Beetle3Juice

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Beetle3Juice

by Serena_Walken

Summary

While we knew the events of the second movie, things happened in the Neitherworld that we had no way of knowing. While Lydia and Astrid ended up getting away, the trip to the Neitherworld caused more than one small problem they weren't ready for. They are going to have to trust in the demon that they know and fear, or they won't have a fighting chance. Unfortunately, said demon has been stood up twice, and he isn't happy about her skipping out on his bills.

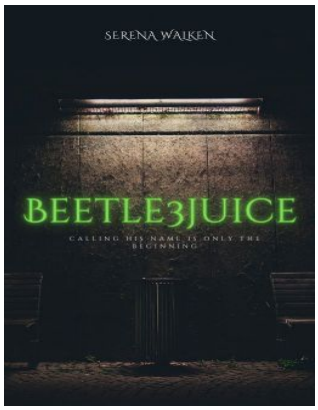
A quick wedding might not be the only answer this time.

(Since there aren't any plans for a third movie, or at least it isn't showing promise by it's own creator, I wanted to add my own ending to a trilogy that might not ever be. This takes a lot of the strange things that didn't make a lot of sense between movie 1 and movie 2, and fuses them to give a satisfying ending to my own imaginary third movie. I hope you like it because my head cannons would not shut up and demanded I make this.)

Chapter 1: What Happened to the Maitlands

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Man. Waiting rooms. Long time. He could only be able to sit for so long, he had to move. He was always charged with so much energy. Move, move, move! He went to go see the secretary again. When she opened the door to speak, he held the door and snuck a kiss from her.

Probably not a good chance she was interested, but he'd seen crazier things. Yeah, she was mad, and closed her window again. He waited beside the window for the next person who came up. Then snuck another kiss again. "So, if I give you a date, can you move my number up? Oh, and do you like my head this small?"

Ooh, she was angry. She just left and another replaced her. So he tried her out. Yeah, she wasn't interested either, but she did bring his number up faster. "Thanks," he said, "but do I look good with a small head?" No answer yet.

Bummer. Maybe he didn't look good with a small head.

“Hey?” Beetlejuice was renting an office now, his business was actually starting to make some decent ground. Things were going well, but he just saw Lydia Deetz cross by it. Which was impossible. Unless she died? He went after her.

She was sulking on the ground.

“Uuh?” She seemed very alive still. “Hey, did you die?” She didn’t answer. He came closer to her. She couldn’t see him. “What is this?” He could feel how horribly sad she felt. Someone hurt her feelings. “Miss Shannon.” He didn’t know it. He wished he did. He wished he knew why he cared too.

She eventually faded away, but he still felt bummed out. Strange.

It was far from the last incident though. Several times had he caught Lydia crossing his office. She was either super sad or super happy. One or the other extreme. Getting tired of guessing and knowing he never saw anything that batshit crazy in the handbook, he had to go deeper.

He went back to the waiting room, and tried to ask for help with the problem of seeing the living. It took a good six months before Juno finally met with him. She was just as terrible at busting his balls now as she was back then. “Look? Let’s leave all the conflict of the past out of this. Just a client here. I just need an answer.”

“You!” Juno still wasn’t happy. “Are you kidding me? If so, this is the longest running joke ever, and your worst bit so far.”

“Well, the academy award winner doesn’t go to me,” Beetlejuice insisted. “What’s it all mean?”

Juno touched the bridge of her nose. “It means. That you. Care.”

Care? “Care about what?”

“You never care about anything,” she griped. “Are you sure you are seeing that girl at her highest highs and lowest lows?”

“Yeah. So what is it, and why am I the only one seeing this stuff?” he had to ask.

Juno still didn’t look pleased. “You are repulsive. You’re a disease.”

“Thanks, but why am I the only one seeing this stuff?” he asked again.

“Ungrateful and so stupid.” Juno took a very deep breath, emitting smoke. “You are seeing a connection between you two. Apparently, for some reason, it’s strong.”

“Okay? What do I do with that?”

“You don’t do anything with it,” she answered. “You recognize it for what it is.”

Recognize? “You haven’t told me a thing yet Juno, you are pretty pathetic at your job. How can I use this for my advantage?”

That got her. “It means that you found a connection with a human which is great and terrible! It’s terrible because you, of all people, of any person in the Neitherworld, are definitely not worthy of it.” She moaned. “You. Basically. Found a soulmate, Beetlejuice.”

Hm. “Is that because of the whole wedding thing?”

“No,” she answered. “It’s no gimmick. She should, over time, make you better. Somehow. Then eventually one day, she’ll be your future, if you don’t scare her off. If you do win her over you’ll spend a good deal of eternity with her.” She took another drag of her cigarette. “You might not *just* escape the prison of your own making. You might be able to move to the great beyond. A happy ever after. Like you deserve one? Now, get out.”

Soulmate? “That Lydia I almost married?” Damn. He did feel a tight connection the first time he saw her. She actually could get him out. He didn’t care about the great beyond crap, just the other part. Interesting. “So, I need to get back to her.”

“A little hard. You’re dead, and I guarantee the Maitlands will not be calling you anytime soon again.”

Hmmm . . .

The Living World . . .

“He needs to stop it,” Barbara insisted to Adam. “Just look at him.” She pointed to the model of Winter River again. “We aren’t calling you,” she shouted at it. “We are just fine without you, and we are living peacefully with everyone here.”

“That’s telling him, Barbara,” Adam said, tagging along the scolding behind her. “You get out of here.”

Beetlejuice was a teeny tiny guy next to a grave stone. “Got a proposition,” he yelled so they could hear him.

“We don’t want to hear about it,” Barbara insisted. “Just go back to wherever you were.”

“I can get you through the time being stuck in this house,” he yelled again. “Get out early card, just for you two.”

“What, you can do that?” Adam was willing to listen.

“Yeah.”

“Is that because you used to work with Juno?” Adam asked.

“You wouldn’t just offer that. We even went and sandwormed you three years ago,” she said. “Why would you help?”

Three years? Time always flies. Eh, no difference. “Fine, okay? There’s no gimmick. I just like it here. I like the people in the house.” It would be a lot easier to speak to Lydia from right there in the model.

Barbara and Adam both looked at each other.

“We are willing to listen,” Adam said. “There won’t be any shenanigans though, it’s just us.”

“Just us,” Beetlejuice agreed. Come on. There was no way they could risk not using this loophole. They weren’t going to find another way.

“Fine. I’ll write a note real quick where we’ll be.” After she wrote it, Barbara sighed before saying his name three times.

“It’s a DIY thing,” Beetlejuice said as he knocked on the door of the lovely new secretary. She shirked backward again when he saw her. “Hey. I need an issue 49Y paper.”

She eyed him. “What do you need that paper for?”

“It’s a DIY paper. You can’t keep me from getting a hold of it.” Especially now. “If you do, I’m just going to wait for Juno. You know how much she’ll love to hear that.”

She angrily handed it to him. “It’s illegal to work on that paper for anyone and exchange money.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s a gift.” He sat back down and started to fill it out. He asked them a few things, and like he thought, it was sliding through. Everything was getting answered. “Were you happy with your house?”

“Oh yes, we loved our house,” Barbara said. “It was wonderful, but we want to move on from it.”

“It’s been three years, she’s more grown now. You stayed friends with Lydia?” Beetlejuice asked. “Close friends? Did she feel like a daughter you raised?”

Both of them awkwardly smiled.

“She was a really sweet kid and she’s growing up so well. I guess, a part of us feels like her parents,” she admitted.

Bingo, yep. Death satisified that need to have children that they had. It was a lurking piece that might have hindered them for another 100 years or so. Lydia helped with that part. It was a big part.

He took the paper back to the secretary. “Hey, Doll. I need a 49Y-A.”

Once again, she was steamed. “You cannot legally work on that for any kind of compensation, without being a part of the caseworker’s team.”

“No compensation. I’m just a genuinely nice guy,” he answered. “Paper already.” He filled it out again, a lot of the same questions, and some with new twists. In the end, it was filled out. He went to the secretary again. “So, I need a Rush R-190.” This is where it would get difficult, but he’d still pull through.

“That is illegal for the waiting room to hand out,” she insisted. “You can’t have Rush R-190. You aren’t even part of a caseworker’s team.” She shut her window door on him.

He knocked on the window again, and pulled Barbara in front of him. It made her almost stumble. “Here, put it in her hands.” Then it wouldn’t be in his hands. “She’ll fill it out.”

“She doesn’t even have a position on the staff,” the secretary answered.

Hmm. “Okay, I need an I-58,” he said. “She’ll fill it out.”

“It has to be approved for it to be official!” She was losing her temper at him.

“There’s no Neitherworld law that states she can’t be given an I-58. It’s the right of everyone to have a shot,” he said.

“What in the world are these last two papers?” Barbara asked him.

The secretary was really angry, but she couldn’t fight it. Barbara filled it out, while Beetlejuice worked on the secretary.

“So? You are a real good secretary,” he said. “It’s just that, you messed up. You did something illegal. Once it’s known, you’re gonna lose your job, and that’s another what, 100 years down the drain for your payment of suicide?” He knew why she worked there. “Or? You can approve this I-58.”

“What? What did I do wrong?” Her anger turned into fear. No one wanted to lose 100 payment years.

“You never gave me an IO- 101002 with the 49 Y, and the 49 Y-A.” It was the paper that made him state why he was doing the paperwork for free. It was a small memo paper, often missed when it rarely did come up.

“The little memo.” She rolled her eyes. She took Barbara’s paper she was still filling out, and stamped it. “Fine. You are a temporary member, but I am just a secretary, my permission is barely anything here. It’s emergency only, it gives you 2 hours.”

