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# Shadow Kin: A Novel of the Half-Light City



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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurOn one side, the Night World, rules by the Blood Lords and the Beast Kind. On the other, the elusive Fae and the humans, protected by their steadfast mages...Born a wraith, Lily is a shadow who slips between worlds. Brought up by a Blood Lord and raised to be his assassin, she is little more than a slave. But when Lily meets her match in target Simon DuCaine, the unlikely bond that develops between them threatens to disrupt an already stretched peace in a city on the verge of being torn apart...

ExtraitChapter OneThe wards sparked in front of me, faint violet against the dark wooden door with its heavy brass locks, proclaiming the house's protection. They wouldn't stop me. No one has yet made the lock

or ward to keep me out. Magic cannot detect me, and brick and stone and metal are no barrier. It's why I'm good at what I do. A grandfather clock in the hall chimed two as I stepped into the shadow, entering the place only my kind can walk and passing through the door as though it wasn't there. Outside came the echoing toll of the cathedral bell, much louder here in Greenglass than in the Night World boroughs I usually frequent. I'd been told that the one I was to visit lived alone. But I prefer not to believe everything I'm told. After all, I grew up among the Blood and the powers of the Night World, where taking things on faith is a quick way to die. Besides, bystanders only make things complicated. But tonight, I sensed I was alone as I moved carefully through the darkened rooms. The house had an elegant simplicity. The floors were polished wood, softened by fine wool rugs, and paintings hung on the unpapered walls. Plants flourished on any spare flat surface, tinging the air with the scent of growth and life. I hoped someone would save them after my task here was completed. The Fae might deny me the Veiled World, but the part of me that comes from them shares their affinity for green growing things. Apart from the damp greenness of the plants, there was only one other dominant scent in the air. Human. Male. Warm and spicy. Alive. Live around the Blood for long enough and you become very aware of the differences between living and dead. No other fresh smell mingled with his. No cats or dogs. Just fading hints of an older female gone for several hours. Likely a cook or housekeeper who didn't live in. I paused at the top of the staircase, counting doors carefully. Third on the left. A few more strides. I cocked my head, listening. There. Ever so faint, the thump of a human heartbeat. Slow. Even. Asleep. Good. Asleep is easier. I drifted through the bedroom door and paused again. The room was large, walled on one side with floor-to-ceiling windows unblocked by any blind. Expensive, that much glass. Moonlight streamed through the panes, making it easy to see the man lying in the big bed. I didn't know what he'd done. I never ask. The blade doesn't question the direction of the cut. Particularly when the blade belongs to Lucius. Lucius doesn't like questions. I let go of the shadow somewhat. I was not yet truly solid, but enough that, if he were to wake, he would see my shape by the bed like the reflection of a dream. Or a nightmare. The moonlight washed over his face, silvering skin and fading hair to shades of gray, making it hard to tell what he might look like in daylight. Tall, yes. Well formed if the arm and chest bared by the sheet he'd pushed away in sleep matched the rest of him. Not that it mattered. He'd be beyond caring about his looks in a few minutes. Beyond caring about anything. The moon made things easier even though, in the shadow, I see well in very little light. Under the silvered glow I saw the details of the room as clearly as if the gas lamps on the walls were alight. The windows posed little risk. The town house stood separated from its neighbors by narrow strips of garden on each side and a much larger garden at the rear. There was a small chance someone in a neighboring house might see something, but I'd be long gone before they could raise an alarm. His breath continued to flow, soft and steady, and I moved around the bed, seeking a better angle for the strike as I let myself grow more solid still, so I could grasp the dagger at my hip. Legend says we kill by reaching into a man's chest and tearing out his heart. It's true, we can. I've even done it. Once. At Lucius' demand and fearing death if I disobeyed. It wasn't an act I ever cared to repeat. Sometimes, on the edge of sleep, I still shake thinking about the sensation of living flesh torn from its roots beneath my fingers. So I use a dagger. Just as effective. Dead is dead, after all. I counted his heartbeats as I silently slid my blade free. He