

**Malleus Maleficarum, maleficas
ut earum hæresim, ut phramea
potentissima conterens**

The Shadow Rises

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One

Hunter knocked back his cold, expensive beer. He was sitting alone at an open-air bar in the middle of Venice. It was late in the night, or at least it felt late - the days and nights seemed to take forever to tick past. The dark canal flickered with yellow lamp-light, along with new fragments of colour.

Hunter eyed the fairy lights that the new owner had strewn across the trellis beams, a cheap way to create a “youthful” environment. He didn’t approve.

He looked around again, his gaze deadened as though he saw through the thin veil of these mortal amusements, and was not impressed.

Hunter Astley appeared to be a very normal guy, though one could never call him average. He ticked every box for the traditional English gent; in his mid-twenties, tall with black hair and classic good looks; he held an aura of charm and intelligence that was woven so appealingly about him; he had a confidence that was only partly to do with a large family fortune to his name.

Yet all this helped to distract people from looking too closely, to stop them noticing that scrutinising gaze and apathy to the mundane facts of life. Because under the veil, there were darker things to fear.

Hunter Astley was a witch-hunter.

Under the guidance of the Malleus Maleficarum Council, alongside other witch-hunters, Hunter worked tirelessly to eradicate witches and witchcraft, to prevent curses and black magic and to stop the witchkind gaining the hold and power over the unaware, ignorant world. The witches never stopped in their pursuit of

power, so neither did Hunter and his fellow witch-hunters.

Except from now. Hunter was on holiday - against his own will, one might add. But the question was, when you know that evil magic is threatening everywhere beneath the surface, what does a witch-hunter do for a holiday?

Oh, he was bored. And in his bad mood, Hunter knew who to blame: James. Good old, annoying, interfering James Bennett. His colleague, who considered himself the brains of the operation, and was as loyal as he was irritating. The two of them had been working overtime since a big coop last hallowe'en, and last winter had been the busiest they had ever known the witchkind. The increased activity had taken more of a toll on Hunter of course. When considering the two of them, it was Hunter that was the man of action and James was his back-up, his background researcher.

James had taken it upon himself to insist that Hunter needed a break now that it was spring. Ok, things were calmer now, and ok, the last job had nearly killed him. But only nearly, he was still alive. But his arguments had been ignored and Hunter had finally agreed to take a week's holiday, especially as James threatened to lock up all the open cases and divert current issues to the others.

Although, when Hunter agreed to stop work for a whole week, that didn't stop him sneaking into his own office to slip all the Venetian files into his suitcase before he left. Not that it had been much use. The damn files hadn't been kept up-to-date and he was chasing ghosts. And no, ghosts didn't exist.

A trio of young women sauntering past dragged his attention back to the present. They were all beautiful, but the tallest of the three was particularly striking.

Hunter noticed that his weren't the only eyes that watched them cross the room, so he was an average guy after all. He smiled at the idea, maybe James was right, maybe he could enjoy a holiday.

When he raised his gaze again, the girls had gone. Hunter drained the last of his beer and made his way over to the bar. He leant against it and waited for the barman. He noticed her perfume first, a fresh scent that contrasted sharply against the alcohol.

Hunter looked up to see one of the girls standing a few feet away. With her heels on, she was almost as tall as Hunter. Her dark brown hair was tied back, and there was a proud tilt to her jaw. Hunter appreciatively inventoried the slim waist and long legs.

As though sensing his inspection, the girl turned on her heels to face him. Her hazel eyes locked onto him, coolly assessing him in return. Apparently dissatisfied, the girl turned away again.

Hunter inwardly laughed, not even a word passed between them and he had been shunned. His poor ego. He ordered a drink, and as he waited for his beer to come, he caught a male voice – one whose accent didn't hide the waver of uncertainty.

“... let me buy you a drink.”

Hunter turned to see a very smart, suited type, leaning in to the girl. His smile did nothing to disguise the fact his suggestion had been half a question. It almost reminded Hunter of how James was when he

had to talk to beautiful girls. Honestly, Hunter felt a little sorry for men that floundered so easily.

He paid for his beer and found himself watching as the girl looked uncomfortable as the suit got closer. Her painted lips somehow managed to convey a pout and a sneer that spoke volumes against her silence.

The guy grew increasingly unsure at her stony silence and eventually slunk off.

Hunter smiled to himself, keen for the challenge. He moved towards her and finally spoke. "Scusi, signorina.."