“Great. She wants a Rush R-190,” Beetlejuice said. The secretary gave it to Barbara. “Fill it all out.” It shouldn’t be hard, just the basics. An R-190 was a summoning paper to immediately take them, instead of a usual five year wait looking over the fine details. Nothing moved fast in the Neitherworld without a Rush R-190.

“This is all so complicated.” Barbara kept filling it out. “Why does the Neitherworld need to know my favorite pet’s name? First and last?” She groaned but kept going.

The secretary immediately grabbed it. “Wait right here.”

“This won’t take long,” Beetlejuice said. He watched as a group of five big guards showed up. He gestured to Barbara and Adam. “These two.”

The guards came toward Barbara and Adam.

“Ready?” Beetlejuice asked. “They are ready, you gotta go.”

“But, this fast?” Barbara was grabbed by one of them while Adam was grabbed by another two. “We didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“It works real slow down here, don’t jeopardize the papers you just filled out.” The loophole wouldn’t stay open for long. “Take them, they are ready. Don’t worry, you wrote a letter.”

“But, all I said was we were leaving to find a loophole,” Barbara said. “That’s not a goodbye.”

“Yeah. I’ll say it for ya.” He waved at them both being carried away. Ha! Suckers. Sure, they were able to move on, but he wasn’t just being nice. They were blocking his way to interact with anyone else in that house.

Now, he’d finally see her. Eventually, she’d come up.

Really? Were they kidding? It wasn’t Lydia who came up to see him. It took a whole two days before someone came up, and it was Delia Deetz.

She picked up the letter. “Dear Deetz', might have found a loophole to leave the house. If we are gone, don’t ever come in this room again, You-Know-Who is here.”

Ah, no, a warning?!

Delia looked toward the blinking lights of his grave. She just gave a small chuckle. “Doesn’t matter. Lydia went off to college. You won’t get your hands near her again.” She took the paper and left.

College? College?! “Sorry Sack of Shits!” Ahhh! “I did something nice for nothing?!” They just used him again. Really. Just like when he showed him what ghosts could do. Just like when he went and saved them, just to be sent back again. Used again.

Lydia had moved to college. Delia and Charles Deetz were the only ones there. He felt her through extreme emotions, but he couldn’t see where she had been. In his vision, she was always just haunting the Neitherworld. His only hope would be her wanting to come visit again for the holidays, and maybe Delia would forget to tell her he was up there in the model?

She’d do that eventually? Right?

Chapter 2: Botched Ceremony Connection

“Hello?”

“Huh?” He felt out of it. This was one of his favorite spots. This was one of his favorite dancers. She even flung her panies in his face. “Hmm.”

“You are always one of my best customers,” she whined. “What’s it saying about me that you ain’t even interested?” She looked like she was about to cry.

Well? He gave her some money. “Is there a ghost midlife crisis?” What was wrong with him? He loved that place, but nothing was doing it anymore. When he did try and shout and have a good time, he felt icky. He didn’t get why. He didn’t care about ick, he never did! What was wrong with him?

He got up and headed outside. He waved a little as he saw another frequent customer.

“Yo, Man?” he asked. “You don’t seem to have your old . . . groove. Like, you used to be an energy bar, bouncing all over the place. What’s up with you?”

Yeah. “Wish I knew.” Yeah, his groove was off. He was still able to perform his jobs though. Hell, he seemed to get even more jobs now. Other people were starting to even take risks like him, trying to get rid of the living.

He looked over in the corner of the whore house and saw Lydia crying again. He was still connected to her. He walked over to her. “So? I know you can’t hear me.” Hmm. “There must be something I can do though. I mean, you are really reaking havoc on me. My energy is getting whacked. I’m losing parts of what made me, *me*. So?”

He knew he couldn’t touch her. She wasn’t really there. He literally killed people for a living, why did this one living being have to crawl so deep into him? He looked around. “Okay. You’re feeling down. Some . . . party?” Felt like a party. “A guy.” Yeah. He could almost hear something in the background. “A guy is teasing you, he found out you can see ghosts. You liked that guy.” Yeah, that would maybe put her in a corner. “Oh.” He sat down. “Tell him to fuck off. He’s nothing. You aren’t weird, it’s a cool power to have. I didn’t have it when I was alive. No one gets it. He’s nothing.” Absolutely nothing.

He watched her rub her eyes and stand up. She took a deep breath.

Right. He watched her fade away. Can’t reach with words, but it looked like he could reach with the spirit of the words. Well, it was something.

“Hey, these are kind of cool.” He picked some roses he turned black. He went over toward her form that was just in a desk, writing and wiping her tears. He had no idea what she was writing about, but maybe these will help. “Hey. Yo. You’re annoying,” he said to her. “How about these?” He placed them next to her. “They are flowers. You probably like those. Okay, you can’t see them. Or smell them.” Ugh. “Look, life is shitty. Someone probably hurt your feelings again or whatever. Right? So. Maybe try a prank. I like pranks.” He snorted a little. “I really do like pranks. Just imagine the whatever idiot at the end of a hook. Fling it in the water and watch them squirm.”

He watched her start to smile. She even bit her lip and then she disappeared.

“Great.” He picked up the roses again. “Really hope this whole thing is working.”

“No, no, no.” Beetlejuice held his head on his lap, trying to comfort himself. “It’s not fair! Bioexorcist was my thing.” He looked back at the title in the newspaper. Bioexorcists left and right were getting *his* work now.

It was his. He got cursed for it. Did he get any recognition for it? No! Nothing, not one mention of his name. He was even the one who came up with the name. “It was mine.”

He felt warm. Strange. Like there was a giant blanket over him in the middle of a snowstorm. What was that? He looked around. He was real upset, but for some reason, he sort of felt better too. “What is that?” He placed his head back on and looked around.

He saw Lydia, lying on the ground with a happy expression.

“Hm.” He went toward her. “Are you making me feel better?” Was her good mood, reaching him? “This tie between us.” Huh. “I guess . . .” He looked back at the paper. “I don’t feel so ignored now.”

“I hate this.”

His waiter looked very upset. “You have been eating that for two years straight. If you are tired of it, stop ordering it.”

“I usually love this.” There was a reason he didn’t like it. “I hate it now.” He moved the spaghetti around and watched the beetles scatter around in it.

He had started to talk to her too much. He was seeing her more happy than sad. He told her the dumbest jokes, shared his daily findings, and those feelings, they were reaching her.

Her feelings were reaching him too, and he was starting to see why he stopped bothering women as much. He already had one. Even though she wasn't there, he couldn't touch her, and she wasn't dead, she was his. Not officially, but she was there. They were tied. When he was feeling down, she could feel him too.

When he was excited, she felt that too.

But this? This was absolutely disgusting. "If I get the chance to kill this guy. I will." She took the feelings that *they* had in *their* connection, and misinterpreted it. For someone she was dating! She thought she was in love with that idiot. She married that idiot, and he just found out that she had a baby.

Looking back on it, he could see it. "How do you just feel love and not pin it to a source?" He looked at the next customer over. "I mean, you don't just feel love and warm and better, and not have it come from somewhere." He poked at his food. "You think, 'hey, it's gotta be this'. Then, you know, all that psychological mumbo jumbo shit gets involved and it gets pinned to whatever the hell you think it is 'cause that's how pscyhological mumbo jumbo shit works." He looked at the person trying to ignore him that he kept bugging. "It's what she did. Science behind it. She isn't thinking 'hey, I'm tied to the supernatural, maybe my almost husband is the one behind this. Nah, nah. Guy you are currently dating is the one. You know I hate it."

This was a form of torture. "Probably. I mean it's probably what happened." He waited 'til the guy ignoring him, slightly glanced at him. "She didn't actually find love with this guy, did she?" He stared at him.

They just shrugged and tried to eat themselves since their food came two minutes ago on their date with whoever was on the other end.

It wasn't. It wasn't a different love. It was their love, right? They connected. She was his. She made him better. He made her better. This, this was not supposed to happen! "This pasta is terrible, how can you sell this schlock?" Of course, that really upset everyone and he headed off.

As he left, he saw her outside. She was rocking her little girl.

"So freaking happy," he groaned. "Look at you. Perfect little life. Feel invincible, don't you? Yeah, the big bad demon that wanted to marry you, not even in the picture of your mind." He turned into a giant snake. She couldn't see or hear, but if feelings came across so well?

Yep. Her happiness changed into something new. She hugged her daughter closer to her.

Good. Good! "Right. So stop bothering me!" He yelled at her. "Go live on with your stupid husband and your stupid family. I don't need those either. I *had* a wife. Worst mistake of my life. Actually, ended my life," he admitted. "So you don't get any sympathy from me. I'm the Ghost with the Most!" Yeah.

But, she was more than afraid. She was like twice as afraid? How was that possible? Her new baby was crying too now. “No way.” If he was connected through some dumb soulmate thing like Juno said, then why was he tied to the kid too?! “You’ve gotta be kidding me.” He came closer to it. “Hey?” Only one way to know for sure. “I didn’t mean to scare you, I was just angry at your mom. She’s an idiot.” He juiced up a rattle and shook it next to her. Yeah, the fear had started to go down halfway. “What dumb name did she give you again?” Oh yeah. “Astrid.”

Ooh. He had to check in with Juno again. Someone was telling him more about what was going on here.

“Hey!” He refused to leave. “I am a valued person, who demands to see someone about this.” The answer had to be in the back. The answers were always in the back. It’s how he learned how to navigate through the systems so well in the first place. He slammed his hand down. “I’ve been waiting four months.”

“Trust me, I know,” the secretary said to him. “Juno’s time is up. There’s no caseworker assigned to you. Sorry.” Oh, she wasn’t one bit sorry. “You have to wait for another one. That’ll be at least another three months.”