was pretty, this one. A face of interesting angles that looked strong even in sleep. Strong and somehow happy. Generous lips curved up slightly as if he were enjoying a perfect dream. Not a bad way to die, all things considered. I unshadowed completely and lifted the dagger, fingers steady on the hilt as he took one last breath. But even as the blade descended, the room blazed to light around me and a hand snaked out like a lightning bolt and clamped around my wrist. "Not so fast," the man said in a calm tone. I tried to shadow and my heart leaped to my throat as nothing happened. "Just to clarify," he said. "Those lamps. Not gas. Sunlight." "Sunmage," I hissed, rearing back as my pulse went into overdrive. How had Lucius left out that little detail? Or maybe he hadn't. Maybe Ricco had left it out on purpose when he'd passed on my assignment. He hated me. I wouldn't put it past him to try to engineer my downfall. Damn him to the seven bloody night-scalded depths of hell. The man smiled at me, though there was no amusement in the expression. "Precisely." I twisted, desperate to get free. His hand tightened, and pain shot through my wrist and up my arm. "Drop the dagger." I set my teeth and tightened my grip. Never give up your weapon. "I said, drop it." The command snapped as he surged out of the bed, pushing me backward and my arm above my head at a nasty angle. The pain intensified, like heated wires slicing into my nerves. "Sunmages are supposed to be healers," I managed to gasp as I struggled and the sunlight hells-damned sunlight filled the room, caging me as effectively as iron bars might hold a human. I swung at him with my free arm, but he blocked the blow, taking its force on his forearm without a wince. He fought far too well for a healer. Who was this

man?"Ever consider that being a healer means being exposed to hundreds of ways to hurt people? Don't make me hurt you. Put the knife down."I swore and flung myself forward, swinging my free hand at his face again. But he moved too, fast and sure, and somehow damn, he was goodI missed, my hand smacking into the wall. I twisted desperately as the impact sent a shock wave up my arm, but the light dazzled me as I looked directly into one of the lamps.A split second is all it takes to make a fatal mistake.Before I could blink, he had pulled me forward and round and I sailed through the air to land facedown on the feather mattress, wind half knocked out of me. My free hand was bent up behind my back, and my other still holding my dagger was pinned by his to the pillow.My heart raced in anger and humiliation and fear as I tried to breathe.Sunmage.I was an idiot. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.Stupid and careless.His knee pushed me deeper into the mattress, making it harder still to breathe."Normally I don't get this forward when I haven't been introduced," he said, voice warm and low, close to my ear. He still sounded far too calm. A sunmage healer shouldn't be so sanguine about finding an assassin in his house. Though perhaps he wasn't quite as calm as he seemed. His heart pounded. "But then again, normally, women I don't know don't try to stab me in my bed."I snarled and he increased the pressure. There wasn't much I could do. I'm faster and stronger than a human woman, but there's a limit to what a female of five foot six can do against a man nearly a foot taller and quite a bit heavier. Particularly with my powers cut off by the light of the sun.Damned hells-cursed sunlight."I'll take that." His knee shifted upward to pin both my arm and my back, and his free hand wrenched the dagger from my grasp.Then, to my surprise, his weight vanished. It took a few seconds for me to register my freedom. By the time I rolled to face him, he stood at the end of the bed and my dagger quivered in the wall far across the room. To make matters worse, the sunlight now flickered off the ornately engraved barrel of the pistol in his right hand.It was aimed squarely at the center of my forehead. His hand was perfectly steady, as though holding someone at gunpoint was nothing greatly out of the ordinary for him. For a man wearing nothing but linen drawers, he looked convincingly threatening.I froze. Would he shoot? If our places were reversed, he'd already be dead."Wise decision," he said, eyes still cold. "Now. Why don't you tell me what this is about?" "Do you think that's likely?"One corner of his mouth lifted and a dimple cracked to life in his cheek. My assessment had been right. He was pretty. Pretty and dangerous, it seemed. The arm that held the gun was, like the rest of him, sleek with muscle. The sort that took concerted effort to obtain. Maybe he was one of the rare sunmages who became warriors? But the house seemed far too luxurious for a Templar or a mercenary, and his hands and body were bare of Templar sigils.Besides, I doubted Lucius would set me on a Templar. That