

♡☆Sheer Heart Attack Cordelia!♡☆ and the Infernal Little Mess

At 9:46 PM on a frigid late September night, Cordelia Milward, the red-haired protector of Derrymill, Minnesota, was just finishing her English homework. She glanced at the clock on her laptop, inhaled, and exhaled gradually, closing her eyes. She closed her laptop and slid it under her pillow, and then reached for her phone, swiping around for her Calendar app. She checked her upcoming tasks:

- ~~yellow wallpaper response~~
- french ii shit (lol)
- pick up spiro

There was more on the list, but she averted her eyes. She threw her phone on her pillow, then straightened, and stood up. She reached into her right pocket and pulled out a plain black wallet. Opening it, she slid out a white plastic card with blue text at the top that read “AUGUR, LLC.” Beneath this was a line of text reading “EMPLOYEE 35747108.” The rest of the card was filled with an apparently random string of symbols; some resembled Greek letters, but others were more like runes. She placed her wallet on the desk in front of her bed and walked out the door. Her pockets were empty, other than her room key and her employee ID.

She walked down the burgundy-carpeted hallway of Bex Hall, the walls tinted yellow by stained fluorescent lights, and pushed open the gray door to the staircase. On her way down, she saw a girl in a Nine Inch Nails t-shirt coming up. Cordelia made eye contact with her and forced a smile, and the girl’s eyes flashed with recognition.

“Hey! Cordelia!”

Cordelia nodded as she walked past her. “Hey, Rachel,” she said. The previous year, Rachel and Cordelia were in Book Club together. Cordelia hadn’t been attending this semester.

“Long time no see!”

“Yeah, well, I’ll see you around,” she said, picking up her pace slightly and walking out the door. That was close, Cordelia. You almost had to talk to one of your classmates.

She was outside, on Derry University’s campus, which was more like a parking lot with a few buildings lining its edges. The moon was waning, shining brightly above her, and there was a slight chill in the air. She folded her arms across her chest, left the lot, and started down Penrose Lane. Just a block away was 7/11. Here, Cordelia walked into the store’s parking lot, and then around the side of the building, facing the empty field behind it. She pressed her back against the wall of the building and pressed her employee ID against her heart.

“Moon seal arcana,” she whispered, closing her eyes “clock in.”

A sound like radio static filled the air, and then there was a flash of light. Her employee ID was suddenly longer, much heavier, and distinctly more baseball bat-shaped. This was because it was now a baseball bat. Cordelia opened her eyes and readjusted her posture. She was about five inches taller, not including the six-inch heels she was now wearing. Her gray shirt and black sweatpants had been swapped out with a pink dress and a denim jacket—her usual work clothes. Her hair, just below her shoulders before, was now about halfway down her back. She ran her hand up the side of her face and through her hair, letting a misty sigh escape from her mouth. It was so soft. Attached to her wrist now was a dark gray digital watch, which displayed the numbers “00” in soft green.

She lowered herself slightly, stretching her legs, and then walked back around to the front of the 7/11. There was a cashier inside, but she wasn't worried about them—in this state, no one could see her unless she spoke to them.

Her instinct guided her another block down Penrose, to Clove Park, which was really a patch of grass next to a pond, both surrounded by a fence. In the middle of the park was a single oak tree. Standing outside of the gate, Cordelia could see three short, dark, round figures darting around in the moonlight, occasionally stopping to jerk their heads about, as if on the lookout for some hidden enemy.

Roadrunners, she thought.

Stepping from the concrete into the grass, Cordelia gripped her bat with both hands and whistled to get their attention. One of them, which had been stopped next to the tree, swiveled around to face her, and seemed to size her up. She planted her feet about shoulders' width apart. The creature tilted back, and then dashed at her at full speed. As far as monsters went, roadrunners were pretty dumb. She slung her bat over her right shoulder. She could see it a little more clearly now: it was really more like a round, sharp-toothed gaping maw that grew legs. Awkward, bird-like legs. She narrowed her eyes as it drew closer.

“Vibe check, loser,” she said, swinging her bat, launching the creature about twenty feet. It hit the ground with a pathetic *thud*, and then dissipated into a wispy white mist. The watch on her wrist beeped twice, now displaying a “01” on its face. Nine more points to go, and she had two of them lined up here. The remaining roadrunners were watching her now from both fenced corners across from her, their spindly legs gearing up as if in a slow march in place.

She tapped her bat on the soft grass, and then dragged it behind her as she approached the oak tree, her eyes darting back and forth to keep track of both monsters. Stopped next to the tree now, she clicked her tongue and winked at the one to the right. It spat and hissed as it started running towards her, and then growled as it found itself running *below* her as Cordelia jumped a good five feet into the air. The roadrunner dug its claws into the ground in order to stop itself, already having run a few yards behind her. Cordelia landed on her feet, facing the other roadrunner, which was already racing to pounce on her. She stuck her bat straight out with both hands, and the monster stopped dead as it received a mouthful of the business end. She lifted, the caught roadrunner kicking and gobbing with the bat lodged in the back of its throat. Cordelia heard a light scurrying behind her, and turned around just in time to swing, colliding the end of her bat with the other roadrunner and slamming both of them into the tree. A hiss like rain hitting soft metal, four beeps, and then silence.

“03,” her watch registered. They could at least make it hard.

She left the park to look for her next mark. She hadn't made it further than a few feet when her watch started to beep. She looked down to find it flashing not its usual digital numbers, but instead, a series of letters, cycling through about a second at a time.