Yeah, he bitterly left and came back in another three months. New person in charge. Fresh meat was easier to deal with. “Hey! How ya doin’ today?” He grabbed her hand and shook it. “I’ve just got one big question that I need an answer too, and you can go about your lovely day.”

“Um?” She didn’t know what to think of him. “What is your question?”

“So, I’ve been seeing this human on this side. My last caseworker, she said that she was a soulmate. We tied together,” he said. “Except, she just had a kid. And I can tell, that I’m connected to it to. So. That’s not soulmate crap. What the fuck is this shit?”

“Ooh.” She didn’t like the roughness. Too bad, he was trying. “I’ve never heard of this. I need to look into this.”

“No. No, no, no. I’ve been waiting seven months to know this,” he demanded. “*We* are going to go into the back room, and figure this shit out. Give me caseworker team power for just a little while. I’ll find it.”

It took some finagling. Some coercing. Finally some bribing before the new idiot in charge let him through.

“Do not touch anything else of anybody else’s. I was warned about you,” they said to him.

Whatever. “Apparitions. Visualizations.” The place didn’t change much. “Ah.” He found it. “Visualizations of humans.” There, he had it. He opened up the file and looked at it. It averaged happening about ten times in ten thousand years. Yeah. It tended to happen with . . . “It’s not a soulmate, it’s a botched ceremony?” Wait. “If she’s mine, then why am I not free?!”

The caseworker looked at the file. “You were missing one word. Wife.”

“Yeah.” Which is why he thought it didn’t work. “Am I married or not?” Was he freed or not? “Oh, I’m about to start seeing some heads rolling if I don’t find out -” His head rolled off in his anger- “What the hell is going on!”

“You are thinking too hard,” she said. “The word wasn’t said out loud. We think before we speak.”

Think before they speak. “The padre. He though the word wife, but didn’t say it.” It botched the wedding, but tied them together. Now he finally understood it. He went and picked his head back up, placing it on his body. “That makes a hell of a lot more sense.” Still. “The kid though.”

The caseworker looked at the files. “I don’t see the answer to this one.”

Ugh. He took the folder back. Only two of those cases applied. “Statements, statements.” There must be statements.

Then, he had it. He knew it. “Family.” Family. “I gotta say. I feel like shit. I’m not just saying it either, I feel like a gigantic, massive piece of turd right now.”

Yeah, the caseworker definitely made a stink over what his juice did next. “Get out, get out! That’s disgusting!”

“No. This is disgusting.” He slowly walked out while the new person just pushed. It was more like a back massage than anything. He didn’t care.

Lydia and his feelings, that she botched up for the other guy? It created Astrid. Physically, her husband did all the work. He got all the fun parts. But, spiritually or emotionally or whatever the fucking tie was called between them. Just like a botched up ceremony that didn’t go through caused the connection?

A botched up spiritual session created Astrid’s connection to him. If there was a doubt in his mind that the love for her hub wasn’t what she felt from himself? His connection with Astrid just proved it!

He was back out in the waiting room. “Hey.” He looked at a guy whose leg was sliced clean off with half his face gone. “Your day’s going better than mine.”

Chapter 3: He Blew It

Several years later . . .

"There we go." Beetlejuice saw his latest human victims, running for their lives out of the house he promised to get them out of. All that was left now, was to get the check. But first?

He juiced to a particular school, not in Winter River. Pretty good timing. He looked in the door. No one ever saw him, it was the easiest to visit.

Astrid was working on something at a desk with the rest of her classmates. She looked sort of like Lydia, but her intelligence was higher in the science areas. "You will ace that thing, Astrid." Man, could she pound those numbers.

Looking in on Lydia was more difficult, it would have to be off in a corner since she could actually see ghosts. He caught her making lunch at home.

He never stayed long. Never wanted a client to complain. Just a few minutes each time.

Like it or not, even with the scares, he was still connected to Lydia. Even when he ignored her, she was still there.

He had even come to care about Astrid, through the feelings he felt through her. Every painful moment she had. Every excitable thing that happened. Even when she was scared.

He did the opposite when she was scared than he did with Lydia. He didn't make her feel just better, he bolstered that self esteem! Even getting bullied with all the crap Lydia caused from the show, she'd stay ***strong***. Gave her a thousand ideas about overpowering. Gave her confidence in their future's being grim because of their own meager accomplishments. Gave her tips on distractions and solutions. He wouldn't let her grow up weak. Physical daughter or not, he was there for every important moment of her life. He was there better than most fathers, so he took the role without even thinking about it.

And there was no way that the infamous Beetlejuice's only daughter was gonna get scared easily. Especially with a mom who connected with the other side. Hell, even when she died and had to deal with the neitherworld, Astrid would be able to handle the pressure, not buckle like a lot of newcomers.

He returned to get his check, and to get called back to his home.

"Ah, there we go." Beetlejuice looked at his handiwork. He made a headspace room.

He made mental snapshots of what he could. There were pictures of Lydia sharing watermelon with their daughter, to the terrifying looks that ended her marriage to Richard.

Well, not really the marriage itself ended, but the love was gone. With Beetlejuice either staying away from her presence in the Neitherworld, or scaring it, that love connection disappeared. She thought she fell out of love with her husband.

Which he didn't feel bad about one bit.

Lydia raised Astrid now. Their daughter was getting bigger with each picture. She was a lot like her mom, yet nothing like her at all too. She wasn't interested in the supernatural at all, she was probably going to grow up a fancy scientist of some kind. She was still a smart kid, and still had a connection, whether she knew it or not. One day? She was going to see ghosts. He could pretty much bet on it.

Without having to feel some mixed up love emotions, he eventually tried to communicate with Lydia again. Nicely. He tried to make her feel better after her husband had died. Her walls were down too, feeling more depressed and alone.

But. Just like last time.

There was another snake in the grass she thought she had feelings for, although not nearly as strong. He stopped bothering her form in the Neitherworld immediately when he realized what he was doing again.

Although? Lydia was starting to get stronger in her connections. He swore that, maybe, she was *actually* starting to see him back in the real world, the same way he saw her in the neitherworld.

She really seemed to notice him more than once.

But when he saw the latest obituaries and saw Charles Deetz in it? Heh. Mother and daughter were coming home to Winter River.

He had to take that chance. Especially with Delores, his soul-sucking wife after him.

After another unsuccessful wedding . . .

It almost worked? Not really. When she finally did it, when his name was finally called?

It wasn't from her! She was actively trying to stop it. Astrid almost said it but it had to be her yuppie lover Rory that said it. After all these years, when he *finally* got a chance to talk with her face to face, it wasn't because of her!

After all that waiting. He was left with unresolved feelings that made his feelings of anger and frustration triumph over actually talking to her, and . . . it eventually made her give birth to his inner child.

In strides of doing ‘good’, he probably didn’t pull it off so well. She left, of course. He got one more shot though.

That curious daughter of theirs got mixed into trouble, and Lydia was giving him his chance to get in as a husband again.

Almost there this time. As an adult, she had to understand contracts better. She knew what the hell she was putting up. Lots of things were still messing around with the wedding though. His unresolved feelings once again still interrupted things. It had him doing a musical number before the wedding with everyone. His ex-wife was chasing him down to kill him. Delia and Charles were dead. Asterid was almost lost.

In the end, he just couldn’t convey what happened right. He would have plenty of time after the wedding, but Astrid figured out the contract was invalid, and Lydia lightly told him she wasn’t marrying him and said his name three times.

Ending it all. Again.

Now, it was down to nothing. It was down to some slim chance of something supernatural messing with her again. Nothing was on the horizon though, that stuff didn’t just happen to people regularly.

Most likely. He blew it.

Chapter 4: Cards in Hurricane Winds

Lydia heard Astrid come through the door. She smiled at her daughter. It was so nice to finally be able to connect with her. “How was school today?” Shortly after the funeral, she had taken Astrid from her other school, and gave her a chance at a new school that wouldn’t know about her show.

“It was okay,” Astrid answered as she put down her bag. “No one knows my secret yet.”

“We’ll try to keep it that way for as long as we can,” Lydia answered her. She opened the stove and pulled out a casserole. She wouldn’t ask if she made any friends yet, bothering her too much did set Astrid off. Their relationship was better, but not perfect.

“Thanksgiving is almost here.” Astrid said as she sat down at the table. “We won’t have grandma or grandpa this year.

“Mm-hm.” Lydia served up the casserole onto plates. “I know, but we’ll still have each other.”

“For Christmas too,” Astrid said. “New years. Valentine’s. Anything, they won’t be here.”

“To be fair, we didn’t spend New years or Valentine’s day with them.” Lydia knew what she meant though. It would be hard for some time. Losing her father was tough. She didn’t even think she’d miss Dehlia that much at all, until she was gone.

“I thought grandma said her and grandpa would be haunting us all the time,” Astrid pointed out. “Why didn’t she ever come back?”

“Your dad never wanted us to see him,” Lydia reminded her. “Maybe they decided they didn’t want to come back. There’s no telling what they are told in the afterlife, Astrid.”

Astrid started to pick at her food. “I know.”

Then? Their conversation went all to hell as knives flew across the room!

Astrid even got cut on the elbow. She held it as it bled. “Mom?”

Lydia tried to get her and her daughter out of the room. When she opened the door to get out to their living room, their large carpet was now dug out to be the size of a pool, holding some kind of alligator. “What?”

It had to be the work of Beetlejuice, but? It didn't feel right. This wasn't his playfulness. Especially that alligator that was coming right toward them! “Astrid, this way!” She guided her daughter out the side door.

Lydia checked her pocket for her keys. They needed to get away from there. Astrid got in the passenger seat while Lydia got in the driver seat. She started up the car and started to move away.