Her eyes suddenly snapped onto him again, her frown increasing. "Scusa, non parlo l'italiano." She replied in perfect Italian.

Hunter smirked at her avoidance. "Great, neither do I! But it's good to know that you talk at all." He couldn't help but notice that she was even more beautiful close up. If one got past the fixed haughty glare, of course.

There was a twitch in her lips as though she fought down a smile. The woman turned to her friends. "Let's go." They obediently shifted away from the bar. "Good night." She said to Hunter and, making no excuses, left.

Hunter watched her retreating figure. What a strange, beautiful girl.

Hunter stood nursing his beer for a quarter an hour, before giving in to his dull mood and heading home. He weighed up the desire for company tonight, there had been enough female eyes turned in his direction this evening, including the waitress at the restaurant earlier. But it felt like too much effort. No, he'd much

rather go back to his apartment, have a night cap, and see when the next flight back to London was.

Although it was spring, it wasn't cold. The late night walk was actually pleasant as he moved away from the youthful hub and into the quieter streets. It was then that he heard a scuffle in the distance, followed by silence.

Hunter stopped, looking in the direction of the brief disturbance. It was most probably a cat, or something equally innocent. But that niggling feeling in his gut grew, calling to him. Damn it, was he getting withdrawal symptoms from work? Looking for trouble where there was none to be found? The utter silence made his senses tingle and his instincts kicked in and took over. He made his way quietly in the direction of the noise. Down a shadowed path to where a heavy door was ajar. Hunter stood against the gap and heard people moving inside, he began to see the weak light of candles as they were lit by two flitting figures.

Hunter reflexively lifted his hand to his throat, closing his fingers around the comfortable weight of the protective amulet. Next he knelt down and retrieved the small gun strapped to his calf, thankful that he had gone against his colleague's advice, that he had decided to remain armed.

Standing tall again, he slipped inside, pressing the door shut behind him. The large room was lit by a hundred candles - some witches were overly keen on the traditional touches. There was a makeshift altar, a long table covered with black silk, and a young woman strapped to it. She struggled sluggishly against her

bonds, her breath fast and frightened. She was probably drugged, but at least she was alive. For now.

Hunter shifted around the edge of the room, keeping to the shadows. His eyes widened as he recognised the victim – the girl from the bar...

Her identity was confirmed when her two friends entered the circle of candlelight, bristling with excitement.

“P-please... please, you can’t...”

Hunter could hear the girl’s slurred pleas, her focus strengthening as those she considered friends came closer.

Hunter kept his own breathing low and steady, his gaze moving to a tall man with greying hair, although his face was unlined. He carried the knife, holding it up with reference.

As he drew up to the altar, Hunter knew he had to act. There was no time to assess hidden dangers. He stepped into the light, trying to look as confident as possible. “Stop! Fermo!”

They all turned, shocked at the unwelcome man that had interrupted their ritual. Hunter rushed to speak before they caught up with the situation. “I charge you to stop. I am Hunter Astley, by the Malleus Constitution you will surrender now to my authority to be bound and registered. If you refuse to come quietly, I am empowered to take any means necessary.”

Oh, it all sounded quite grand and official, and if he had had back up they might have turned themselves in harmlessly; but one Hunter against three put the odds in their favour.

“Assalire.” Get him. The man ordered. “Subito!” Now! He barked as the two girls hesitated.

Ah, perhaps they were new to this game, Hunter thought, briefly giving him hope. But hope and desperation were put out of his mind as his body moved almost instinctively into action. He felt the charm about his neck heat up as it absorbed attacks from all three. He took aim with his gun and fired a single shot...

The brown-haired girl woke up in a large bed with soft sheets, an early morning breeze rippling through the white cotton curtains and filling the room with cool and pleasant air.

“Good morning.” Hunter said gently as he stood in the doorway, waiting for his guest to wake up. “How are you feeling?”

The girl sat up sharply, but then groaned, pressing her hand to her aching head. “Where am I?”

“Still in Venice, in my apartment. My name’s Hunter by the way.” He smiled politely. This was usually the part where people thanked him.

She frowned, a certain intelligent harshness returning now that she was fully awake. “Why? You had no right to take me anywhere. What did you do, drug me?”

Hunter waited patiently for her to finish, a slight smirk at how easily people forget what was hard to believe. “It’s nice to feel appreciated for saving your life.” He replied calmly and innocently. “I’ll put on some coffee, come on through when you’re ready.”

