

may never
see the light



Laylah Hunter

Risa turns the corner into the alley behind the Second Circle, not quite jogging but doing her best to hurry. The back door always has a bouncer on duty, so she's fishing her entertainer's permit out of her bag as she walks up. She knocks at the door, flashes her permit when it opens, and smiles to the guy on the door tonight—a new guy, six feet plus with a generous helping of pecs and shoulders. Devonn, if she's remembering names right. Probably a shifter, like most of the guys the boss hires for security work.

When he waves her in the door, Risa takes the back stairs two at a time, heading up to the green room for the dancers. The afternoon shift isn't quite over yet, the insistent throb of a bass line rumbling through the walls. Jordan is already there, mostly out of his street clothes and leaning close to a mirror so he can line his eyes. "Hey, doll," he says as Risa slips into the room. "How's life treating you?"

Risa shrugs. "I've had worse days." She stuffs her jacket into a free locker and drags her shirt off over her head. "How's the crowd tonight? You had a chance to look?"

Jordan shakes his head. "Sammi was complaining about there being an incubus party in the back earlier, but I think they've gotten the boot already."

"Ugh. I hope so." There are plenty of patrons in this kind of work who try to coax freebies out of the dancers, but incubi are some of the most chronic offenders. Usually the protective talismans hidden among Risa's jewelry keep her head clear enough, but every once in a while some asshole has enough power or enough of a skewed take on spellcasting to get past them.

Risa digs her heels out of her backpack and sets them on the floor, then shimmies out of her jeans so she can put her stockings on. The sticky stuff on the insides of the thighs is starting to wear out; she's going to need to toss this pair for a new set pretty soon. She tugs at the seams up the back to make sure they're straight, and after a minute Jordan bats her hands out of the way so he can fix them for her.

"Thanks," Risa says, biting her lip to keep from fidgeting. It tickles when Jordan fusses at the back of her knee. "So how are things with you, anyway? What happened with that wolf boy last week?"

Jordan sighs dramatically. "He sure likes to think he's a big tough alpha, but for my taste? Too much puppy to be let out off the leash."

"Ouch," Risa says. "I'm guessing I shouldn't make a crack about sending him to obedience school."

One of Jordan's tufted ears flicks in amusement. "As long as you don't start in on 'cats and dogs sleeping together,' I don't care what you say about *him*."

Risa smirks, digging in her bag again for the rest of her gear. Plain cotton panties get traded in for a spangled thong, and she sheds her bra in favor of a pair of glittery pasties. There: dressed in as little as she can legally get away with in a club that has a liquor license.

She keeps the tangle of jewelry at her throat and her wrists. All her amulets are in there, strung on chains with innocuous baubles and charms. They're not obvious enough to offend the patrons, so she can wear them out on stage. And one of the charms on each wrist is actually a blade, small and subtle but sharp enough to make her act work.

Jordan has taken over the mirror again, teasing his black hair up into something out of an early-80s goth club, pouting at himself as he tries to gauge whether it's perfect yet. Risa waits for him to get out of the way; he'll go out on stage before she will.

Eventually, though, she does have to elbow him out of the way. "Go on, you're beautiful already and I need to put my face on."

His smile is all tiny pointed teeth, and the tip of his tail twitches. Holding that barely-started-shift form is one of his key draws as a performer; from what Risa's heard from other shifters, it takes a lot of work to maintain a partial shift instead of going all the way from one form to the other. Jordan makes it look effortless.

"See you under the lights, sweetie," he says, and finally lets Risa at the mirror.

At least this is enough of a routine that it doesn't take long anymore. Foundation with just a little shimmer, blush in a shade that won't look feverish under the club lights, fresh-blood lipstick, heavy liner for her eyes. A coppery bob-cut wig over her pixie-chopped brown scruff finishes the transformation.

Pretty as a witch princess and totally capable of handling grabby, drunken incubi, Risa slips on her heels and heads for the stage.

Jordan's still in the middle of his main-stage act, which is fine by Risa—he's always fun to watch, even if her appreciation is strictly technical. "Pole dancer" feels like such an inadequate term when you see somebody talented do it. The name doesn't prepare you at all for the kind of acrobatics it involves. Jordan writhes to the slow dance grind, defying gravity as he coils and unwinds around the pole. The muscles of his shoulders roll and flex, and somebody in the audience wolf whistles. Jordan's tail flicks teasingly.