“What was that?” Astrid asked.

“I don’t know,” Lydia admitted to her. “It seems okay now.” She saw the green light ahead. What was that? There shouldn’t be anyone messing with them except maybe Beetlejuice.

As she crossed the light, she immediately regretted it. She moved very fast, trying to miss the cars coming in the opposite direction. She didn’t run any red light, her light was green, but so was theirs. “There’s nothing playful about that.”

Beetlejuice did playful. Dangerous but playful. Circus show. Huge snake. Big and showy. He even just changed Otho the interior decorator’s clothes.

“That could’ve killed us,” Astrid said to her mom. “Beetlejuice doesn’t want to kill you, he wants to marry you.”

Eh. “He wants out,” Lydia said to her. She was right though. “This isn’t him.”

“Then who is it?” Astrid asked, right before the car started to go off road.

Lydia tried to control the steering wheel. The doors locked themselves and the car drove itself. She started to fight against the door as the car picked up speed.

“If it’s him, it’ll stop if we call his name!” Astrid yelled at her, “and if it isn’t, then he’ll help!”

“For what, marriage?” Lydia asked. “You already discovered the flaw in the contracts, Astrid.” There would be no ducking from him this time, he’d want it first to help them out of this jam.

“I want to try talking to him,” Astrid said to her. “I think I might be able to get him to help without that.”

What? “How? He’s not a regular guy,” Lydia warned her. “I’ve seen what he can do.”

“I did too,” Astrid reminded her.

“He could have killed your grandpa. He has no regard for human life,” Lydia warned her. “You didn’t see the real him. He’s a demon.” If she really married him? “If I marry him, he’ll be let loose on the world. I had no choice before, you’re life was in danger.” She tried to hold onto the wheel again.

“Both of our lives are in danger,” Astrid pointed out. “I don’t know where this car is taking us, but it’s not going to be anywhere good.”

She was right. “I hate this.” No control. Just like in the past. One minute she was talking plainly to the Maitlands, and the next she was willing to be a demon’s wife to save them from the exorcism.

She thought she’d gained a good control of her life some years ago, but then, the ending of her love. The ending of her husband. The ending of being able to go without pills. She ended right back there at the model, begging for help again.

Even in a new place, and getting a new beginning with Astrid, she was still a pathetic little girl, begging for help. Offering anything in return if he just-

The car was smacked into on the back, sending them spinning.

The doors were ripped off, and Lydia reached for Astrid as she seemed to be blowing out the door.

It didn’t matter. She’d give anything! “Betelgeuse Betelgeuse Betelgeuse!”

The car interior was starting to stick like glue to Astrid, keeping her in.

Beetlejuice showed up in the back of the car. “Well, here I am again.” He was holding playing cards like there wasn’t hurricane winds on the other side of the window trying to blow out Astrid.

“I need help!” Lydia yelled at him.

“Yeah.” Still not moved. “Looks like it. Typical. Getting into trouble, expecting me to bust you out again, and then fold on the deal.” He looked at his watch. “I’m kind of busy right now. I am on a real job with someone who actually pays for services rendered.”

Ohh! “Look, I promise this time, I will do it!” Lydia said to him. “Just help us!”

“Well, there’s nothing I can really do,” he said bummed out as the car started to spin around again. “I’m just gonna save you and get nothing out of it.”

Astrid moved in the glued seat enough to turn and look at him. “Yeah! You will because if you lose mom, then you lose everything you might gain in the future!”

Lydia looked toward Astrid. That wasn’t going to help. She had ran away from marriage, twice. Even calling to him was a supreme act of desperation.

Beetlejuice started to shuffle his deck. “What do I gain in the future?”

“Nothing if you just let us die,” Astrid said without yelling higher than she had to, to be heard over the winds. “There are other deals you can cut.”

“Other deals.” He kept shuffling as the car spun.

Then he disappeared.

The glue holding Astrid had disappeared. Lydia held onto her, feeling herself even losing her grip.

“Betelgeuse, Betelgeuse, Betelgeuse!” Astrid yelled.

This time, Beetlejuice showed up in a bigger way. He was no longer in the backseat playing with cards, he was on top of the car in fishing gear.

He had a fishing rod that hooked onto Astrid somehow. Lydia didn't want to know how, but her daughter didn't seem to be in extra pain. He pulled and she came over to her.

"Really big catch today," Beetlejuice said. "Perfect weather for fishing. Let's see what else I can snag." He threw out an even bigger fishing line, sailing into the distance farther than anyone could see.

He pulled back on it, and the winds disappeared. The car stopped spinning.

Lydia got out and checked on Astrid on the top. She looked over at Beetlejuice who seemed to have some kind of gremlin on a hook.

"Oh, one of you things," Beetlejuice said to him. "What are you up to?"

"I'm in the middle of business!" It yelled at him as it struggled to break free. "That's my catch!"

Catch? Lydia didn't understand but Beetlejuice disappeared with the little gremlin thing.

"Is it over?" Astrid asked. "Mom?"

"I think so?" She didn't really know. She had no idea what that was all about in the first place. Everything supernatural was now gone. The breeze was normal.

She looked at the car. "The car's totaled, but we're okay." That was all that mattered. She went over toward Astrid as she opened up her phone to pay for a ride.

It was an unsettling time. The house was back to normal too, no huge pool with an alligator in the middle of the carpet. Her and Astrid were both watching around themselves the whole evening and into the night. "Whatever that was, I think he stopped it," Lydia said. Maybe

some gremlin creature had escaped into the living world, and it sensed her connection to the supernatural?

“I told you,” Astrid said. “I told you I could get him to help without getting you married off.”

“By gaining something in the future?” That didn’t make any sense. “Astrid. He only wants to marry me to be free. So, what is he supposed to gain?”

“Mom.” She looked at her as if she was stupid. “That guy is in love with you.”

No, no. “Marrying me sets him free,” she said.

“He had everyone sing and dance at the wedding,” Astrid reminded her.

“Yeah. He’s unpredictable and does weird things,” Lydia said back. It had nothing to do with love. “He was in a wedding setting, so his juice wanted to play in wedding things.”

“His juice?” Astrid never heard that term before.

“It’s what he calls his magic,” Lydia said. She should really explain this better. “Look? Before he tried to marry me, I met him once. Maybe five minutes. The next time afterward, he was already asking for marriage. Then he was eaten by a sandworm,” she said. “There was no time to really start liking me, it’s all a big showy trick.”

“I don’t know,” Astrid still disagreed. “The Neitherworld is really different from our world. Maybe there, they can feel love faster?”

Feel love faster? “Astrid. His whole freedom rides on his name being called. The Maitlands, they were well aware of this. He’s never done anything good that didn’t have something in it for him. Marrying me is like winning the lottery.”

“Then how come not me?” Astrid wouldn’t let up. “If he didn’t have problems with it the first time, then how come he never switched to me?”

“Ah?” Lydia didn’t know what to say to that. She honestly didn’t know. “Maybe there’s some other reason he hasn’t told anyone.”

Astrid didn’t buy it. Her daughter was as stubborn as she was at her age. “I don’t know, but if anything tries to eat me in my bed, I’m calling him.”

“It should be over.” It had to be. “He isn’t a solution. He’s a desperate pit stop when you are at the end of your rope.”

“If that is how you feel, then he was telling the truth,” Astrid said surprisingly to her. “He’s helped you, and then that’s it.”

Really? “You think I should marry him?”

“No,” Astrid said. “If I did, I wouldn’t have mentioned the contract thing. Although, he’s probably not much worse than the last husband you almost had.”

Whoah. “There’s a difference between a scumbag that wants money and an actual demon.” Lydia was fairly sure that husband would be much worse.

“If we have to call him again, I think you should do something,” she told her. “You can probably get him to help a little bit more, but he won’t be there to serve you forever. He was already really tired of helping for nothing. He just disappeared after helping with that gremlin thing.”

“I don’t want there to be a next time.” Lydia looked toward Astrid. She was right though. If the supernatural bothered her again, she would need him. Besides marriage for his freedom

though, what else could she give?

Chapter 5: It's Written All Over Your Face

Neitherworld

“So, did we find something?” Beetlejuice had been looking through several client papers, but he didn’t see anything. There were several bioexercists now, so calling some up would normally be a good idea. Letting them know about a living human’s predicament would just make them a new target though.

Love her or hate her, he couldn’t let Lydia just become a target. He watched one of his employees come up. Actually, several of them gathered around. They had Bob’s things. “Poor Bob.” He was such good material, not many like Bob.

They handed him several papers.

Beetlejuice checked them out. “What?” He looked at all of them. He eyed all of them. “Just in Bob’s?” They all nodded.

This was bad. There were a ton of client papers, with the hit being on Lydia and Astrid. “That Ghost House show rubbed the wrong way.” Being a bioexorcist meant more than getting rid of people in a house. It meant getting rid of anyone that was needed.

He thumbed through the papers. “Ghost House. Ghost House. Ghost House.” Her damn show. They either wanted her dead claiming she was proving life after death, or that her show was shaming the dead. He counted them. Twenty. “Shit. All dated when they were in the Neitherworld.” That was bad.

He may have started the business, but he wasn’t the biggest in it. When it was clear that several wanted the same person, then several contracts were gathered together, to get the fattest paycheck.

Lydia and Astrid were the biggest and fattest paychecks. That gremlin was just the first one that gathered enough clients for his fat payday! “Hundreds are gonna be after them.” Shit! “Well? They are royally fucked.” He dropped the papers.

To stop all of those coming after them in the future, it would take a lot of juice, and he couldn’t do it. He could if he could stay, but others knew his weakness. That’s why he disappeared away from them. It would just be a constant namefest back and forth, being there and not.