would be madness.So, who the hell was this man?When I stayed silent, the pistol waved back and forth in a warning gesture. "I have this," he said. "Plus, I am, as you mentioned, a sunmage." As if to emphasize his point, the lamps flared a little brighter. "Start talking."I considered him carefully. The sunlight revealed his skin as golden, his hair a gilded shade of light brown, and his eyes a bright, bright blue. A true creature of the day. No wonder Lucius wanted him dead. I currently felt a considerable desire for that outcome myself. I scanned the rest of the room, seeking a means to escape.A many-drawer wooden chest, a table covered with papers with a leather-upholstered chair tucked neatly against it, and a large wardrobe all made simply in the same dark reddish wood offered no inspiration. Some sort of ferny plant in a stand stood in one corner, and paintingslandscapes and studies of more plants hung over the bed and the table. Nothing smaller than the furniture, nothing I could use as a weapon, lay in view. Nor was there anything to provide a clue as to who he might be."I can hear you plotting all the way over here," he said with another little motion of the gun. "Not a good idea. In fact" The next jerk of the pistol was a little more emphatic, motioning me toward the chair as he hooked it out from the table with his foot. "Take a seat. Don't bother trying anything stupid like attempting the window. The glass is warded. You'll just hurt yourself."Trapped in solid form, I couldn't argue with that. The lamps shone with a bright unwavering light and his face showed no sign of strain. Even his heartbeat had slowed to a more steady rhythm now that we were no longer fighting. A sunmage calling sunlight at night. Strong. Dangerously strong.Not to mention armed when I wasn't.I climbed off the bed and stalked over to the chair.He tied my arms and legs to their counterparts on the chair with neck cloths. Tight enough to be secure but carefully placed so as not to hurt. He had to be a healer. A mercenary wouldn't care if he hurt me. A mercenary probably would've killed me outright.When he was done he picked up a pair of buckskin trousers and a rumpled linen shirt from the floor and dressed quickly. Then he took a seat on the end of the bed, picked up the gun once again, and aimed directly at me.Blue eyes stared at me for a long minute, something unreadable swimming in their depths. Then he nodded."Shall we try this again? Why are you here?"There wasn't any point lying about it. "I was sent to kill you." "I understand that much. The reason is what escapes me."I lifted

a shoulder. Let him make what he would of the gesture. I had no idea why Lucius had sent me after a sunmage. "You didn't ask?" "Why would I?" I said, surprised by the question. He frowned. "You just kill whoever you're told to? It doesn't matter why?" "I do as I'm ordered." Disobedience would only bring pain. Or worse. His head tilted, suddenly intent. His gaze was uncomfortable, and it was hard to shake the feeling he saw more than I wanted. "You should seek another line of work." As if I had a choice. I looked away from him, suddenly angry. Who was he to judge me? "Back to silence, is it? Very well, let's try another tack. This isn't, by chance, about that Rousselline pup I stitched up a few weeks ago?" Pierre Rousselline was alpha of one of the Beast Kind packs. He and Lucius didn't always exist in harmony. But I doubted Lucius would kill over the healing of a young Beast. A sunmage, one this strong if his claim of being able to maintain the light until dawn were true was an inherently risky target, even for a Blood lord. Even for the Blood Lord. So, what had this man who was, indeed, a healer if he spoke the truth done? His brows lifted when I didn't respond. "You really don't know, do you? Well. Damn." The "damn" came out as a half laugh. There was nothing amusing in the situation that I could see. Either he was going to kill me or turn me over to the human authorities or I was going to have to tell Lucius I had failed. Whichever option came to pass, nothing good awaited me. I stayed silent. "Some other topic of conversation, then?" He regarded me with cool consideration. "I presume, given that my sunlight seems to be holding you, that I'm right in assuming that you are Lucius' shadow?" I nodded. There was little point denying it with his light holding me prisoner. There were no others of my kind in the City. Only a wraith is caged by the light of the sun. A smile spread over his face, revealing he had two dimples, not one. Not just pretty, I decided. He was alluring wasn't the right word. The Blood and the Fae are alluring an attraction born of icy beauty and danger. I am immune to that particularly charm. No, he was inviting somehow. A fire on a winter's night, promising warmth and life. His eyes held genuine curiosity. "You're really a wraith?" "Yes." He