were even close to drunk enough for sober-up pizza.

“Sounds fun,” she bent forward, her aura pulling me in. “Count me in.”

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Raquel wasn't enthused to have a third with us at the diner but didn't protest too much. When I explained how Aileen and I met, she'd given a defeated "Maybe a temporary fling will be good for you."

I didn't have a response to that. I wasn't a fling kind of girl. Was I? Yeah, I hadn't dated much before college, but that was more due to growing up in a small town as the granddaughter of the town witch. With Gran's reputation being close to that of Granny Boswell in our town, it wasn't surprising that I hadn't had too many dates.

College hadn't changed much. Freshman year was a blur of bad first dates but nothing more. Sophomore year I'd managed to go out with a girl for a few months before we broke up and it became the entire dorm floor's problem. I met Alexander at the end of Junior year and we'd been steady until... well, until now...

So, squished in a booth next to Raquel across from this gorgeous, mysterious woman, I wasn't sure what to do. Were meals with flings acceptable? Did this make it not a fling? Did it not count as a meal if all she had was a mug of black coffee?

"Aileen, was it?" Raquel asked, dark eyes narrowing. She didn't even try to hide her suspicion. "What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a hairdresser," Aileen said, twirling a lock of copper hair around her finger. Watching her hand, I noticed the nails on her middle and ring fingers were blunted, while the rest were lacquered claws. "Well, salon owner technically, but that's more recent. I'm still paying off student loans so it took a while to get the approval from the banks."

"What did you study?" I asked after swallowing around my dry throat.

"Philosophy," she said with a wry smirk. "Realized halfway through my Bachelor's that it was a waste and dropped out to go to cosmetology school instead. But Uncle Sam still wants his money, with interest." She sighed and rolled her eyes. "What about you, Holly?"

Her grey eyes burned holes in me. Both degrees I'd earned fled my mind. College? Never heard of it. I wasn't even sure I could read the menu if she presented it to me at that second. I was suddenly an illiterate fool, at the mercy of that silver gaze. Her expression was amused but still patient as she waited for me to form a coherent thought.

It was only when she broke our gaze to take a sip of coffee that my brain kicked itself out of its blue screen of death and I managed to sputter "F-Forensic Magic."

"Really?" There was genuine interest in Aileen's voice.

I looked away before her eyes could catch mine and scramble my thoughts again. Hells, how did she have such a strong effect on me already? I took a deep drink of my own coffee. "Yeah, just completed my Master's this spring..." Was now the time to bring up that I was

moving? No, a fling wouldn't say that. Or would they? It would reinforce the fling-ness of this, wouldn't it?

"Seems like you're a witch of many talents then."

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The conversation seemed to get easier after that. Aileen asked Raquel about her life, equally interested in the fact that Raquel was working on getting a career started in professional fighting. She'd been performing in a few smaller promo circles since completing her Bachelor's and recently gotten scouted by one of the larger promotions as part of the new Witch League they were building.

Eventually though, the night had to end and we left the diner. Raquel went to keep an eye out for our Uber, as Aileen pulled me back.

"Hey, this was fun," she said, sounding almost shy.

"Y-yeah, it was," I agreed, falling back against the brick side of the building.

Aileen reached down and grabbed my phone from my hands. After a minute of fiddling with it she gave me a toothy smile and handed it back. "There! Now you can call me for next time." Her expression turned more serious. "Can I kiss you?"

"I-uh, yes please." *Great one, Maywood.*

Any self-deprecation I had left my mind as her lips pressed against mine, soft, at first, insistent. Her teeth found my lower lip, nipping it. A surprised noise caught in my throat. My hands found their way around her neck and I was lost in the taste of her, bitter and sweet and utterly intoxicating.

She pulled back too soon, grey eyes sparkling. She grinned and swiped away a smudge of red from her bottom lip. How bad had her lipstick smeared on me? I decided it didn't matter. The kiss had been more than worth it.

"Your ride's here. Call me, yeah?"

Clutching my phone to my chest like it was a lifeline, I managed a shaky "Y-yeah." It wasn't until I slid into the car that I realized my lip was bleeding.