“T”

“C”

“U”

What?

And then, something else:

“.”)

Cordelia glanced over her right shoulder, back in the direction of the park, to find nothing and no one behind her. When she turned back to her front, however, there was a figure, just slightly shorter than her. Cordelia let out a small yelp, gripping her bat and stumbling backwards a few steps. If she were in her usual body, she probably would have fallen flat on her ass. It took her a half-second to notice that the person in front of her was giggling.

“Hey, C-C-Cordelia. Long time no see.”

“Glitch! Are you trying to kill me?”

“What, is your elysian body gonna get heart failure? I was just messing with you.” Glitch was wearing a pair of dark green shorts that ended just above their knees, a black crop top, and a light green cloak that somewhat resembled a lab coat. When they stuttered, their figure seemed to flicker slightly with that same light green glow, as if reality had not quite finished loading their model yet. They were already smiling, but now they gave Cordelia a toothy grin. “Have you been avoiding me?”

“No, I just haven’t, um, been around. Some family stuff.” It was socially acceptable, she knew, to let someone know that you lost someone close to you. It was probably less normal to spend months in bed wallowing in your grief. Especially if the person you lost wasn’t an immediate family member. Only your cousin. Cordelia touched her bat to the ground. “They didn’t used schedule us at the same time. Is something up?”

“Well, it’s just that Venus is in retrograde,” Glitch said.

“Oh. I see,” Cordelia said. Sometimes it was better to just take it in stride.

“So, I actually thought you c-could help me take c-c-care of a bigger monster. Do you think we could c-catch up on the way?”

Cordelia thought for a moment. She wasn't particularly thrilled at the thought of discussing the last year. But maybe some company wouldn't kill her.

"Sure, Glitch. I can help."

"C-C-Cool! It's back in the direction of Derry U, so we c-can head that way." With that, Cordelia turned around, waiting a moment for Glitch to walk up beside her, and the two of them started back up the road to Derry University. At one point, as they passed the 7/11, Glitch asked "How have you been?"

"Fine," Cordelia said, and wanted it to be true. It wasn't, though. Cousin Mel was her hero, and she was gone, and Cordelia was still barely recovering. They were silent the rest of the way. Glitch, more than a few times, shot a worried glance at Cordelia, who did not look up from the ground once. When they arrived at the lot, Glitch opened their mouth to say something, stopped, and then said something else.

"I saw it around here somewhere." They looked around, straining their eyes as Cordelia stared. "Mm. Ok-k-kay. I think I know." Glitch stepped onto the black pavement of the lot, with Cordelia following behind now. Glitch led them to the western end of the lot, and they walked alongside the buildings.

"What is it that we're looking for, anyway?" Cordelia said as they traced the gray cube of the library.

"I'm not really sure. I haven't seen it b-before tonight, but it's big. I think it has something to do with the lunar enti-ti—enti—the full moon monster this month. Wait." They were just outside the dining hall, a long building painted an eggshell color with red accents. Behind it was Moore Hall, another dorm. Between the two buildings was a small alley, where

Cordelia could hear something grinding, a low noise like a hand being dragged across a metal sheet. Glitch poked their head around the corner, and then recoiled. “Alright, don’t make any noise, but look.”

Cordelia peeked around the corner and saw Glitch’s mark. A black shadowy figure, about eight or nine feet tall, and had broad, hunched shoulders. Its stature was akin to a golem, or a mopey Andre the Giant. It was running a large, round, arm-like limb across the top of a dumpster. She took a step back and looked at Glitch. The two of them spoke in hushed tones now.

“It’s big alright.”

“Probably worth about six each, b-between the two of us.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“I was thinking that I c-c-could draw it out here and try to grapple it, while you hit it with your bat,” Glitch said. There was a beat, and Cordelia shifted her weight.

“Is that seriously the end of your plan?”

“Hey, if these things work, they work!”

“Okay, okay,” Cordelia said. “I’ll get myself ready here.” She stepped a yard or two away from the two buildings, the alley just out of her line of sight.

Glitch snapped their fingers, and a black paring knife appeared in their hand. Cordelia clenched her hands around her bat as they entered the alley. Cordelia moved to the side so that she could see in. The large creature turned to look at Glitch, revealing now its striking yellow orb-like eyes. It turned its body away from the dumpster, taking a large step towards them, and

then another. Glitch stepped back once, and then twice, mimicking the monster's movement. It seemed to bend its knees slightly, and then, with unexpected force, lunged towards Glitch.

“Shoot!” Glitch flickered green and then disappeared just before the monster could grab them. It stumbled forward and out of the alley, disoriented at the disappearance of its prey. As it tried to regain its bearings, Glitch reappeared, this time on the monster's shoulders, covering its eyes with their closed hands. The giant grumbled, jerking back and forth in an attempt to shake its attacker. “Now!” Cordelia jumped forward and swung her bat with all of her might, striking the monster square in the stomach. It let out a low groan and took a staggering step backwards diagonally, so that its back touched the wall of the dining hall. Feeling the hard surface behind it, it rocked forwards, and then back, slamming Glitch into the wall. Their grip loosened, and they fell to the ground beside its feet, returning the monster's sight. It exhaled a black smog from its square jaw, and then turned its yellow glowing eyes to Cordelia.