laughed and the sound was sunlight, warm and golden, a smooth caress against the skin. "Is that so amusing?" "If the stories are to be believed, you're supposed to be ten feet tall with fangs and claws." I tilted my head. "I am not Blood or Beast Kind. No fangs. Or claws." He looked over my shoulder, presumably at my dagger. "Just one perhaps? But really no one ever said you were" He stopped abruptly. "What?" The question rose from my lips before I could stop myself. This time his smile was crooked. "Beautiful." I snorted. Beautiful? Me? No. I knew that well enough. The Fae are beautiful and even the Blood in their own way. I am only odd with gray eyes a color no Fae or true demi-Fae ever had and red hair that stands out like a beacon amongst the silvery hues of the Blood. "That's because I'm not." He looked surprised. "I know the Blood don't use mirrors, but you must have seen yourself." "Maybe the Night World has different standards." "Then the Night World needs its eyesight examined," he said with another crooked smile. "Gods and suns." Silence again. He studied me and I looked away, discomfited, wondering what angle he was trying to work by flattering me. Did he think I could sway Lucius into granting mercy? If so, then he was in for a severe disappointment. "What happens now?" I asked when the silence started to strain my nerves. "That may well depend on you." "How so?" His fingers drummed lightly on the barrel of the pistol. "There are several possibilities. Firstly, you might try something foolish like trying to get free. In that case, I'd probably have to shoot you. Gunshots attract attention, so I would expect to find the authorities on my doorstep. At which point you would become their problem if you were still alive." I swallowed. Dead or captured. I didn't particularly like that option. "And if I'm not foolish?" "Then, I imagine by the time the sun rises, I'll have decided whether or not to set you free to run home and tell your master that he picked the wrong man to trifle with this time." I winced at the thought of returning to Lucius to tell him I'd failed. Lucius is unpleasantly inventive when displeased. The sunmage frowned. "What?" I shook my head, staying silent. His frown deepened. "Will he hurt you?" I shrugged. It was likely. In fact, almost certain. But not enough to permanently damage or kill me. Ignoring my current spectacular failure, I was uniquely valuable to Lucius. No other Blood lord had a wraith at his command. My kind are rare. The Fae are not prolific even when mated to their own kind. And wraiths are not born of Fae and Fae. "You don't have to return." He sounded almost angry. At this I laughed and there was nothing light or warm in the sound. "You really haven't spent much time in the Night World, have you?" "I try not to," he said. The pistol flashed suddenly as he tossed it, flipping it with a showy twirl and catching it with surprising ease. My gaze sharpened. There was one possible way of deflecting some of Lucius' displeasure. If I brought him information, if I could find a weakness in this man, that might be enough to buy me back some favor. "Who taught you to fight? You're a healer, aren't you? That's what sunmages do." The gun glinted again as he twirled it a second time. "Most of them." Another twirl as he considered me. "Including me. But my brother's a Templar. He can be overprotective." A Templar? Who in the name of the lords of hell was this

man? "A Templar taught you?" I tried to keep the impressed tone out of my voice but failed. That earned me another smile. "Templars can be insistent." I could imagine. Arguing with a divine warrior would be imbecilic by anyone's standards. Even Lucius tended toward leaving well enough alone when it came to the Templars. Which begged the question of exactly why I'd been sent to kill someone so closely connected to one. The whole thing stank of intrigue. It made the back of my neck prickle and I twitched my bound hands, wanting to rub the sensation away. The sunmage spun the pistol one last time, then laid it across his lap. Within easy reach, I noted. "It's a long time until dawn. If we're going to sit here all night, I'd rather know who I'm talking to. Do I call you 'shadow' or do you have a name?" "My name. This time my eyes prickled rather than my neck. Lucius calls me "my shadow." The Fae call me "soulless" when they deign to acknowledge my presence. The Blood and the Beast Kind mostly don't use any name at all. No one had asked my name in a very long time. I blinked and gnawed the inside of my cheek, seeking control. Distance. Cold detachment. It was how I lived my life. How I survived. A blade can't afford to feel. This man, with his smiles and warmth, was dangerous. "I'm Simon," he said quietly. "Really, Shadow, you may as well tell me." Simon. It suited him. It sounded clean and strong. Like no one I should have anything to do with and no