He walked into the main room, smiling as he did so.

The girl sat dazed for a moment, then slowly slid out of the covers and stood up. She was still in last night's clothes, the smell of smoke and alcohol clinging to them. She didn't hesitate for long and Hunter heard her bare feet padding into the very luxurious open plan apartment. She stood next to the sofa, watching Hunter suspiciously in the small kitchen.

"So last night was real? I mean, what happened, and why?"

Hunter didn't reply immediately, but brought through two cups of steaming coffee and invited his guest to sit down. "If you don't mind me asking, had you known those girls long?"

The girl shrugged, "A few days, they were at the same hotel as me. I was on holiday alone and they were friendly, inviting me out day and night. I thought they were ok."

"It was their job, to gain your confidence. But they were going to kill you, to sacrifice you, last night. They were witches." Hunter glanced up as he finished speaking, watching her carefully after this revelation.

"Witches?! As in 'fire burn and cauldron bubble'? You've got to be joking."

"No, I am completely serious." He replied with an apologetic smile. "Witches are real, and to be blunt, they're all black-hearted, evil... I'm sorry you got involved. If we were in England I could offer you something to erase the memory - but as it is..."

"Are there a lot of witches?"

Hunter shrugged. "Depends on what you mean by lots? There are too many in my opinion. If I tried to put a number on them, perhaps ten thousand

worldwide." He paused to drink his coffee. "Does that surprise you?"

"I don't know; it's not something I've previously considered." The girl replied quickly and rather sharply. "But I suppose if you count all the fortune tellers and-

"No." Hunter broke in with a rue smile. "All those harmless, normal people that play with the idea of using magic - they aren't witches. Witches are an entirely different breed of human, at least one parent has to be a witch; you can't become one by wanting it. And they don't waste their power telling fortunes at fairs either. Instead, they create illnesses and plagues; they torment victims with illusions and nightmares; they can bring storms, fires and floods. They do all this and more, for their own gain, or sometimes just because they enjoy it.

"Their powers are only limited by their strength - they gain a temporary boost from draining the life from victims; that is why they perform sacrifices, their thirst for power is insatiable. Sorry, I don't mean to frighten you."

The girl sat there quietly for quite a while, naturally taking time to comprehend all this. Finally she spoke with an obvious scepticism. "So... if those girls are witches, and I was the sacrifice - what does that make you?"

"A witch-hunter."

She raised a brow. "A witch-hunter named 'Hunter'? How very original."

Hunter sighed. "You're a very pleasant, friendly character, aren't you? So, you know about me, do I get to learn your name?"

"Sophie Murphy." She replied without hesitation. "What... what happened to the girls - I mean, the witches?"

Hunter paused. "The two female witches weren't very powerful creatures. They agreed to be bound. But the male witch that was in charge was executed on site."

"You killed him?" Sophie's voice shook.

It sounded bad, but people just didn't understand. "He wasn't willing to cooperate, I hope you don't mind." Hunter replied with a certain bite. Oh yes, he could act the hero and save her and get away unscathed, but he must do it without killing violent witches? Sure.

"So... bound? What does that mean?" Sophie asked more quietly, helpfully shifting the focus.

"Oh, it means they submitted to arrest. Then their powers are 'bound', effectively removed so they can never use them again. Then the witch serves time in prison, same as any convict." Hunter replied, giving the brief version of binding. The witch-hunter's handbook devoted about three dreary chapters on the subject. "You've got nothing to worry about from those girls, they're powerless and it may be a lifetime before they're free."

They were interrupted as the door flew open. A young man entered, slamming the door behind him before turning to glare at Hunter.

"You couldn't do it, could you? You couldn't go even two bloody days without looking for trouble?" A thick Yorkshire accent shouted out as he turned to throw down his coat and two bags in the kitchenette. "You call me up at 3 in the mornin', and it's me that's gotta fly out and clean up. I've already rang the Italian branch of the Council, we've got a meeting with 'em this afternoon - they're not happy, Hunter - you know the rules. You notify them if you're operating or hand it over to one of theirs."

Hunter sat back, appearing unfazed by this little outburst. When the young man had finished, he spoke quite coolly. "Sophie, this is my colleague, James Bennett. James, this is Sophie, the girl that would have been sacrificed by the time I had followed the proper lines of authority." Although he spoke calmly enough, there was a hardness in his tone.