The thick smog from the monster's mouth seemed to dissipate in the cool Minnesota night air, but all the same, Cordelia could feel something thick enter her nostrils, choking her slightly as it went down into her lungs. She looked up at the giant, and in its yellow eyes, she could only find dread. She dropped her bat, and it clattered to the ground with a sound like wood hitting pavement, because this is exactly what it was. This was not a pointed dread, in the sense that she was afraid of this creature. Instead, she felt her mind going hazy, and wandering, and though she was aware of it, she could do nothing to stop it. All at once, the thoughts started overwhelming her. They were disjointed and unrelated and each one seemed to make her whole body twitch. They began small and then grew like a cyst. Did she feed Milo before she left Jersey? Did that English homework she wrote actually sound good? Did she sound stupid? She

couldn't afford to fail, there was already so much to catch up on after she missed last semester. Oh, god. Her breathing was short now, little wheezing heaves that felt like they would make her lungs burst. She couldn't move. What were those breathing exercises Dr. Nussbaum showed her earlier? The monster stared, and its eyes seemed to glow brighter with each second. Why couldn't she move?

“Cordelia!”

The monster's gaze was broken as Glitch launched himself at its legs, bringing it down on its side with a sound like a boulder hitting the bottom of a canyon. They climbed onto its stomach and, gripping their knife in both hands, drove it downwards, into its right eye. It roared, and then they wrenched their hands to the left, slashing through the monster with a devastating gravelly crunch. There was a puff of white smoke, and Glitch was kneeling on the pavement, their shoulders rising and falling with their breath.

“Are you o-ok—are you alright?” they said. “What happened there?”

“I'm fine,” Cordelia said.

“Hey, C-C-Cordelia. It's probably none of my business, but you seem... stressed out.”

Cordelia stared at the pavement.

“Have you ever thought about... taking some time off from Augur?”

Cordelia looked up at Glitch. “Is that... something we can do?”

Work, after the fall of the larger creature, was routine. Cordelia and Glitch found another pack of roadrunners and gathered their remaining points. They didn't talk to each other much at all. Afterwards, Cordelia went back to her room in Bex Hall and grabbed her phone and a small

plastic sandwich bag from her desk. Inside were a toothbrush, toothpaste, and a razor. The hallway seemed much brighter than it did earlier, and she had to look down to avoid the glare of the fluorescent lights. She started towards the bathroom at the other end of the hall, pulling her phone from her pocket to check the time. 1:56 AM. She huffed and blinked her eyes hard twice.

Another perk of the job was the elysian form: a different body, just for her work. When she fought monsters, she wasn't really fighting with her own hands. Her mundane body might as well have been sleeping. Physically, there was no way that the job could tire her out. But there is a certain negative sensation that comes with fighting monsters. You might feel something like it if you read from a screen for too long, or try to solve a math problem that you don't quite have the understanding to work out. Cordelia was exhausted.

She stepped into the bathroom, the lights just slightly dimmer, on account of the thin dark film that appeared to be caking the fixtures. Her shoe squeaked on the tile as she walked in, and she stopped. She twisted her foot once, and then again, listening to the high-pitched rubbery sound. She wasn't sure why she did it, but it made her smile, and she exhaled a bit of air out of her nose. She walked further into the bathroom, passing a few of the sinks before stopping at one towards the end of the room, closer to the black frosty window. She plopped the sandwich bag on the head of the sink and looked up at the mirror.

As she grabbed her toothbrush and squeezed the toothpaste tube onto it (just a bit too much), she maintained strong eye contact with her reflection. She hated looking at herself a little less after starting estradiol, but of course, these things don't happen overnight. She bid the toothbrush to do what it was meant to, and then spit in the sink.

Her mouth feeling fresh, unlike the rest of her, she returned to her room. She climbed into bed, but it felt stiff, unwieldy. She couldn't stop thinking about the shadowy creature. At 4:02 AM, her eyes were still wide open.

She thought, as she often did, about Mel.

Cordelia had always admired Mel. It wasn't just that she was an older female figure in her life—though that was part of it. Nor was she particularly successful. Assistant Manager at Jersey Video was cool, though. What Cordelia looked up to in her was that, through all of it, college and work and life, Mel had always seemed happy. Mel, Cordelia thought, had figured it out, whatever “it” was. She never ended up asking her how.

At 9:00 AM, the sanguine car crash of her alarm made her aware of the world and its daylight, which was streaming through her blinds. At some point, she had fallen asleep. She reached down to the floor with one hand and tapped her phone's screen without looking—SNOOZE. She closed her eyes, and after what seemed like a second, the sound repeated itself. She groaned through a short breath, and this time, she rolled over to look at the phone's screen. 9:05 AM. She set it to Snooze again. This process repeated several times until a different, lower tone played, and a different notification intruded upon her sporadic oblivion. It read Interpreting Literature II - 29 minutes. She squeezed her eyes shut and flapped her lips vehemently. She had recently found that exhaustion, and the slow-killing melancholy that had plagued her last winter, was only less severe than her psyche's aversion to missing class. Unstoppable force? Meet object only movable by desolate fear of failure. Not that it did her

much good. She barely made time for herself to study, and it showed in her grades. Often, the best she could hope for was a high C.