Watching him might be entertaining, but Risa's here to work, so she makes herself pay some attention to the audience, too. She doesn't see any incubi—not many demons in the audience at all tonight, honestly. Maybe it's too early for them to be showing up still. Maybe there's something keeping them busy. Periodically it does seem like most of the city's infernal population will get called into a big project at the same time, which means they have less time to enjoy mortals but party a lot harder when they get the chance.

Sammi is working a table in the back, a couple of tourists who are clearly in over their heads and trying not to admit it. Somehow, the supply of gullible marks never seems to run out. They'll be lucky bastards if they manage to get back out the door with their wallets, souls, and blood all still in their possession.

Jordan's song comes growling to an end and he prowls out into the crowd. The DJ cues up Risa's slinking, vamping beat. Showtime.

Risa picks out the tiny blades in her jewelry, opening the first quick cut in one of her arms just before she struts out on stage. She weaves the blood with the ease of practice, turning it into smoky tendrils that wrap around her and trail in her wake. The club advertising calls her the Dark Goddess.

She reaches center stage and nicks the other arm, adding more flickering shadows to her train. It doesn't take much blood to make a pretty light show, not anymore. She writhes, sinking to kneel on the floor, her knees spread wide and her body rocking in time with the music as the shadows boil between her thighs.

Another cut, this time slower and more obvious. She licks her own blood from the inside of her arm, looking out into the audience as the blood on her tongue bursts into the illusion of flame. Her act is less acrobatic than most of the other dancers', but she makes up for it by bringing her own special effects.

Fire replaces her shadows, little tongues of flame licking along her limbs and wavering in her steps. The usual chatter of the crowd falls away as they watch her: the mundanes in the audience probably don't get to see much magic on a daily basis, and definitely not stuff as flashy as this.

The centerpiece of Risa's act takes a deeper cut, more blood, another line across her arm beside a long series of similar scars. The blood drips from her hand to spark and sizzle when it hits the stage floor, and then—she's barely swaying now, concentrating all her attention on the work—rising slowly, teased into form, a shadowy doppelganger who takes up Risa's pose.

When she looks into her double's face she can see hints of features, flickering and changing, in a body that looks mostly like shadows and smoke. Clients have sworn to her that they've seen themselves, their lovers, celebrities, old

mostly like shadows and smoke. Clients have sworn to her that they've seen themselves, their lovers, celebrities, old enemies; the magic leaves them impressions and their own hungers do the rest. Blood magic, like so many of the old traditions, is always about hunger.

Risa stalks her shadow self around the stage, sometimes hunting it, sometimes letting it hunt her. The inky tendrils and tiny flames she conjured first seek to shield her, but the doppelganger can simply swallow them whole. Consumption, destruction, life being spilled; she's done this act once or twice at burlesque shows around Halloween, but the infernal atmosphere of the Second Circle gives it a home year-round.

She lets herself be captured just as the song is coming to an end: she'll look like she's been defeated right here, as the music grinds into a low, growling pause. The blood ghost leans over her, hungry—and then just for an instant the face comes clear for Risa, sharp and obvious in a way it's never been before. A woman with white skin and black hair, hollow cheeks and feverish eyes, reaching out.

Risa falters, almost misses her cue to rise again, meeting the doppelganger as it leans down. She presses their lips together and where usually she feels nothing, this time she feels cold. Something—*someone* is interfering with her, trying to get her attention in the worst way. Risa takes the doppelganger's face in her hands to deepen the kiss, the final reversal of roles in the show. The shadow body dissolves under her affections, twining sinuous and insubstantial around her and then fading away under the lights.

The music ends, and after a moment of nervous silence the audience applauds. Risa gives them her best temptress smile, and slinks down off the stage for the second half of the job: working the tables, finding her own pack of awe-struck tourists to charm money out of.

She flirts, she teases, she lets a little fire dance along her arms as she moves. She collects a few pretty healthy tips as she works the room. Then she reaches the table at the far edge of the room and falters for the second time tonight.

“Hello, lovely,” says the woman she just saw reflected on stage.