Living World

And this was interesting? He was still holding the papers, but he and his desk were in the living world. Astrid was standing in front of him, her arms crossed.

Oh yeah, she would go places some day. “Don’t see anyone threatening your life, so why’d you call me?”

A part of her was nervous. She summoned the demon herself. If she was wrong, she could end up in real trouble, but she needed to understand what happened. What if it happened again? This guy made it clear that he wouldn’t just drop in and pull them out whenever they summoned him. He wasn’t a genie, he was a demon.

Fortunately, she had called it right in the car. When left with no choice, he did save them, and pulled whatever was causing the mayhem away. She needed to trust in herself to get this done too.

Her mom would do nothing but offer a marriage that appealed, but wouldn’t be trusted. Not for a third time. She’d either have to go through with it first, or he’d eventually stop helping. Neither of those were right.

She hardly knew him. All she heard were terrible things, but when it came down to it, at the end of the train, her mom was there for her. She risked everything to contact that demon for help. It was a real big leap to trust in that.

Everything she did that day with the book was a leap of faith too. Astrid had to risk it. They couldn’t just be in trouble and risk him not wanting to help. “Betlelgeuse, Betelgeuse, Betelgeuse.”

He appeared in front of her studying papers with a desk. He looked at her.

She had to stay strong. “What was the gremlin thing about?” she asked him.

He just smirked. “If I tell you, what do I get out of it?”

Astrid stood up straight. She had to go with her gut. Something had to be tried. “I’ll marry you.”

He looked grossed out. “No way.”

“Why not? I’m prettier and younger than my mom,” Astrid said. “It’s the same thing. It gets you freedom.”

“Because!” He still looked disgusted, but he didn’t answer right away. He eventually spoke. “I started with Lydia, I’ll end it with Lydia.”

Yeah, Astrid called it right. “You never looked twice at anyone else in that church. You were into mom. You don’t want marriage. You want mom.”

“It’s the same thing.”

“No, it isn’t. You know that.”

“Okay, clearly you are trying to make some kind of deal with a demon?” He grinned wickedly. “Didn’t your mom ever warn you about that? No? Mine didn’t either,” he joked. “Well, maybe we can strike some kind of deal. Dealing’s part of my business.”

“First, what’s going on with that gremlin?” Astrid asked.

“He’s a bioexorcist, same as me. Great pay. Fun job. Killing people bugging ghosts,” he answered, probably half trying to scare her. “You and your mom.” He whistled and turned the papers around, showing them off like a deck of cards. “Ghost House shoved you on some big lists.”

Mom’s show? “How come we haven’t had trouble before?”

“Greed. Getting as many contracts as possible to take you out first,” Beetlejuice said. “Why get paid once? I’ve got twenty right here myself. My employee was collecting them. Poor Bob.”

“So no one ever tried before the gremlin?” Astrid asked.

“You have to know where your prey is. Can’t just call out a name,” Beetlejuice said. “Nobody knew where you guys were at, until they did. Thanks to me blowing up the backdoor.”

The trip to the Neitherworld. “Yeah, but we aren’t there anymore.”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean they don’t know. That’s where you *were,* for the contracts. It’s up to the bioexorcists to find and take care of you.”

Oh no. “So more are going to come?”

“Yeah.”

“When?”

“Probably soonish,” he answered. “What kind of deal are we talking? Because if you haven’t guessed-”

“Someone else was calling your name and making you leave,” Astrid said. “We have to break that curse to even have a chance.”

He actually held his hands out. “Well, nice to see someone smartened up. Always knew you would.”

This demon. She didn't know how to explain it. His hygiene was terrible, he smelled really bad, and no one would ever trust that face. But? "You talk like you knew me longer."

He wasn't giving anything away. Yet.

Fine. "If you marry my mom, can you let her go later? After this is all taken care of?"

He looked like she was insane. "Hell no, once she's mine, she's mine!"

"And that's why my mom doesn't want to marry you!" Astrid yelled at him. "You're a nightmare to her. You aren't her hero, you're the last chance stop at the pit of desperation." Her mom said something like that. "Mom didn't like the last guy either, he was just the one that was there for her."

Beetlejuice seemed to squirm and mutter at that second. "What's it got to do with anything?"

"Mom. Is." What could she say? "She's afraid of you."

"She should be," he said.

"Should she, or do you want a half decent chance for her to like you?"

She tried to read his expression. It was tough, but she swore that she saw it correctly.

"You know? Pretty bold considering you kinda fell for a ghost that killed his own parents and tried to end you."

Oh. That hurt. It was true though, she didn't see it coming. She messed up, a lot. She was the reason her mom needed to get help. She was the reason all those contracts ever found them. It was really all her fault.

"Guys say sweet shit all the time to get what they want, don't worry about it," he said offhandedly.

But that. Again. Right there. "I might be wrong," Astrid said. "I have been wrong, but I don't have much choice. Especially if so many are trying to kill us." They would soon. "I have to go with my gut."

"I'm an undead guy with a curse on me," Beetlejuice said. "You are digging pretty deep there, Sister."

"Mom's . . . used to seeing ghosts." How could she say it? "I don't know, but, if you care."

"If *I* care, just be nice, from the bottom of my heart?" he said. "Nice. Cute. Did I mention I have a soul sucking ex-wife that wants to kill me? Not like dead. Dead dead. Death for the dead, no coming back. Poor Bob knows."

Okay, step two. "Mom said the Maitlands were ghosts that used to live there. They found a loophole to leave. Do you know what that loophole had been?" She watched his expression. She got that right it looked like.

“Clever,” he complimented her.

“Is there a way that some kind of loophole could block the name curse and stop your wife without dragging my mom into marriage?” she asked.

He looked to the ceiling. He seemed to be thinking. “Why should I?”

Okay, there was something. “Like I said before. Do you want marriage, or do you want my mom? You know. Dates. Kissing. All that stuff,” she said. “Mom isn’t going to fall for someone throwing a random ring on her finger, but if you genuinely care, then maybe she’ll give you a chance?”

He just chuckled and smirked at her again. “You really don’t know who I am.”

Oh. That wasn’t a good sign. “It’s not a sure thing,” she backtracked a little. “There’s never a sure thing, but if you are around her, and you save her all the time? She has a history of being manipulated really easy.” Wait. “No, that’s not what I meant to say.”

“It is true.” He was glancing to the side. “Especially the last guy. Few nice words, some cornerings, and she was easy to manipulate.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” She didn’t want him going down that path. “If mom is ever going to like you, this is your chance to see if it’s possible.” It probably wasn’t. It was hard to stand that close to him, he smelled so bad. She finally had to pinch her nose again. “I could even give you tips?” Like, bathe.

“You know? Interesting deal,” he agreed. “Shaky. Bad at making it, clear you don’t often make them.”

Okay. “Well?”

“You really think she’ll fall head over heels for a dead guy, just because I save her unselfishly?”

Probably not. “Maybe.”

“Uh huh. It’s written all over your face, Astrid.”

Astrid felt writing all over her face. She looked in a mirror. Liar was written all over it in several places.

She knew he wouldn't play easy. She had to stay strong. “The answer isn't easy.” He was already gone though. Working something out wasn't going to be easy.

Then, a scream was heard downstairs. “Mom?”

Chapter 6: Astrid Tries Again

Agh! Lydia felt her legs get tugged out from beneath her and she was dragged backward. The front door opened and she was helpless to stop from leaving the house. She felt the burn of the cement against her as she was being pushed off into the road! She heard Astrid yell, and then felt something stopped her.

It wasn't soft, but it was softer. It was plastic. It was.

Even he knew he couldn't handle all the contracts coming onto Lydia and Astrid. And Lydia, had a history of skipping out on the bill. But? He couldn't help it. He turned into a long and wide rug attached to the cliff, slowed her down in a roll and careened her back down.

He watched Astrid start coming. "Don't tell her what I did."

"What, saved her?" Astrid pointed out but he disappeared.

Beetlejuice showed up to the ghost energy he sensed nearby. He made sure to be in his black and white outfit, the one he would be most recognized in. "Hey."

Another spirit appeared. "Beetlejuice? Are you still hanging around the fiancee that dumped you twice?"

Great, he knew his story. "She just had cold feet, you know? Being wife to an acclaimed guy like me, she was just too nervous. I'm getting closer to snagging her, so if you could just put this contract on hold and work on something else, I'd appreciate it."

They just stared at him. "No way. I prepared this for a long time."

"Come on, you know it hasn't been a long time." He tried to keep this civil.

"If it isn't me, it'll be another person stealing the contracts on them, so I can't." They refused to quit.

"Okay? I'm telling ya," Beetlejuice warned them. "Back off."

"Even if you like these living, you can't save them," they outright judged him. "You're a bioexorcist. If you start saving people, you might as well say goodbye to the business. Now, leave. Look on the bright side? When she dies, maybe she'll be easier to get a date with finally. Instead of, you know. Being some visualization that haunts you?"

Beetlejuice shook his hands, fixed his collar, and then fixed his collar sleeves. This one knew everything. He had to go.

“It’s pretty sad to see someone that used to be a great big idol to me, fall into puppy dog territory for two measly humans.”

Puppy dog. “This puppy still has one gnarly bite.”

“Do you have enough to bite everyone coming after them?” they challenged them. “I bet you don’t. Especially when all we have to do is say your name.”

“Yeah. Yeah, you know you are enjoying your priviledge to come back and forth too much,” Beetlejuice warned him. “Overstep, and you’ll end up cursed just like me. In the meantime? What was it that used to make me an idol to you?”

“Oh, the fact you came up with this whole thing in the-”

Oh, her legs. Lydia started to wake up. She tried to stand back up but couldn’t. She wasn’t on the road. It was a striped mattress?