Cordelia went through her half-hearted morning routine; she slid on a pair of black sweatpants from her floor, she brushed her teeth, splashed some water on her face, and either forgot to shave or did not care enough to. In her room, she opened two medication bottles which did not say her name, and swallowed a light yellow pill (dry), and rested a chalky blue tablet under her tongue. She grabbed her old red backpack and made her way down the stairs and out into the DU lot, avoiding eye contact with everyone she passed. Avoiding eye contact was one of the few things Cordelia thought she was good at by day. She slogged her way through the lot and into the amber-coated passages of Knowle Hall. As she sat in class, almost prying her heavy eyelids open behind someone buzzing about Charlotte Perkins Gilman, she realized that she still had work tonight. And then a thought crossed her mind: maybe it was time to take a break from Augur.

The Derrymill branch office of Augur, or any of the extradimensional company's offices, for that matter, did not have a particular location. It was nowhere, and was everywhere, or rather, it was exactly where it needed to be at any given time. After clocking in in the alley of Derry U's dining hall, Cordelia turned her attention to the back door and took a deep breath. She placed a wary hand on the knob, felt its steel, frigid the night air, and opened the door. Inside was a barren replication of the hallway of a corporate office. The carpet was grey and the walls were an off-white made whiter by the rectangular lights fixed into the ceiling. Cordelia stepped inside and pulled the door shut behind her, barely thinking about the fact that the building's light was not

spilling out into the dark alley. You stopped thinking about things like that after awhile in a business like hers. At the end of the hall was a single wooden door with a sleek black nameplate, announcing the occupant of the room in metallic font. "CONSTANTINE." Cordelia approached, and knocked three times on the door.

"Come in," said a nasally voice from inside. He sounded like Ira Glass after drinking a tall glass of milk. In spite of his cheery tone, something about him always seemed off. But he was nice, and the only form of management at Augur that Cordelia had ever spoken to. Cordelia stepped in and gave a half-wave. Constantine smiled, his eyes closing behind his thick-framed glasses as he did so. He set a stack of papers aside on his desk and gestured to a small wooden chair across from him. "Please, take a seat. How are you doing, Cordelia?"

"I'm fine," she said, meeting his eyes, which still seemed to be smiling.

"Excellent, excellent." He swiveled his chair to the right and reached into a simple wooden cabinet on the wall, pulling out a cup with a fine wisp of steam rising from it. "Cocoa?"

Cordelia squinted for a second, but then released with an exhale, leaning back in her chair. "Sure. Um, please." Constantine produced another mug from the cabinet and pushed it across the table. "Thanks."

"Of course. What can I help you with today, Cordelia?"

"I, uh, wanted to take some time off. If that's... okay."

Constantine paused for a second, blinking a few times. Was he surprised? "Sure, that's okay. I have the paperwork here." Cordelia took a sip of her hot chocolate. It was divine. "What days were you thinking of taking off?" Constantine said, shuffling a stack of four papers he pulled from his desk.

“Well, I was thinking of... two weeks. I was hoping to focus on my schoolwork for a little while. I don’t know how possible that is, though.”

“Cordelia, you know that we here at Augur pride ourselves at being able to provide our employees with a flexible schedule,” he said, scribbling on the papers in front of him. “As long as there is another employee on the beat—I understand that the agent designated The Devil Glitch works in Derrymill with you—we are happy to allow you as much time off as possible, though there are some exceptions.” It didn’t make much sense to Cordelia, but she figured that it stood to reason that Augur’s policies wouldn’t always translate to those of a normal company; they were, after all, not of this world. She took another, longer drink from her mug, and then her eyebrows knitted together with disconcertment.

“Can I ask you something, Constantine?”

“I’m here for you, Cordelia,” he said in his homely, nasally tone, looking up at her.

“If there’s nothing wrong with me taking time off... why didn’t you ever tell me that I could?”

“That’s simple,” he said. “You never asked.” He looked back down and continued filling out the forms. From across the desk, Cordelia could only see him writing in what appeared to be hundreds of tiny black boxes.

Something welled up in her that felt like anger, and then was suppressed by something like sadness. Not quite. Her shoulders sagged, and she placed her forearms on Constantine’s desk. It occurred to her that, in her four years of working with Augur, the thought of taking time off never even crossed her mind. Through high school and summers, she worked nearly five

nights a week. It was the same, her first year at Derry. Even after she lost Mel, she would drag herself out of her room after a long day of sulking and clock in for work.

“I see,” she said, and Constantine said nothing as he finished the last page of the form.

She liked working for Augur, of course. The clothes, the body—the monster-hunting. It made her feel powerful when she started back in high school, a time in her life where she felt nothing but helpless. It was still work, of course. For the life of her, Cordelia couldn’t figure out why she was incapable of giving herself a break.

“Alright, that’s all. Though we did hit a snag at the end of the month here,” he said, passing her one of the pages, which appeared to be a calendar that he had marked off. “We have you off for the next week, but the schedule is blacked out the week of the 20th.” Cordelia tensed up at the mention of the 20th. He pointed near the bottom of the calendar. “We’re expecting a lunar entity and we’ll need both of you on it. Sorry for the inconvenience.”

“And you’re... sure I can’t take next week off?”

“You know how the more powerful monsters can be, Cordelia. We wouldn’t want Glitch fighting it alone. There wasn’t an entity last cycle, so we need to be on alert.”

“You’re right. Okay.” She massaged her eyelids roughly with her right hand. Constantine passed her a pen and slid the rest of the form across the desk, pointing to the bottom of the first page, where there was a long, blank line. She blinked at the name printed above it. “Sheer Heart Attack Cordelia.” The codename she’d registered under when she was sixteen. She signed the form and passed it back to Constantine.