“Evening,” Risa says, trying to put her professional smile back on. “Enjoying the show?”

The woman shrugs one shoulder. “It's not entirely satisfying,” she says, “but then, that's the point, isn't it? Satisfaction isn't what you're selling.”

Risa swallows. “Sorry to hear you're not having a good time.”

“That isn't what I said.” The woman shifts in her seat and suddenly she's holding Risa's hand, though Risa hadn't seen her move. “But I am hoping you have more to offer.”

“Prostitution still isn't legal,” Risa says, which has decent odds of shutting down a client who's getting a little too optimistic. They don't like the reminder, as best she can tell. They want to think of it in fuzzier terms than that.

“It isn't prostitution if I'm not asking you for sex,” the woman answers.

Risa wonders if she should be signaling security. “You want a dance?”

The woman smiles broadly enough for Risa to see her teeth. “I want to know how much you charge to bleed and not burn it on pretty light shows.”

“I don't sell to leeches,” Risa says. She pulls, and the woman doesn't let go of her wrist. “The second I yell, security will throw you out of here. Complete with sharpened mountain laurel, if that's how you roll.”

“I would hate to disrupt your evening that much,” the woman says. She presses a card into Risa's hand, then lets her go. “Look me up when you change your mind.”

Risa gives her an entirely insincere smile. “Don’t hold your breath.”

She makes her way over to the bar as quickly and unobtrusively as she can, flagging down Else, who helps tend bar but also knocks heads when somebody needs her to. Even when she’s *not* currently a bear, she’s six feet tall and made of shoulders. “Trouble?” she asks when Risa reaches her.

“You see the skinny woman in black over by—shit,” Risa says as she looks back toward the table. “She’s ducked out somewhere.”

“Somebody hassling you?” Else cracks her tattooed knuckles.

“A leech,” Risa says. “Really skinny, long black hair, working the cadaver vibe. Tried to buy blood off me.”

Else grunts. “She give you anything?”

Risa hands over the card, which claims in spidery, sprawling letters that the leech’s name is Mircalla K.—great, so she has delusions of grandeur along with everything else.

“I’ll pass this to the boss, see if he can get a read on her.” Else handles the card like it’s just as likely to bite as its owner.

“Thanks,” Risa says. She has her doubts about how much Mr. Sallos gives a damn, ha ha, about any of his employees, but he does at least see them as investments. He wouldn’t want some leech coming in off the street and messing up one of his performers.

There’s no sign of “Mircalla” anywhere right now, at least. Risa takes a few deep breaths and tries to put the threat out of her mind so she can get back to dancing. The show must go on, like they say.

She dances a table or two before Else calls her back over and lets her know that Mr. Sallos can’t find any traces of the leech still on the property. With any luck she took the threat of staking seriously and just cleared out.

It winds up being a good night, on other counts. Risa lucks into a couple of generous tables, guys who pay for her to keep giving them their own personal show. She gets a low-level demon, some kind of little infernal intern or something, who hands over a charged copper talisman as a tip—not something Risa wants to mess around with wearing, but any infernal artifact can be pawned for a good return. By the time her shift ends, she feels pretty good about having the next few days off. She’ll have plenty of cash to see her through.

The rain in the forecast hasn’t even materialized when she hits the street at the end of her shift. There’s a chill fog clinging to the street, but she has a warm jacket and home isn’t far. Risa stuffs her hands in her pockets and heads up the street, careful of the slippery spots where the pavement has worn down to the old layer of cobblestones.

Two blocks from the club, she’s not alone anymore. She glances over, through the thick streetlight-orange fog, and the leech from the club is pacing along beside her. “Already told you no,” Risa says. “Haven’t changed my mind.”

“You sure?” The leech links her arm through Risa’s as if Risa’s her gentleman escort. “I can be kind. Generous.”

“Somehow, I’m not convinced.” Risa tries to pull her arm away and the leech spins her, suddenly all hard edges, sick-white face entirely too close, black eyes glittering.

“Be *calm*,” the leech says, and there’s something resonant and heavy in her tone, something that makes Risa feel dizzy, short of breath. “You’re fine. You’re lovely.”