She was covered in the burning of being rubbed across the concrete. Her skin was bloody, peeling, and bruised. She may have broke a leg. She didn’t hurt as much as she thought she would. She saw Astrid beside her, but couldn’t stand up. She couldn’t even feel her legs. “Astrid.”

“I’m right here,” she told her.

Lydia felt herself getting scooped up. She felt something. A weird connection. She hadn't felt it in a long time, not since before her husband's death. Her body just wanted to sleep.

Astrid stared at him. Yeah, if there was any doubt before in her assumption, it was gone now.

Beetlejuice stood there, just holding her mom, hot as hell. Fire was starting to appear around him as another spirit appeared a little ahead. That spirit was bleeding severely. “You were warned like the last guy. Back off, or you’ve got 30 seconds before you face the waiting room again.”

“Your warning was a rabid bunch of you-dogs that took off his arm!” they complained. “The waiting room isn’t going to give back his arm.” It snarled. “I’ll leave this, but I’ll let everyone know what happened. No one will ever do business with you again.”

Astrid watched the exchange. If he didn't think a deal could be reached, he wouldn't have lifted a finger. Apparently, he was making enemies interfering even.

They had the upper hand whether he wanted to say it or not. There was something else too. This guy was the stuff of her mom's nightmares. But?

He was holding her and she wasn't fighting it. Even injured, she would at least be rigid. It kind of even . . . looked like her mom was relaxed.

When Astrid was small and she woke up in the morning, she would see her mom just like that with her dad. Not the same position. It was the same kind of . . . feeling.

She approached him. “I don't buy it. She does know you.” She looked straight at him. She wouldn't back down. “The chances she would be into you are slim, but it doesn't matter because you will run after her each time anyhow.”

Oh he had a bitter face, but she knew that she was right.

“No marriage. Make a workable deal with mom,” Astrid insisted. “Otherwise we are all going to keep going in circles until we die, or you do.”

He didn't want to take it. It was clear he didn't like following orders. “This freebie was the last one you get.” He started to scan the area. “There’s more than one already here.”

“No, it's not. You will keep coming back.” Astrid stayed strong, but she also felt her mouth get sewn shut! She touched it, but it didn't hurt. Just another reason she could tell. He could do that and make sure it hurt, but he didn’t. He had a huge bark, but he wasn't biting with fangs.

She had no doubt he had them. Her mom did tell her about him. He did kill people for a living.

He was a dangerous undead demon guy. He was also the person that her mom looked really comfortable in the hands of right now. She even nestled against him while he was still looking around.

“Alright you pest, I know your close,” he insisted. It looked like he knew there were more out there.

The smell of him. Her mom didn't even seem to mind it. Even hurt, the average person would try to scramble away from that smell, not cozy up to it.

It was weird. Astrid didn't understand it. “Anyone would be fighting to get away from that smell.” She had to point it out. “Mom is comfortable in your arms. I think maybe you do have a chance.”

He stopped looking around to glance at her. “She's out.”

“Your smell probably still wakes the freshly dead,” Astrid said to him.

“Flattery won't get you anywhere.” He said it with a straight face.

Strange. He wanted her to be sure about it before. She gave him a good sign, just like he wanted, and he was ignoring it. Like, it was really hard to accept it.

Astrid knew the feeling, but she could really see it. Somehow. It was like . . . but it wasn’t. It couldn't be, she knew her dad. He didn't look like him. He didn't act like him. But.

The feeling between them. That feeling. Before her parents became distant, she felt that feeling. She still cared for her mom and her dad, but the feelings were changed. Now those changed feelings, they were back. “Impossible.” She stared at him. He wasn’t talking, but he clearly knew something. “You feel like . . .” How?

“Just your imagination, Kid,” he answered.

No. “How?” This deadbeat disgusting undead monsterlike demon. “You’re my dad?”

“Ooh, you are trusting your gut a lot more, aren’tcha?” He didn’t deny it.

No way, there’s no way her mom would do that. “She said, she just, she fell out of love before he died.” The feelings changed beforehand. The closeness. Everything changed.

Standing next to to Beetlejuice, with him holding her mom. It felt like when she was a kid again. That strange, weird, almost whimsical buzzing between all three of them. It was always there, and then it was just gone one day. Even when her dad was still alive, it was just gone.

A mess. She felt so incredibly sad. That feeling was lost to time. And now, it was there again. “She can’t even stand you, and you’re dead.” She knew her eyes were starting to tear up, but she didn’t want to.

It didn’t make any sense. What was going on? What was he hiding?!

Okay, she had to get it together. Rethink things through.

Her mom Lydia wouldn't trust him to work out any deal. She didn't think he wanted anything else from her but his freedom.

The almighty undead guy Beetlejuice, was definitely hiding things, but he was skeptical of giving any chance. He gave it twice, and both times it fell apart. He wouldn’t share any secret now.

No one would budge. They would all eventually be dead at this rate. “I don’t want to die. I know mom doesn’t want to either. Is there anyway we can get out of this? It looked like you might have fought a couple spirits.”

“Six,” he told her. “I took out five. The guy I was talking to was taken out by another one.” He readjusted her mom. “I know you want to live. It’s a pipe dream.”

“Even if mom married you?” she asked.

“We are talking I don’t know how many contracts, but every bioexorcist is eventually gonna show up,” he said to her. “Big, small, and company handled.”

She moved closer. “How many are there?”

Beetlejuice stared at her with a raised eyebrow. “Whoah, what are you thinking? Oh, I know what your thinking.” He backed up. “There’s no way,” he refused. “No way. No how.”

Astrid had to try. “Please?”

“Please? Really, please?” Beetlejuice walked around with her mom, back and forth. “Gee, let me think. Since Lydia still has a backbills to pay, that needs taken care of first. Let’s see. I still need paid in some way for stopping the exorcism of the Maitlands. I should have gotten paid for saving them years of the Neitherworld overlap too, that gift wasn’t spoken, but it still counts now. Then, there was saving you with your mom. Add in these five guys, and the gremlin I dealt with earlier. All in all, can you even pay what you owe already?”

Well? “No.”

“Then how are you gonna pay for me to take out at least 500 dead guys! Because that’s what we are looking at! Some professional, some new, some ‘cup of coffee getting paid by the big companies to defeat houses for yuppie new ghosts’ ghosts too. Not to mention the really big one, I’m a fucking demon ova here! Name three times, I’m done!”

Boy. He sure could yell.

“Then, yeah, the kicker? Even if I did all of that . . . they just come back! They’ll go to the waiting room for awhile and be back out there before you know it, ready to off you again. So? I know your clever. Are you clever enough to get the debt owed to me, and figure out a way to stop all the contracts? I’ll give you a few minutes.”

Chapter 7: Wolf Jackson Enters the Scene

Debt owed. Her mom would have to marry him. Was that even enough? It would be necessary, they needed the three times thing off. *But even if he took them out, they were ghosts too.* They couldn't be killed. Then what, the contracts? It sounded like there would be thousands.

Contracts. Contracts had limits, just like the one he had with mom. Maybe that was a place to start? "Is there an expiration date for each one, or a clause that terminates it?"

Beetlejuice blinked. "Impressive. These contracts aren't the same, hell, I came up with them, they just copied them. This bioexorcism thing was mine, all mine. I covered everything, and these aren't really governed by the living world or the neitherworld. That way I can run back and forth to get my prey. Get it?"

He made the contracts. "The enforcer to the contract was just you."

"When you are killing people? You tend to be enough enforcement," he answered.

Hmm. "You must know any weaknesses it has then."

"No weaknesses. I made these iron clad," he insisted. Oh, he was proud of it.

"Okay, but if you were expected to be really good, then when did it end?" Maybe that was the way to go.

He blew out air. "I never went long. Didn't have to think about it, I'm excellent at what I do."

Okay, less bragging. Did he have a date on it? "Your clients needed to trust you. Didn't you have a date to promise results back?"

"Three to six months," he said. "Standard jargon, not needed, usually finished within a day or two. Hours."

Okay, he was a real bragger.

"People want results. Person can be anywhere, Neitherworld or Timbuktu, wherever. Normally, they run six months. Some take a year."

"Then, can you put us somewhere that no one could find us at?" Maybe that could work.

Beetlejuice swayed with her mom's body. "I could for a short time. A week. Maybe two, tops. But? I've got this soul sucking ex-wife. Literally. If she comes back from the waiting room and figures it out, that's it. We're all dead. Anything after two weeks there is risky."

The best they had was two weeks, and even then, someone else might still find them to kill them.

“Alright, time’s up,” he said. “You got anything?”

Astrid couldn’t think of anything else. She would have to hear what he had.

“Okay. I’m not a desperate sap looking for twenty bucks from new ghosts anymore,” he said. “I don’t have that kind of time to pursue. So, this is what I can do for you, and this is it,” he said as a retainer appeared in his mouth. “I can be on a retainer. Starts with marriage. Lasts until the contracts go out.”

Retainer? “What’s that?”

“You can pay for my services ahead of time,” he said. “Instead of me popping up and getting payment or, more likely than not with you lot, shortchanged? *I* get taken care of first, so I can take care of you later.”

Reasonable, but he wanted marriage. Although, she did just think of something. “Your clients, you don’t marry them. What do they pay?”

“Money.”

Her mom could pay money. Her show made her a lot of money. She stashed a good chunk away. The only thing was that they needed that curse off, or Beetlejuice would just be sent back and forth. *I’ve got it.* “Marriage is the retainer.”

“Yeah, obviously.” He didn’t look impressed by her.

Strange how that kind of bothered her. She shouldn’t care how impressed he’d been. But. She still had her senses all messed up. It felt like her dad was around. “Part of the retainer,” she fully explained. “We need you for so long, just like people need legal help. Right?”