one that should want to have anything to do with me. But my mother, before the healer-wife had proclaimed me for what I was, had given me a name. One that was completely inappropriate, given the life I lead. For the first time in a long, long time, I wanted someone to know it was mine. But I wasn't that foolish; this wasn't a story with a storybook happy ending. And names have power. "'Shadow' will do. It's what they call me," I said, lifting my chin. "I didn't ask what 'they' call you," he said. "I asked your name." I stayed quiet. He watched me for a long silent time, something sad in his eyes. "Very well, Shadow," he said eventually. "Have it your way. For now." After that we talked. Or rather he talked and I mostly listened. The topics seemed innocuous, but I got the feeling he was testing me. Though to what aim, I couldn't tell. He told me about his Templar brother, and also about his family, though I noticed he couched everything in careful generalities. No names. Besides the Templar, there were apparently two younger sisters. I couldn't imagine growing up with other children. Lucius had taken me bought me when the Fae rejected me. But the Blood do not turn children, so I had no companions my own age. The lone child in a sea of adults, tended by the Trusted and skirted warily by the Blood. Treated more like a pet, or rather, perhaps a hound puppy raised for a purpose. Valued but not indulged. Treated with a firm hand in case I turned vicious. I'd never had a family. I had seen my mother amongst the Fae sometimes when they left the Veiled World, but she never spoke to me. Never even looked at me. As for my father, well, his identity was a mystery no one had ever seen fit to enlighten me about. I found myself leaning forward as Simon spoke, drawn again against my will, like a moth seeking light. I straightened whenever I noticed, reminding myself exactly what it was that happened to moths that flew into bright lights. Simon the sunmage could be nothing for me but trouble. And the reverse, even more so. Lucius already wanted him dead. His efforts would redouble if he thought I had developed some sort of fascination for the sunmage. But, despite the cold hard facts, it was difficult to make myself pull back and not bask in the sheer novelty of someone speaking to me like I was a person. Amidst his talk of his life, he kept throwing unexpected questions at me. About the Night World and my life there. I didn't answer. The truth of my life was nothing I wanted to share with this man. Nothing he would understand. Besides, I didn't want Lucius to have another transgression to lay at my feet. Still, I got the feeling he was reading more than I wanted from my silences. But against my will, his warmth spread to me, easing a little of the icy ache I've carried inside all my life. It made me feel slightly dizzy and part of me wanted to escape to the clarity of the shadow. Which was never going to happen while the sun beat down on my skin in the few places it was bared by the black of my hunting outfit. After a while, I started to feel more than dizzy. Hot and flushed. For a moment I feared it was the need calling to me, but then I dismissed the possibility. It was too soon, even if I'd been trying to push the limits of my tolerance lately, delaying the urge as long as possible. This felt different. The need feels hot, yes. But it's the dead scorching heat of the hottest part of a flame, the diamond note of a siren's song. Deadly. It demands as it burns, nothing warm or gentle in it. This felt more like sitting too close to a fire for too long. "Are you all right?" Simon asked as I tried to take a deep breath to ease the heat. "I'm a little warm," I admitted reluctantly. Maybe it was the wrist-to-ankle black I wore. Leather and heavy cotton are not the coolest of choices in summer. He scanned me, a different purpose behind that gaze now. I could almost feel the switch to healer again. Which maybe could prove useful. If he came closer I could what exactly? No plausible course of action sprang immediately to mind. I couldn't shadow in sunlight, and we had already established he was at least a match for me whilst I was without my powers. Unless I could somehow get him to leave the room, give me a chance to reach a window, wards or no, and try to