The world blurs and smudges, cold giving way to warmth, dim streetlight glow melting to the more certain golden light of shaded lamps on painted walls. Risa squints into the leech’s face, trying to make the last few minutes come

clear. How did she get here? Where is her jacket? What are those cold hands doing at her wrists?

“Stop it,” she says, her tongue thick in her mouth. “I don’t want to be...” What doesn’t she want to be, again? There’s a weight pressing down on her mind, slowing her thoughts.

Beads rattle as they slip from her wrists and drop to the floor. The leech’s hands move to the clasps of her tangled necklace and Risa shivers. Isn’t this a bad idea? She tries to lift her hands to push the leech away and she can’t bring herself to move. Her necklace falls away and there are cool hands cupping her face, pulling her close.

“So beautiful, my lovely,” the leech says. “I think you might be even prettier now, stripped of all the glitter and paint.”

Risa trembles, lets her lips part for the cool lips that press against hers. The whole world feels slow and strange, fascinating, beautiful. The kiss makes her drunk. Her fingertips tingle. Her mouth feels sensitive and lush.

The woman kissing her pulls back, changes focus, drops a little line of kisses along the line of Risa’s jaw, down the column of her throat where the pulse hammers hard. “It’s intoxicating, you know. Blood laced with magic. So much more fulfilling than the mundane kind.”

“Oh,” Risa says slowly. That’s...that should bother her, shouldn’t it? The idea floats at the corner of her mind, hard to process, refusing to come clear. “You...”

“Call my name, beautiful,” the woman murmurs against Risa’s throat. “Let me hear you.” She bites, one quick twinge of pain, more focused than showy bladework, tiny pinpricks of sensation that melt into a swirling cool lethargy.

“Mircalla,” Risa breathes as the pleasure floods her body. “Mircalla, oh.” Her hands are on Mircalla’s waist and she can’t remember putting them there; all of her joints feel unstrung, loose and pliant, like she could spill into any shape Mircalla hoped for. The slow pulse of her heartbeat drives the heady pleasure of the bite through her veins, through her limbs, into every part of her.

The swipe of Mircalla’s cool tongue against the little wounds makes Risa sob. “Hush, sweetness, lovely, hush,” Mircalla croons. “There will be more, so much more. You’re so perfect. Feels so good.” She pushes Risa’s jacket off and lets it fall, then reaches for the hem of Risa’s shirt. “I want to see the rest of you, sweet thing, pretty thing.”

That’s so kind. So flattering. Risa sways, letting herself be moved. Mircalla is stripping away her shirt, running delicate fingers across her collarbones, over her shoulders, down her back. When the clasp of her bra comes undone she shrugs, letting it fall away.

Mircalla’s hands stroke her breasts, follow the delicate lacework tracery of blue veins under pale skin. Risa’s nipples stiffen and her breath hitches, her back arching as she presses into the touch.

“Darling, lovely,” Mircalla murmurs. She tugs open the button of Risa’s jeans, eases the zipper down. “All of you, there, without the paint and shadows.” She sinks slowly to her knees, dragging down Risa’s jeans and underwear both together, and presses a chilly, promising kiss to Risa’s thigh.

Time slips and stitches itself together again and Risa finds herself on her back, smooth sheets underneath her, Mircalla bare and white and angular above. She reaches up and her hands tremble as she takes a grip on Mircalla’s hair, silken softness and rough knots. Anything more complicated than that is too much for her to manage, with her head swimming, the room spinning slowly when she closes her eyes.

Mircalla leans down and kisses her way from Risa’s throat down to her breasts. She licks and teases one nipple to an aching tightness, until Risa can’t help but squirm. Some stray lost part of Risa’s mind tries to protest, tries to complain that—that.... She can’t remember; the problem is hazy and distant, impossible to focus on. Then Mircalla bites,

wicked little fangs piercing the skin on either side of the nipple itself, and fastens her mouth to the wound.

The little suckling pressure and the thrumming waves arousal that follow make Risa feel like she's melting, her spine liquid, her clit throbbing with every flicker of Mircalla's tongue. She writhes in the sheets, whimpering, trying to plead with her body since words won't come. Mircalla catches her other breast, rolls the nipple between thumb and forefinger, twists sharply. Risa's back arches, pressing up toward the little pain, offering herself up.