Okay, he was starting to look a little impressed.

She really shouldn’t care about that. Why did she care about that? “The marriage is part of the retainer, plus the fee for everyone that you defeat. If, at the end of it all, mom can’t afford the fee of it all, you get married. If mom *can* afford the fee, then you just walk away.”

He wasn’t immediately discounting her idea but he wasn’t reaching for it either. He didn’t really say anything.

Mom had stacked up a lot of money from the show. She should be okay. “She could pay the standards that you use to get rid of humans.”

“Oh I don’t know about that. My prices went up high,” he said. “It’s a side job, to a required job. See, uh? My little stunts last time around didn’t go unnoticed.” He jiggled his hand. “Eternity is an afterlife call center.” He looked at a watch on his wrist. “In fact, unless you guys want to free me, I am going to have to get back to work.”

He had a job? “What about us?”

“Sucks to be you, what do you want me to say?” he asked. “I don’t get a choice about it. I’m just the manager. Unless-”

“Mom marries you and frees you.” Damn. They really needed to figure something out. “What are your prices?”

“First, I’m required to see if they can’t handle things themselves. Then, I have to give some guidance over the phone. I’ve got others looking over my work, so?” He shrugged. “My freelance time is high. Here you go.”

He moved her mom around enough for him to reach in his jacket. He gave her a business card.

Bioexorcist. Bouncer. Escorter. Roper. Last Chance. “I know bioexorcist. What’s the rest?”

“Bouncer. I get people out without killing them,” he answered. “Works well for the freshly dead that still have a lot of feelings for them. Escorter. Sending other ghosts back to the waiting room. Roper. When the dead have other company and lose it, I go get it. The amount of people who don’t get why they are in sandworms is astounding. Last Chance, that one was brilliant. Your mom used me for that. When the living are actually exorcising a ghost, I come in and stop it. Now that one?” He half gestured, half pointed at her. “That one is desperation. Yeah. Usually other services that happen during it are free.”

“How much are your services? Can you convert it into dollars?” Astrid asked. She was trying to keep him in his business state of mind. If she could do that, and appeal to his greed instead, maybe she could save her mom from a lifetime of marriage.

Beetlejuice moved Lydia around again for a calculator. He held it up with magic, and dialed on it until it burned out. “Sure. I got your numbers. Hand me my card back.”

Astrid gave him the card back. He wrote down on it and gave it back to her. Whoah. “You’re kidding.”

“It’s not my prices, I can’t go lower, or I’ll do too well that I’ll try and bust out. I mean, that’s what the Neitherworld thinks,” he told her. “Standard rates.” He scoffed. “People wonder why I went rogue.”

“This is so expensive.” Was he telling the truth?

“Do you know how annoying the living are to live with? Most people are getting rid of one, maybe two of them. Sometimes a family. They can eventually figure out how to pay if they are desperate enough.”

Astrid looked at the prices. What would be the best way to do this? “What if they get away, and you can’t get them to the waiting room again?”

“Then it was a bouncer fee.”

Bouncer. Then they would still come back.

“Hey?” He gestured to her. “I’m not gonna drag something out just to make more. It’s a business. I take care of it. Now, I’m really good at parties and finding a good time, but I’m a real professional at what I do.”

Mom had a lot of money saved. Astrid didn’t know how much though, and it was hard to tell how long it would take. “Most would probably be standard. Three to six months.”

“You’ll have some outliers, but probably not many. Longest I’ve seen is two centuries. With most of them out of the way, I should be able to chase down the outliers.”

“Centuries?”

“Yeah, but most clients wouldn’t want to give something that long. Living or dead, nobody wants to wait around forever for stuff to happen, you know?”

Okay. That covered information on the fees, but she still had a major problem to face. “Only two to three weeks of safety? Is there anything else we can do? We can lie.”

He just chuckled, his top teeth really showing. “Good at lying, huh.”

“I’m not good at it, but we can lie,” she offered. For her life, she could lie.

“Nice to hear. Did I mention, uh, I’m being watched a lot now?” he reiterated. “Anything I do is finagling but legal. Eventually it’s gonna get unfinagled. Without marriage, I can’t get away.”

They needed months, not weeks.

“Marriage has to be fast too, I’m still paying for that last job I just did for you guys,” he reminded her. “I’ve got a Wolf on my tail.”

Marriage. Astrid was trying to look at all the corners. “Is it illegal to marry someone who’s alive?”

“Betelgeuse!”

“I didn’t do anything!” He yelled back as someone from the wedding approached him.

Oh okay, if Beetlejuice didn’t know anything, then maybe this guy did? He was actually law enforcement. “Wait!” Astrid said to him. “We need help.”

He just cocked his head at her. “Help? You need help? Everyone needs help in this crazy world.”

Okay, a little weird. That was melodramatic. “My mom and I have a thousand contracts against us now. My mom nearly died just now, he barely saved her. We need his help.”

“Then summon him in his off hours, he’s gotta go back to work,” the law person said.

Really. “We are going to die if you take him away. Is there a way that we can pay for him to be out to help us?”

The law person looked funny. “Someone actually wants this guys help? Look, little girl.” He bent down toward her, taking a long dramatic sigh. “This world is hard and it’s cruel. We all try to get by in it. We lift ourselves up each day, and just keep on going.”

“I can,” Astrid said slowly, “if I can live. Don’t take him. Help us.”

“Yeah, don’t take me,” Beetlejuice agreed. “If life is at stake and there's a death that you could have prevented, you’ll get written up, Officer Wolf.”

“Okay. What kind of contracts are coming?” Wolf asked her.

“Bioexorcist contracts.”

“That isn’t governed by the Neitherworld, those are outside contracts by individuals that are often illegal.” He glanced toward Beetlejuice.

“Mine are by the books now, I even gave her the rates,” Beetlejuice insisted.

“Yeah, they better be,” Wolf said to him. “The Neitherworld is never pretty. Not every Tom, Dick, and Harry should be hiring killers.”

“Look. We can pay whatever. We can do whatever,” Astrid said. “We just need to get rid of these contracts, or keep him somehow to help.”

“Living world is not my department,” Wolf said. “I do have a heart though. I may be missing some of my head, but boy, I still do have my heart. Tell me all the details you have, and I’ll give you the skinny. Straight, blunt, and without frills ‘cause that’s how I handle things. No frills.”

“When me and my mother, Lydia Deetz, were in the Neitherworld, people made contracts on us for mom’s show, Ghost House. A lot of people. We are going to need some real help to survive.” If he cared, maybe he could help? If it wasn’t all just smoke. “We just need to stay safe until the contracts expire, but we’ve already been found by several exorcists within hours.”

“Yeah, they tend to be good at their illegal craft.” Wolf looked back at Beetlejuice, then back at her.

“Mister Wolf,” Astrid said. “We don’t have anywhere else to turn to.” He was really big into melodrama, she might as well try his way. “My mom and I? We’re going to die, and we don’t want to die. Look at my mom, look at her!” She yelled and pointed to her in Beetlejuice’s arms. “She was only saved because of him, but this is going to keep happening. Please? Don’t leave a little girl and her mom at death’s doorstep? Help us?”

“Come on, Officer Wolf,” Beetlejuice added to it. “A kid is begging you.”

“Is it illegal for my mom to marry him for our safety?” She’d just outright ask it.

“Oh, absolutely,” Wolf said easily.

Beetlejuice cleared his throat. “Check her records, Wolf.”

“Records?” Wolf was confused but started to dig them out. “Oh. Fascinating. You already live with one foot in each side.”

What did he mean by that?

“Just tell her whether it's possible,” Beetlejuice told him.

“Right, right. Yes, you two qualify, but on the few occasions it happens, it is no picnic. You will have to spend time in the Neitherworld for months.”

Months. Perfect.

“It will be intense.” Wolf looked at Beetlejuice. “He knows.”

Beetlejuice rolled his eyes around, and eventually started dipping his head in different directions as he started to talk fast. “I gotta bring her and any children over, willingly, and get them evaluated. I have to get signed confessions of release from any marriage they had in process while they were alive, I have to get my own questionable marriage in order, and then I have to send in papers for any of the ceremony stuff. It has to be half living world contained and half dead contained. We have to agree on the worlds we want to stay in together. How long. With whom. We have to get written permission for a place to stay in both worlds. The owner in the physical world has to have ties to the undead world, and has to have read the Handbook for the Recently Deceased at least once. Permissions from the other world’s residence to have living people in it, then there’s the death circumstances, when, if, how it happens, jobs, more permissions, tests over handbook, permissions, minors, permissions, it just goes on and on and on!”

Oh, “Because it’s going to take a really long time.”

“Right!” He agreed. “No!” He disagreed. “Ugh.”

That was it. “Mister Wolf, can he marry my mom like that?”

“To get married, in this crazy world full of crazy people,” he answered. “You gotta know some tough answers about some tough things, and you can’t share those answers with nobody. You become a stranger to the world you belong in, to walk, with one foot in the other side.” He spread his hands around in gestures. “You don’t even really feel alive anymore with all these secrets buried so deep. And if it ever gets to be too much and you break rules about sharing? Ah.” He shook his head so sadly. “It’s a one way ticket straight to hell. No time in the Neitherworld. No makeup. No nothing.”

“All that has to happen, to have mom marry him?” she asked. “A quick ceremony is-”

“Illegal, yes, extremely, all permissions must be secured!” Wolf propped up and looked over at Beetlejuice with accusing eyes.

“What? I didn’t do anything this time,” he said.

“This time. You’ve tried twice before,” Wolf warned him. “You aren’t getting away with it. I can see your moves, before you even make them. Yeah.” He nodded his head. “You won’t get away with anything with Wolf Jackson watching you.”