reach the darkness. I slumped a little in the chair, trying to look sicker than I felt. He studied me awhile longer; then his palm hit the bed with a thump. "Sunburn," he pronounced, sounding disgusted with himself. "I imagine you don't go out much in daylight." "No." The Night World isn't much for daylight activities and I live by their hours. My skin was Fae-fair anyway, not pure white there was a slightly golden cast to it and it had only grown fairer over the years I'd lived with Lucius. The Blood are pale, and those of the Night World other than the Beast Kind the Trusted and the blood-locked and the Nightseeker tend to emulate the look. Still, Simon wasn't about to leave the room for a sunburn, so I had to try another plan. "Maybe you could turn it off?" I jerked my chin at the nearest lamp. He grinned. "I don't think so. You'd just go 'poof' and then where would we be?" "Hell. Pretty and dangerous and not stupid." "I do not go 'poof,'" I said, trying to sound trustworthy. That made him laugh and the warmth in my cheeks flared higher. Somehow I didn't think I could blame the sun for that. "Maybe not, but you'd still vanish as soon as you could. You might even try to kill me again." I shook my head. "You have my dagger." And even without that minor detail, I couldn't see myself trying again now that he knew about me and now that I knew more about him. For one thing, there was the sobering image of a revenge-bound Templar knight rampaging through the Night World to separate my head from my body to contemplate. And for another No. I wasn't going to think of any other reason. "So I do," he said. He stood and came over to me, bending down to look more closely at my face. "Too late for a shield if you're already burned. I was careless. I apologize." I stared at him. I'd tried to kill him and he was apologizing for sunburn? A more normal reaction would be to try to kill me. At least, that would be the case in the Night World. Violence for violence. A life for a life. Do worse unto others until they stop trying to defeat you. But his world was different. So different it didn't seem real to me. "Can't you?" I didn't exactly know what it was that sunmages did to heal. He shook his head, nodded at the lamps. "Not while those are still burning." So he did have limits. I filed the information away carefully with the other things he had revealed. Then tried to press the one small advantage I had. His healer instinct. It was a weakness that might make him careless. Part of me felt guilty for using it against him, turning his warmth into something darker, but I locked emotion down ruthlessly. I needed to survive this night. I would use whatever means necessary. "I just sit here and burn, then?" He frowned for a moment; then his face cleared. "I have just the thing." He vanished out of sight and I heard the wardrobe door open and close behind me. When he reappeared, he was holding a battered straw hat wide brimmed and high peaked that looked as though it had been soundly trampled, then punched roughly back into shape. He held it out proudly. "Perfect." He held it over my head, and the light cut off for a moment. Not enough to let me shadow I couldn't do that as long as any sunlight touched my body but enough to ease the heat in my face. Then he pulled the hat away. "What?" "It won't fit with your hair like that." He gestured at the twisted knot of braids at the back of my head. I wriggled my fingers, which was about as much movement as I had in my hands with my arms tied. "I can hardly take it down." "I'll do it." Before I could protest, he started sliding pins free and unwinding my braids with ease. Each brush of his fingers against my skull made me want to simultaneously purr and run away. No man had ever run his hands over my hair before. I rarely wore it down in public and never for the hunt. And no man came to visit me in private. This man wouldn't be either. I bit the inside of my lip, welcoming the pain to remind me of what was real and what was not as his hands moved. At last he had my hair arranged to his satisfaction and slid the hat gently into place. It smelled of him. Warm spice scented the air around me, soaking into my skin with each breath I took. Dawn felt a long, long time away. In the end I fell silent again in self-defense, trying to draw my shields around me even as he tried to coax me into conversation. It felt oh so tempting to soften and bend and let him draw me out. I couldn't afford soft. I couldn't afford to want something. Wanting can be used as a weapon against you. Simon eventually stopped talking and instead sat silently, watching me. That was almost harder to take. But I couldn't quite make myself look away from those blue eyes. The clock by his bed seemed to tick very loudly in the silence that bloomed between us. "Dawn soon," he said after who knows how long. I looked toward the window. Sure enough, the sky was lightening: not true dawn, not yet. Like the Blood, I'm sensitive to the rhythm of day and night. In daylight, my powers work if I am underground, but not without a greater effort. Dawn is the time to retreat to safety. To curl myself away in my room and sleep while the Blood slumber and the Trusted stand watch. I could feel the dawn coming. And, as always, wanted to hold it off. Though this time I wasn't sure if it was the loss of my powers I dreaded or the fact that I would most likely never see Simon again. Gradually the sky faded from indigo to purple, then grew pink and gold like a rose. Simon rose from the bed, pistol in hand. I watched as he pulled my dagger free from the wall. "You don't need that or the pistol. The sun's up you're stronger than me." "So if I untie you, are you going to try to take this?" He held the dagger in his left hand,