Her hands fumble, trying to offer some reciprocal affection, or some guidance, or any contact at all. Mircalla's skin is cold brushed silk under her fingertips. She breathes a soft, needy sigh.

Mircalla looks up and meets Risa's eyes, the rich red of fresh blood staining her smile. "Still unsatisfied, sweetness?" she asks, gently teasing.

"Want," Risa slurs, "I want," but even making her tongue obey her that much is almost unbearably difficult.

"Yes," Mircalla hisses. "Wanting is a thing we share." She sits back on her heels, running a hand down Risa's side, bringing her palm to rest against the arch of hipbone. "Do you even know how delicious you are? You can't, you mustn't. You'd never be so cruel as to keep all this to yourself if you knew."

Risa tries to find words for a reply but they're lost, they're somewhere too distant to hold onto. Mircalla slips down her body, pressing her thighs apart and settling between them; Risa's hips rock and she tips her head back, offering herself up.

"Here, sweetness, lovely, pretty thing," Mircalla says, a little hungry sing-song tone. She lowers herself down, presses a kiss to the arch of Risa's pubic bone, slides her fingers up the inside of Risa's thigh. Risa whines with need as Mircalla's fingertips trace her folds, too lightly to be satisfying. She rocks her hips up, trying to beg for more.

Mircalla's fingertips slide up into her, firm and cool, and in the same moment Mircalla's mouth finds the soft inside of her thigh. Risa sobs as Mircalla's fangs pierce her skin again, almost too painful to bear in such a tender spot—but her clit throbs at the pain, at the suction, at the swipe of Mircalla's tongue against the wounds. The fingers buried inside her are twisting, stroking roughly, pressing up at just the right angle. The world falls apart, fades into darkness, crumbling in comparison with this moment of pleasure. Nothing else matters. Mircalla has her and she's floating, dreaming, dissolving into nothing. The pleasure is a vortex, drawing everything that's left of her toward that center point.

When Mircalla's mouth moves, releasing the bite on her thigh and closing instead over her clit, Risa claws at the sheets with all the strength she has left. "Please," she gasps, and that's all she can manage, the rest of the words lost. Mircalla hums against her flesh and licks her there, quick and focused, teasing the nub of her clit with unbearable precision. Her fingers still rock deep in Risa's cunt, pressing up from inside, pulling the vortex in tighter still: all that remains of her is these sweet raw nerves that Mircalla torments so, the helpless trembling need, the rising tension—and then the tremors of a climax that steals her breath and makes starbursts of black and red bloom behind her eyes.

Mircalla is laughing in delight when she sits up, her eyes shining bright. "Sweet thing, lovely thing, so precious. You taste so *good*, lovely. I've missed feeling like this." She crawls up Risa's body and collapses, splayed half on top of her, face buried in her neck. "Perfect, so perfect, I'm going to keep you as long as I can."

There's something wrong about that, but the part of Risa that could tell her *what* is reeling and smothered. She feels so listless now, tired and wrung out, barely able to keep her eyes open.

"Oh, lovely," Mircalla says, stroking her skin gently, drawing aimless patterns on her belly. "You're all worn out, aren't you? Poor thing."

Risa nods, and even that much effort makes the room lurch around her again. "Sorry," she slurs.

Mircalla giggles, sitting up to grab for the blankets and pull them up. That's nice. Warm. Soft. "Sleep, then," she

Mircalla giggles, sliding up to grab for the blankets and pull them up. That's nice. Warm. Soft. Sleep, then, she says. "I don't want you to lose all your strength."

Risa closes her eyes, grateful for the reprieve. It's exactly what she wanted to hear.

Despite the exhaustion, her sleep is restless, marred by strange dreams of half-visible threats, and she can't seem to get warm. She tosses and turns, and startles mostly awake eventually to cool gray light seeping in through the too-thin curtains. Light. Daylight. That matters, doesn't it? Daylight matters for some reason. *Get up*, something in the back of her head keeps telling her. *Move*.