“Okay, then. You’re set. Is there anything else I can do for you tonight?”

“No,” Cordelia said, sighing, “I think that’s it.” She picked her mug back up and drank it down all at once, leaving the dark brown sludge pooling at the bottom.

“Then we’ll see you soon,” he said, revealing his teeth in what should have been a smile. He then looked down, putting his paperwork back in front of him.

“Yeah, you will,” Cordelia said. “Thank you, Constantine.” Constantine said nothing, and Cordelia stood to leave. “I hope you have a good night.”

She walked back through the hallway and out the door, back into the darkness of the alley. She looked behind her. The door to the office was gone, of course. She clocked out, and without a sound, and barely a second’s pause, she was a little shorter, a little more tired. She had changed into pajama pants before clocking in, and as her real legs touched the bitter climate, the attire all at once felt inappropriate. She shivered, moving her feet, which now felt stiff. She struggled her way back to Bex, walking up the stairs to her room. Standing in front of her bed, she took a deep inhale, and let it sit in her lungs for a few moments before exhaling. This wasn’t going to solve all of her problems, but, she thought, it was a start. There was something else, though. She picked up her phone from her desk and looked at her calendar for the week of the 20th. “mid-terms week”

Cordelia was huffing and panting on the corner across from 7/11, her face red from a mixture of exhaustion and the cold. It was 6:32 PM, and she had decided that going for a jog would be an effective use of her time. The *Stress Management* pamphlet that Dr. Nussbaum had given her a few weeks ago said that exercise would be helpful, but right now, she just felt like someone had

punched her in the ribs. Bending over and pressing her hands into her knees, she closed her eyes, trying to catch her breath.

She had been jogging with Mel a few times in high school, though each time had been Mel's idea. The first time, Cordelia remembered, she had collapsed onto a park bench within five minutes. Mel had laughed, ruffled her hair, and handed her a plastic water bottle.

"You okay, kiddo?" Mel asked. This was after Cordelia had begun struggling with her identity, but before she was called Cordelia. Before she was Sheer Heart Attack.

Cordelia responded by mumbling something under her rasping breath, and Mel sat down next to her.

"What was that?"

"I... I said," Cordelia said, inhaling sharply through her nose, "does it ever get..." Her breath was still catching. "Does it ever get easier?"

"Of course it does," Mel said as Cordelia took a big gulp of water. "But you have to do it every day."

"Every day..." Cordelia mused. "And it's easy." She looked up at Mel. Her hair was dark, and still long, tied back in a ponytail.

"Not easy," she said. "Just easier. Life is like that. We manage things better, I think, when we have routines. When we take care of ourselves. Drink some more water," she added, pushing the hand Cordelia was holding the bottle in up.

Cordelia opened her eyes, staring at the sidewalk. Right. Okay. She straightened her back and jogged her way back to Bex Hall for a shower.

The following morning, she got up at 9:16 AM, went to Interpreting Literature, then attended Western Art and Mathematical Concepts II. She went for another jog that afternoon, sitting down later to finish her homework over a cup of tea. She set aside some extra time to revisit *News of the World* by Queen. It always was her favorite album.

Days later, on Friday, she got up just a few minutes after her alarm went off. She grabbed a bottle of water from her desk and took a few sips before taking her spiro. She'd been trying to stay conscious of being hydrated. She was beginning to fall into a rhythm, and it was a rhythm she felt she could feel good about.

Inevitably, though, Monday rolled around. The moment she heard her alarm, she knew something was wrong. Her body felt heavy. Like it was being held down. She hit "Snooze" on her alarm. She didn't want to get up. She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the feeling would come to her, but there was only a thick haze. She rolled over and whined in a low voice. She was supposed to be doing better. What was the point if she was just going to fall back into one of her moods? She laid down face-first on her bed. Her alarm went off another time. She picked her phone up and put it next to her on the mattress, glancing at the screen. It was 9:10. She turned off the alarm and opened her calendar app. "October 21st - full moon (back 2 work)"

Of course. How could she forget? She blinked, consciously, fearing she might doze off if she let herself do it idly. Against all odds, she forced herself out of bed. Outside, the light sound of rain was rapping against the window, like a vampire waiting to be invited in.

“How are your grades, kiddo?” A year before she died, Mel stayed with them for a week.

Cordelia was still in high school. They sat on the couch in the living room of the silent house, *Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer* playing on TV.

“They’re fine, but...”

“But?”

“I guess I just... I still feel, sad. And I don’t really get... it. What’s the point of trying so hard, of keeping my grades up, if I’m just going to go back to feeling... sad?”

“Cordelia...” Mel placed a hand on her shoulder. “You can’t let yourself think that way. Life is the point. Things are going to be hard, but you can’t see them as obstacles in your way. They’re part of it, Cordelia. Life is its own thing, and the hard stuff is part of it.”

“Like *Dark Souls*,” said Cordelia.

“Yeah,” said Mel, smiling. “Like *Dark Souls*. I’m here to help you, okay? We all are. I’m going to try to visit more often.”

“You promise?” said Cordelia.

“Of course,” said Mel.

The next fall, during Cordelia’s first semester at Derry, there was a fire at Mel’s apartment. They’d never determined the exact cause, but they said it was probably faulty wiring.