James reined back his frustration as he held out his hand to shake Sophie's, while giving her an appraising glance. "Sure, spurred on by a bonny face." He muttered to no one in particular.

There was no denying the warning in Hunter's voice this time. "Just take her statement, Mr Bennett."

It took half an hour for James to take down everything Sophie had to say, then a further hour for her to answer his unending questions into every tiny detail. Finally he sat back, closing his notebook. "Right, thank you, Miss Murphy. I'll get this all typed and copied for the Council... ah, there's just one more thing."

He reached into his briefcase, and after ruffling through many stuffed-in papers he pulled out some

sheets and handed them to Sophie. She took them hesitantly, glancing down at the thick paper covered in text.

“It’s a non-disclosure contract.” He explained, leaning over so that he could see the writing he already knew by heart. “I’m sure you can understand, it’s to protect you and us from... well, other witches finding out, or idiot interference.”

“He means the media and general stupidity of the human race.” Hunter added as he hovered about the formal conversation.

Sophie looked between the two of them and back down to the contract. “So signing a piece of paper is supposed to guarantee my silence. I can see some flaws there.”

“It legally and, ah, otherwise binds you to silence over the subject.” James said seriously. “You will be unable to speak of it to anyone outside of the Malleus Maleficarum Council. Speaking of which, we’ll organise you a contact for when you get back to England in case you want help, memory modification or the like.”

Sophie continued to stare at the contract with an emotion resembling disgust. “And if I didn’t sign it?”

Hunter leaned in deadly serious, “We make sure you don’t talk. As we said, it’s for your own protection. I suggest you sign.”

Sophie slowly picked up a pen and scrawled her name at the bottom of the page. James swiftly snatched it away from her and stuffed back in his briefcase. The three sat in silence for a few minutes before Hunter stepped up. “I’ll see you out, Miss Murphy.”

As he opened the front door for her, Sophie gazed up at him questioningly. "When do I see you again?" "If everything goes to plan?" Hunter replied, leaning against the open door. "Never."

Two

Spring was warming to summer.

Amongst the rolling hills and the green pastures of the English countryside in the picturesque village of Little Hanting life went on as normal. It was a quiet, sleepy place, with fields of cows and rattling tractors. There were old stone houses built in clusters. The grandest of which was Astley Manor, set in a large estate. No one could remember a time when there wasn't the quiet, unobtrusive Astley family. George "Young" Astley VI had died unexpectedly five years ago, leaving the manor and the care of his widow in the hands of his then 20 year old son, known to all as Hunter.

And at this very moment, Hunter was seated in one of the large rooms, reading over a report written up by the ever-present James. Hunter sighed, even witch-hunting required paperwork in this crazy modern world - but thankfully Hunter could shift all that onto James' workload. He preferred the more active part of his job than this paperwork. And James did a tediously good and thorough job of it. James hovered over him, waiting for his response.

"Yes, that's all in order. Send a copy to the MMC." Hunter passed the thick sheaf of papers back.

The Malleus Maleficarum Council, the secret branch of witch-hunters under the pay of the crown; or MMC for short. All witch-hunters reported to them and were bound by their laws.

Hunter stood up and walked over to an old cabinet, one of those numerous antiques that filled his family's sprawling homestead. With a clink of glass he filled

two glasses and passed one to James. "Here's to the end of that, then."

James took the drink. It had been an easy one this time, a single male witch in the East Midlands causing very localised trouble. He was comparatively weak and, faced with Hunter and James, he had succumbed to be bound from his magic and be registered with the MMC, to live quietly from now on. After the necessary jail time, of course.

"Excuse me, sir. There is a young lady here to see you." The mild voice came from the doorway. The family's long-serving butler waited for Hunter's attention. "A Miss Murphy. She is waiting in the sitting room."

"Thank you, Charles." Hunter replied, quite perplexed. Murphy? It sounded familiar. He exchanged a confused glance with James, before they rose together to meet the unknown guest.

A woman sat straight-backed on the settee, her long, dark brown hair casually tied back. She turned her head at their entrance and met them with a defiant stare.

"Mr Astley, Mr Bennett. I am Sophie Murphy. You may not remember me, but you came to my aid a couple of months ago - in Venice." The young woman spoke calmly and confidently and remained seated.

"Ah, Miss Murphy, of course." But Hunter frowned. "Forgive me, why are you here? The Council provided you with a contact?"

"Yes," Sophie replied. "But I didn't want to speak to a low-level pen-pusher. This won't take long, why don't you sit down."

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