Risa spills out of bed more than anything, sliding down to the carpet in a little woozy heap. Her head is pounding, her mouth dry. Her memory is a blur of sensation and confusion. She gropes across the floor, her mind fogged, her limbs heavy. Something—there was something important here, she's sure of it. Something that—

Her fingers close over a string of beads, and a little tingling shock rips through her. Risa clings tighter to them, holding on to the one that hurts. It's an important pain, isn't it? She's dimly sure of it. She's shivering now, but she's not cold.

Her mind clears with a snap, like the sudden waking from a nightmare. Entirely too much like that, she thinks as she realizes how she's spent the last few hours. Her stomach lurches and she tries to force the reaction down. Not now. Not yet. Plenty of time to panic later. Don't think now, just move.

She wraps the string of beads around her wrist quickly, quietly, and reaches for the next one. Her head swims, but this time it's just the familiar discomfort of low blood pressure—hah, and no wonder, after she wound up being Mircalla's midnight snack. Thank god for the way leech powers weaken in the daytime, giving her the chance to recover her brain.

She's fastening the clasps of her necklace when the leech stirs, rolling over in bed and making a sleepy whimper. Time to hurry. Risa jams her feet into her sneakers, shrugs on her coat, grabs as much of the rest of her clothes as she can find and stuffs them in her backpack.

"Sweetness?" Mircalla says, dreamy and confused. At least she'll be slower now, with the sun up.

Still, if Risa tries to leave this room the traditional way, she'll be in a hallway with nowhere near enough exits and no sunlight to slow pursuit down. She's going to have to do this the hard way.

She crawls across the floor, at the foot of the bed, trying to keep out of sight as long as she can. The bedclothes rustle. "Where did you go, lovely?" Mircalla asks. She can't actually have been a leech for long. She's too careless.

Risa reaches the gauzy curtains over the balcony door and pauses to gather her strength. She's going to have to do this in a hurry as soon as she gets moving.

She yanks the curtains back as she rises, letting cool gray light into the room. The door doesn't open the first time she pulls on it and she fumbles the latch. Behind her, Mircalla yowls.

"What are you doing? Close the curtains, love, *now*," Mircalla demands. The bedclothes rustle.

Risa yanks the door open, cold air a shock against her skin. Mircalla grabs her arm and tries to pull her away from the balcony, but with the sun up she's just a skinny girl who makes too many demands, not an irresistible eldritch force. Risa struggles, trying to reach the blade on her charm bracelet.

"You're mine," Mircalla growls, her eyes feverish, her fangs bared. "You're mine, you can't get away, I'm not going to let you."

"You're a spoiled child," Risa says, and punches her in the nose.

Mircalla howls, losing her grip and clapping her hands to her face. Risa ducks out onto the balcony.

The room faces the street, a broad expanse of pavement far below and the roof of a competing hotel roughly level with the balcony on the far side. This is going to *suck*—god, she should try to cut that phrase out of her vocabulary. Risa catches her blade between her fingers and rakes a long cut up one thigh, as deep as she dares to go. Illusions she can afford regularly, but serious conjuration has a high price.

She sends her blood out, spidering into a latticework, from the balcony's edge toward the opposite roof. "Don't you dare!" Mircalla snarls, and Risa vaults over the balcony rail onto her pathway.

There's no time to be afraid, no time to look down. Risa bolts, cold air whistling past her skin, her eyes fixed on the opposite roof. The pathway shakes under her, barely holding her up, and Mircalla's snarls aren't fading. She'll have to hurry.

At the last step Risa kisses her hand, crouches to press the kiss to the blood path, then *leaps*. For one suspended instant she's weightless, and she can feel the snap in the air as her blood surrenders its form. Then impact jars through her ankles, through her knees, as she staggers on the rooftop. Mircalla howls one last time, and then there's a terrible, wet crunch.

Risa limps to the edge of the roof and peers down. The leech is a broken heap on the street below, limbs at odd angles, blood—stolen blood—spreading around the body. One of Risa's ankles throbs from that landing, she's freezing and half-dressed, and she needs medical attention for the cut still pouring fresh blood down her thigh. She gropes in her jacket for her phone, rehearsing her next moves through the lightheadedness of the last twelve hours' blood loss. She'll call for an ambulance. She'll go inside to wait. It'll be fine. Once the hospital is done with her, she'll look into getting better protection from leeches.

And maybe she'll see about getting a new job.

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