It was hard for Cordelia to get herself through the day, but she did it. This, too, was another victory, though the exact size of it is relative. In her room, she tried to study for her midterms later in the week, but couldn’t seem to find the focus. Motivation to go for a jog was another thing that she couldn’t seem to find, and anyway the ground was still wet from the rain earlier in

the day. She found herself staring off into space, or staring down at her phone, and before she knew it, it was 9:30 PM. She clocked into work and started to make her way to their usual meeting point in Clove Park, but found Glitch waiting for her on the outside of Derry U's parking lot. Constantine was leaning against the fence, wearing a pressed black suit, doing his best to appear human.

“Oh. Sorry, have you been waiting long?” she said.

“Not even,” Glitch said. “I was just c-c-c-... going to find you.” They pointed at the fence. “C-C-C-o-onstantine is here.”

“Yeah, I,” she glanced back and forth as Constantine waved at her, “I see that. What are you doing here?”

“I've just finished placing magical barriers around the property of this institution.”

Constantine pressed the screen of his watch, which was identical to Cordelia's and Glitch's, and faint whitish-gray walls appeared on the perimeter of the lot.

“Oh. Why would you do that?” Cordelia said, already having a vague idea of the answer.

“We have reason to believe that the lunar entity is located here. This month, the bulk of magical energy in Derrymill has been emanating from this central point.”

“That's... interesting. What do we know about it?”

“Agent Glitch has already heard some of this, but the entity is a large, likely infernal, organism resembling the mammal that humans identify as *Procyon lotor*.”

Cordelia raised an eyebrow, and Glitch nudged her shoulder. “Raccoon,” they whispered.

“Its abilities, we have been able to gather, can be classified under Augur Standard Notation 13-C.” Cordelia tried to remember the notation—psychic vampire, she was pretty sure.

“C” was “emotion.” What it fed off of. “Due to the deceptively simple nature of human emotion, it is difficult to precisely describe how the monster attains its power, but suffice it to say that it is able to create states of agitation—depression, anxiety, stress—in those vulnerable to it, and then feed on the energy created by these states.”

“I’ve been fighting its stooges for the last week. They’re c-creepy,” said Glitch.

“So, naturally, it chooses to haunt a university in the midwest,” Cordelia said, pinching the bridge of her nose. “And, of course, the only day that we can kill it happens to fall during midterms.”

“Incidences like these are not uncommon. Remember that the seeds of the ethereal are often planted by both cerebral and somatic events in the mundane world.”

Cordelia sighed, caving. “Yeah, no, I know.”

After a brief lull, Glitch chimed in again:

“We should probably get started, then, right?”

“Yes, well, if neither of you have any further questions,” said Constantine, pushing his glasses up, “then there is nothing that should stop you from beginning the neutralization.”

Cordelia and Glitch met each other’s eyes, and then nodded. They’d been through this together a handful of times already. The two of them walked through Constantine’s barrier and into the lot to search for the creature. Their best bet, Cordelia suggested, would be Regence Hall, the junior and senior residences. When their searched turned up nothing, they made tracks to Bex Hall, scanning each floor one by one, and yielding nothing but artificial light and chipped paint. When they reached the fourth and final floor, however, they found something. Cordelia noticed it first—as she cracked open the door leading out of the staircase, a familiar smog seemed to curl

around her feet. It was close. She cracked the door just a bit further, making sure the monster wasn't too close, then pushed it out all the way. Glitch stepped out into the hallway, and Cordelia guided the door back into its place, making sure it didn't make too much noise. Further down, near the end of the hall, they could see it, hunched over leaning against a door and sighing the dark fog from its maw. At about seven feet tall, it looked more like a bear than a racoon, but its striped tail was distinct and prominent.

“What’s the plan?” Cordelia whispered.

“I’ll... draw it out and you hit it?”

Cordelia nodded, planting her feet and readying her bat again. Just routine work, she thought. Glitch crept through the hall, approaching the raccoon as it continued producing its chthonic essence. When they were about ten feet away, they sprung into action.

“Hey!” they shouted, and the monster looked to its left, staring bullets into Glitch. It snarled and got down on all fours, lunging at Glitch. Glitch turned tail, winked at Cordelia, and blinked out, leaving the monster barrelling towards her, leaving a trail of smog behind it.

“Smoking kills, Sly Cooper,” Cordelia said, driving her bat straight into its side. It yelped, slamming against the wall of the residence hall and hitting the floor. Cordelia thanked God that no one could hear this. Glitch appeared, then, just a few feet away, and jumped, driving their knife into the raccoon’s back, then pulling it out, stumbling backwards a bit. The knife wound seemed to blur with the monster’s black smoke for a moment, and when it cleared, there was no wound at all.

“Wh-wh-what th—” Glitch made a high-pitched noise as the monster spun around and struck them with a large paw, cleanly sending them sliding across the carpeted hallway. It turned

its attention to Cordelia, emitting a low growl, its fangs steaming black. Was it just her, or was it suddenly larger? She tried to push it back with the long end of her bat, but now, it seemed, it was far too heavy. Her mouth was agape as she looked up to meet its glowing yellow eyes. She pressed her back against the metal door, feeling for the handle. She couldn't find it. She couldn't look away.

A low hiss filled Cordelia's ears as the raccoon straightened out, its blackish arms, now covered in that cloud of haze, reaching up. It placed its hands on either side of her neck, and applied no pressure. Still, she felt her throat tighten. She felt heavy, like the only thing holding her up, now, was this monster, and if it let her go, she might collapse and never get up. And why should she get up? What was the point of trying if she was just going to keep getting sad? Why should she force herself through the day just for the chance that, tomorrow, she wouldn't have to? Yes, it was easier to just lay still. What was the point in trying?