weighing it. I shook my head. "No." "I want to trust you, Shadow." "Trusting me isn't a good idea." I didn't like the way his blue eyes darkened at my words. Didn't want to think I'd hurt him in any way. "But you're safe from me today." "You'll come for me again?" "I go where I'm sent." He considered me. "Do you think Lucius will send you again?" I shrugged, not wanting to think about what Lucius might do to either of us. "Maybe not. But trusting in Lucius' goodwill isn't terribly wise." "Yet if I set you free, you'll go back to him," he said. A bitter edge made his words sting like acid. "I have to." He shook his head. "There are other choices." "You don't understand." And if I had my way, he wasn't ever going to. He tucked the gun into the waist of his trousers, but he still held the dagger. "I'm not giving this back to you. Not now." My fingers curled. My dagger was part of me. It rode my hip whenever I was awake. Beautiful, like all Fae work. Beautiful and deadly. A reminder to the Night World of exactly what I was. "It's mine." "I'll send it to you. I assume 'care of Lucius' would be the correct way to address such a package?" "Yes," I said, grateful he hadn't pushed for any further details. "Fine." He crossed to a dresser, tucked the dagger into a drawer, then locked it. The key went into the pocket of his trousers. Clever of him. I would hardly be attempting to retrieve it from there. His face was serious when he returned. "Have you decided?" I asked, trying to ignore the wary thread of fear rising in my stomach. "Decided what?" "What you're going to do with me?" I held my breath, knowing if he so chose, he could make a decision that would end my life. I hoped the side of him that healed would make such a decision hard on him. I knew what I'd do in his place. Eliminate the threat. But this man was very different from me. Very different from anyone else I'd ever met. "If I turn you in, you'll try to escape. If you're successful, people will get hurt. If you fail, they might kill you." I nodded, my mouth too dry to dispute any of this. It was all true anyway. His mouth twisted. Then he braced his shoulders as if he'd made a decision that didn't entirely rest easy. He knelt and started to untie me. I didn't try to fight or flee once I was free. The sun was level with the window and added its paler light to the blaze of Simon's lamps. "I'll take you downstairs. Send for an autocab." "Cabs don't like to go where I live." Hackneys even less so. The Beast Kind scents spook the horses. "I know the driver. He'll go where I tell him." In daylight his house was an oasis of light and peace. Windows and skylights filled the rooms with sunshine, each golden patch of light on the dark floorboards a reminder of my failure and the man who walked behind me. We came to the front door. I reached for the handle. His hand caught mine. "Don't go back there." "I have to. Lucius will come looking for me." I looked at our hands, at his fingers curled around mine, and thought of the world I was returning to. No warmth or pools of sunlight there. No one who saw good where there was no good to be seen. No strong hand holding mine. Only the familiar ruthless world I knew. But I had to go. Lucius would move heaven and earth to find me if I vanished. I doubted Simon would survive the search, Templar brother or no. "Don't try to save me, Simon. It's not worth it." His smile went crooked again. "Saving people is what I do." "I'm not hurt. I don't need a healer." The smile vanished. "Are you certain about that?" I tugged my hand free, wanting to ask what he meant. A dangerous impulse. I needed to go. "You should leave being a white knight to your brother." "He taught me everything I know." "Then you should have paid more attention. I'm sure he taught you not to tangle with the Blood over foolishness. Let me go." "You think this is foolishness?" His finger brushed my cheek, and the sting of the sunburn faded under his touch. Another warmth altogether flared in its place. I stepped back. "I know it is. This is the real world. White knights belong in stories." I was used to lies and deception, but my tongue stumbled over that one. To cover my confusion I pulled the hat from my head and held it out as the clatter and hiss of metal and steam in the distance heralded the arrival of the 'cab. His hand fell to his side as if by refusing the hat, he could keep me here. "How about golden ones?" I tossed the hat, relying on Templar-trained reflexes to make him catch it. "I don't need saving," I repeated, and stepped out into the daylight and away from him.

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