Life is the point, Cordelia.

The raccoon roared, reeling backwards and falling on its back as Glitch swung around it and jammed their knife into its left arm. Cordelia, slightly dazed, watched as the wound fogged up, then disappeared. Just as she thought, the monster was bigger now. Like the more they agitated it, the stronger it got. Cordelia looked at Glitch.

"We need to go."

"What?" they said.

"It's not working. We need to regroup. Let's go." Cordelia was already swinging the door open as the monster stood again. She and Glitch ran down the stairs, the raccoon catching on the

door, but then flinging it all the way open and nearly tumbling down the stairs. Cordelia glanced back. It definitely wasn't getting smaller.

"How are we supposed to—to kill it?" Glitch shouted as they skipped a few stairs.

"I'm not sure we can," Cordelia said.

Glitch ran out first, and then Cordelia, slamming the door behind them. They were barely halfway across the glistening lot when the door swung open again with a loud crash. Cordelia could hear the creature snarling and snapping as it gained on them, and they crossed through the barrier just in time for the monster to crash into it. It rolled around, and was on all fours again, pressing itself against the magical shield. Cordelia met its eyes and frowned.

"You haven't neutralized it," Constantine observed.

"It's—it won't stay down. We c-can't hurt it," Glitch said.

"Well, perhaps it has some weakness you need to take advantage of." These things often did. Cordelia remained silent, watching the monster panting through hunched shoulders. It seemed to give up on getting through the barrier and glanced around, sizing up its surroundings. She could have mistaken the rings around its eyes for eye bags.

"C-Cordelia says she doesn't think it will go—go down," Glitch said.

"That's highly unlikely. At the very least, all extradimensional threats at the ethereal level can be neutralized."

"Hm. Neutralized," Cordelia said idly. She watched the raccoon pad around on the asphalt, spot its reflection in a puddle, and snarl again.

"Cordelia, do you have further thoughts?" Constantine said, seeming slightly irritated.

This was a first.

“Yeah, no, I was just thinking... It’s kind of like me.” The raccoon was slowly making its way back to Bex Hall.

“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself, C-Co-o-rdelia—”

“No, it’s—I mean, I think I have an idea. Constantine, can you give me a bowl of water and play ‘All Dead, All Dead’ by Queen?”

“I—I’m sorry?” said Constantine, widening his eyes.

“C-C-Cordelia, did you hi—did you hit your head back there?”

“No, I’m serious, I think I know how to fix this,” she said, leaning her bat against the fence. “What do you have to lose?”

“An agent,” Constantine said. He locked eyes with Cordelia.

“Okay,” she said, “but if we don’t stop this thing tonight, it goes free for another month. I can’t let that go. If anything happens to me, you can interfere, but right now, I’m asking you to trust me.”

Constantine looked at Glitch, who shrugged. He shifted his eyes back to Cordelia. She wasn’t going to budge. Constantine waved his hand slightly, and a soft, melancholy piano filled the air. It sounded as if it was being played through a small PA system in the middle of the lot. Constantine handed Cordelia a small dog bowl, which he had not been holding a second ago. She gave a small nod to the two of them, and stepped into the lot.

The raccoon, trying to identify the source of the sound of Freddie Mercury, whipped its head around, stopping when it saw Cordelia approaching.

“Hey there,” she said. The raccoon growled and began to slink towards her. She put the bowl down in front of her and waited, her arms at her sides. She’d left her bat against the fence.

It was looming over her, almost ten feet tall now. It looked down and bared its teeth. “Look how big you’ve gotten.”

The creature shrugged off a look of perplexity and placed its arms around Cordelia’s neck. She felt heavy, and weak, but this time, she was ready for it. She placed her arms on the raccoon’s and gently removed them from her, as if it were the easiest thing in the world. It wasn’t, of course, but she did it anyway.

“I think we’re done with that for now, okay? I’m not here to fight you. I think I was trying to do that, for a long time, but... that’s not really how this works, is it? You sure don’t go down easy, at least.” She looked up into its bright yellow eyes and smiled, just a bit. It shrank nearly two feet. Just like she thought. If she could make it bigger, she could make it smaller. She just had to find the right way to manage it. “Have some water.”

The raccoon, still appearing cautious, bent down, keeping its eyes trained on Cordelia. After a second, it leaned in to lap up some of the water. It shrank a little more, just imperceptibly.

“You must have been thirsty,” she said after a few seconds. “Too many things to do to remember to take care of yourself, huh? Too many energies to drain, in your case, I guess.” She reached down to scratch its head, but when its ears perked up and it froze, she pulled her hand back.

Her ways are always with me

I wander all the while...

“Do you like this song? Sometimes I listen to it to calm down,” she said, rubbing her left forearm. The creature looked up at her absently. “It reminds me of someone I lost. She taught me a lot of things, but I think I’m only just starting to understand them.”

She frowned as she stared into its glowing eyes again. The monster was now about six feet tall.

“Listen. This sounds crazy, but I get what you’re going through,” she said, as if she were not talking to a large raccoon. “You’re lost. You’re sad, and you don’t really know why you’re sad, and you don’t really like your weird raccoon body. That makes you angry. Maybe you wanna hit something.” She mimicked swinging a baseball bat, and the raccoon blinked. “You find an outlet that lets you do that. You find something that makes you feel big and strong, and maybe sometimes it works. But it’s not really the solution. At the end of the day, it’s only a part of you.” She held out her hand and a soft blue glow emanated from it. She was holding her employee ID. She pressed it to her left breast. “Moon seal arcana. Clock out.”

Her hair shortened, back to her shoulders, and she got shorter, too, standing at eye level with the creature. She was wearing a grey t-shirt and a pair of black shorts. She shivered, slightly, remembering that she hadn’t been dressed for the cold.

“In reality, you’re small, and maybe you’re not weak, but you feel weak. Something happens that makes you feel weaker. Maybe you lose someone,” she said, her voice cracking. “You fall flat on your ass, and you stay there until you think it stops hurting, but when you finally get back up, everything is harder. You take less time to be with yourself to avoid being trapped *in* yourself. Your grades take a hit. Probably, you should talk to someone about it, but you’re ashamed, so you push people away. You avoid them. Maybe even some people who want to be your friend.” The raccoon was about half her height now. She sat down on the wet ground. “And you know that things will never go back to normal, and you miss your cousin so much, see, because she was your *hero*,” she said, sniffing and laughing nervously. “But then you see an

opportunity to get it all off your chest. And you think that maybe, you can make some changes. Maybe you need to stop trying to fight yourself, or running away from your sadness, and just... face it." She closed her eyes, a few stray tears streaking down her cheeks. "I kind of lost the analogy somewhere, but does that make sense?"

She opened her eyes, and sitting in front of her was a raccoon—big, black, beady eyes, human-like hands, though distinctly more, well, raccoon-like. Cordelia wiped her face with her sleeve and smiled. "Drink some more water." The raccoon stuck its head back in the bowl and drank. After a few seconds, it glanced back up at her.

She reached a hand out to the animal and inhaled. "I'm cool if you're cool?" The raccoon climbed up on her arm and she carried it through the lot and out of the barrier, which Constantine promptly dropped. Glitch and Constantine were looking at her, their mouths slightly agape.

"So, how do we... k-kill it?" Glitch said.

"We don't," Cordelia said, and she lowered the raccoon onto the ground. "You can't, really," she added as it trotted in the direction of the park. It really seemed like a normal raccoon now.

"Well," said Constantine, staring at a device on his arm, "I won't pretend I entirely understand what you've done here, but good work, Cordelia. You have, in fact, neutralized the lunar entity."

"Of course," she said. "We had to."

"If you have no further business, then, I'll take my leave," he said, and without a pause, he was gone.

"I t-told him to st-st—I told him not to do that anymore," Glitch said.

“Yeah,” Cordelia said. “I don’t think he gets why it’s creepy.”

The two of them laughed, and then Glitch seemed to stare at Cordelia.

“Hey,” they said, “I’ve never s-seen you outside of your elysian body. You look—you look cute.”

“I’m a mess,” she said, chuckling, “but thank you.”

“You are a mess. But who isn’t, right?”

“I guess so,” she said. “Goodnight, Glitch.”

“Goodnight, C-Cordelia. See ya soon.”

Rachel: cordelia!

Rachel: *cordelia

Rachel: we hangin 2nite?!

Cordelia: eyaaa not this week

Cordelia: gotta work tonight. full moon

Rachel: wtf does that mean?!

Rachel: wat do u even do?

Cordelia: ;)

Rachel: so fcking strange

Cordelia: i’ll see u at book club monday!

Cordelia smiled at her phone, and then set it down on her bed, plugging it in. She smoothed out her blue skirt and grabbed her pills and a water bottle from her desk. They’d doubled her dosage last week. She swallowed a spiro tablet, and then rested an estradiol under

her tongue. She closed her eyes as it dissolved, a faint sweet taste permeating through her mouth. She'd always thought they tasted a bit like a Flintstones vitamin. She went to the bathroom to freshen up. She'd started keeping her toothbrush and shaving kit in a glass cup. It wasn't any more elegant than the sandwich bag, but it was, she thought, less upsetting to look at. She went through her routine in front of the sink, realizing suddenly from a glance in the mirror that her facial hair had required less maintenance in the last few weeks. She stuck her tongue out at her reflection, which reacted in turn.

Cordelia still wasn't having an easy time. Not entirely, at least. There were still days where she didn't feel like getting out of bed—many days, in fact, were like this. But after the last full moon, she started to open up more, communicate with others, and this made her feel a little lighter. She wasn't alone anymore. Until last month, she realized, she had felt alone. Getting out of bed, she also realized, is easier when one doesn't feel this way. It's funny, that. She averaged about a 74 on all of her midterms, but she would take it. It was, after all, not failing.

She left the bathroom, dropped her things off in her room, and started making her way toward Clove Park. Things were better at work, too—she worked with Glitch more often, and the two of them enjoyed their time fulfilling their monster-busting quotas together. Glitch had also explained the concept of a vacation to Constantine, and they now were allowed three a year. Plus sick hours. This change, Cordelia was surprised to find out, was company-wide. All considered, Cordelia thought, Augur was a pretty good job. This was lucky, because Cordelia had a lifetime contract, and wasn't sure what would happen if she broke it.

Before leaving the lot, she poured a little bit of water in a bowl that was sitting by the door of Bex Hall. A completely average raccoon padded across the lot and began, graciously, to drink.