“Well, I’m not gonna, Officer Wolf,” he said to him. “Because the little number I’m carrying in my arms? Hasn’t done anything but betray me.”

“Yes, I saw that,” Wolf smiled. “The Deetzes are good people. They put you right back where you belong.”

“What we talked about before?” Astrid said to Beetlejuice.

Beetlejuice sighed. “Officer Wolf Jackson?” He glanced over to him. “I need one day off to get some affairs in order. It could save lives. My team can hold down the fort. Come on. I’ve been good. I saved Astrid’s soul not real long ago.”

“It has to be initiated by the dead first and that takes a couple of weeks,” Wolf said. “After that, they can come into the Neitherworld. They just need to figure out how to survive until then. If they can.”

“Nah, I got it,” Beetlejuice said. “Legally, I can get them in. I just need the rest of today off. That’s it.”

Wolf eyed him for about a minute. “Fine. You get the rest of the day, but you go back to work tomorrow.” He held his finger at him. “You better not be up to something illegal. I will catch you if you are.”

As the officer left, Astrid stared at him. It sounded like he’d take it. Was he finally going to take it?

Chapter 8: Why He Sang MacArthur Park

“I’ve been swindled twice by your ma,” he reminded her. “Forgive me for not diving into shark infested waters yet.” He suddenly had a bathing suit on. “Little nervous it won’t go well. Even with a retainer, you are pretty clever. If you figure something out, it won’t end well for me. Again.”

Insurance. There was only thing Astrid could think of. “Me. If you take this risk, I’ll give up my soul if we don’t fulfill the deal.”

“Don’t need it. I don’t want to live again, that’s lame.”

“Would it work on getting rid of your soul-sucking wife?” she asked. “If she’s alive again.” He looked intrigued. “I won’t welch on the deal.”

“Promises, promises.” He glanced toward her mom who he was still holding. So far, he had never wanted to put her down. “The marriage is the retainer, I want paid my amount per transaction. All business is done by the end of the day. We will bounce back between worlds, you need to be ready at a moment’s notice. If she runs out of money, the marriage happens.”

Okay. “So you don’t want my soul as backup?” Astrid asked.

“Nah, keep it.”

Why? It was clear that it would stop his ex if she was alive again. *He doesn’t want me to lose my soul.*

“I mean what kind of new dad would I be for ya if I let you do that?” he added.

“You are just a potential future stepdad.”

“Ya sure?”

Oh now he was teasing! She was already on the brink, his actions and her feelings around him. “You better eventually explain what I’m feeling right now.”

That phrase seemed to really elate him. “Sure. Eventually. So, if the deal is ready?” He chuckled, kind of wickedly. He shoved his hand straight at her. His body glowed like there was suddenly fire around them. “Then shake your new daddy's hand.”

Oh, she hated the way he did that. It wasn't hard to tell she was making a deal with a demon.

Something had to give though, and this was all she had. Except, for one thing. “The marriage is the retainer.”

“Right, we established that.”

“Marriage is a relationship. You don’t have one with her. So? No grabbing. No hugging. No kissing. No dating. No touching my mom in any way without permission.”

“Whaaat?!” It was the strangest anger mixed with a whine. She didn’t know whether to be afraid, or give him a treat like a good little dog. “Do you know how long-”

“No deal,” Astrid insisted. “Anything else, you need to ask mom about first.”

“Oh, you and you modern day people. Take all the fun out of everything,” he complained. He grumbled.

“Do you kiss your clients?” she asked, but that backfired.

“Used to. Modern day dead folk, you guys are another breed. You all want your space. People get super mad and then there’s no job. Keep yelling shit like canceled. Then *their* contract is cancelled and they probably regretted that later.”

Ew. “All of it’s part of a relationship, which is part of the retainer.” Oh, she *hated* how that sounded, like her mom would just go for him after marriage, but it was the best shot mom had not to get annhilated by him right afterwards. “Your dead. She’s living. She’s going to have to get used to . . .” She gestured toward his face. Especially toward his teeth. “That.” Right. “You should take a bath too.”

“Hey! If I accept these nonsense boundaries, then you gotta respect mine too. Isn’t that what all you people are into these days? Boundaries?”

Boundaries. “If you smell so much that she doesn’t want to be near you, your going to have a hard time getting anything like a kiss.”

“Oh. Done.”

Wait? Astrid smelled the air. She could smell the air, but there wasn’t anything foul in it anymore. “What did you do?”

“Changed the old factory settings of your nose,” he said.

Old factory. *Olfactory.* He was covering the scent from their noses, but he was still dirty. “Not good enough. We are living. Dirt equals germs, and too many germs can kill us. It’s not an exaggeration.”

He scratched his head. “We’ve reached a crossroads.” A railroad sign fell between them.

Astrid looked up and moved backward as a whole train fell down! It started to speed across the tracks.

Whether he wanted to or not, apparently that disgust was part of what made him, him. So far, this seemed like the hardest part of the dealings. While the train crossed, she had to think.

Jeremy didn’t have an odor even though he was dead. Her dad Richard, sort of smelled like fish though. He would definitely be taking care of himself, he did in life. The smell wasn’t

too bad, but he did smell like fish and the rainforest.

When the train finished passing, she knew what she had to ask. “Can you get rid of the smell or did you die with it?”

His eyes went wide and he even took a step backward. He just looked at her strangely.

Yep, she nailed it. He would never smell well even if he did take care of himself. “Basic hygiene, enough not to kill us, and we’ll learn to accept it.” They had to. It was part of wherever he came from.

“Modern people are weird,” he just muttered. “There won't be that much difference. Fine! Basic that it can’t kill you. Picky.”

Astrid watched as the whole set up of the train disappeared. He stuck his hand out again. “This includes mom’s treatment?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered. “I’ll work on marriage papers as a delay tactic, until I do win her. Until then, I get paid.”

“Right.”

“I can’t believe I am stooping this low,” he complained. He changed from his ridiculous bathing suit back to the strange black and white tuxedo. “Thing’s happen in threes. Even on the two, I really tried. I knew it wouldn’t happen.” He glanced at her. “All the sweet green icing, flowing down. Someone left the cake out in the rain.”

He didn't sing it, he just said it, but she vaguely knew what he was saying. Those were the lyrics to the song he made them sing at the wedding. She was too shocked and had no control of herself during that part, she wasn’t thinking about the lyrics. *Cake.* They did sing a lot about cake. “What song did you make us sing? I’d never heard of it before.”

She grabbed her phone from her pocket.

“People are attached to those like umbilical chords,” he said.

Astrid didn’t care what he said, nor with his phrasing did she want to see what he was doing. She was typing the lyrics into the phone to find the song. Jimmy Webb wrote the song. The meaning?

It wasn’t something the average person would be singing at a wedding that was happy. Apparently, the songwriter was broken up about losing his girlfriend in MacArthur Park and wrote about it. Beetlejuice could not have made it clearer. He knew how it would end, before anything even happened to jeopardize the wedding. “If you knew the marriage wouldn’t happen, why’d you try?”

“Same reason,” he muttered. “I’m *still* trying.”

Astrid looked at him a couple seconds longer before putting her phone away. Her mother called him a trickster demon. He wasn’t a nice person. He smelled horiffic, he was terrible, he

killed innocent people for his job. He tried to marry her mom. He was going to ride up the hugest bill he could before this was over. He was the thing that haunted mom's nightmares.

And for the strangest reason, he felt like her dad. The impossible marriage the officer said couldn't happen, it suddenly could when he saw her records. A lot of things refused to make any sense. He probably had those answers, but one thing was for sure.

She knew it, for a fact. If he was given extra freedoms? He wouldn't be the chaos supreme her mom thought he'd become. It wouldn't unleash some hell on Earth. He'd stay right there, with them. Protecting them until the job was over.

This time, she extended her hand.

He still looked skeptical.

She pulled her hand back briefly. "The other deals were made in the spur of the moment," Astrid pointed out. "With a desperate young teenager, and a desperate mom wanting to save her daughter. This deal had an officer involved, a retainer, payment, and we worked out details about hygiene and boundaries." It had been thought through. "We are going to finish this deal." She put out her hand again. "One shower a week. Including hair."

He grabbed her hand.

"You have to brush your teeth everyday too," she added.

He pulled his hand away.

"If mom does like you, or she at least feels pity enough for you to give into a kiss? She'll choose a hug or something different, she never will like that." That seemed to work.

He put out his hand again.

They shook.

"Don't stab me in the back again," he warned her. "Things have a tendency of happening in three's. Your mom needs to get in on the deal too, she's part of it. That and she already owes me."

"Yeah."

"Back payment too."

"I know." Astrid looked at the card. "You sent five to the waiting room."

"Escorter," he said. "Never helped the living much, but we'll just flip the definitions but keep the same rates. Five escorters. One Bouncer. One Roper."

Five escorters. Astrid saw a calculator pop up in front of her, free floating. She put in the prices. *Escorters are 2500. Bouncer is 1000. Roper is 500.* She did the math. "14,000 dollars."

“That was today. Now? Since I got scrubbed on the other deals. Another roper, but an advanced roper.” A piece of paper appeared in front of him and flew toward her face.

Astrid grabbed it. It had the details of all the pricing and more detailed pricing. All of the official pricing was off the charts, but it made sense why, even Officer Wolf said it. Not everyone needed a killer.

“Breaking into the neitherworld falls into advanced,” he said.

When he brought her mom to the Neitherworld illegally to get her, it turned advanced. And advanced? *Ten thousand plus 500.* “10,500.” She added them together. “24,500.” Then, she knew what was going to be next. Last Chance. “There’s no way anyone could pay this.”

“It’s big, that’s why anything that happens in it is free.”

It better be for that price. “It’s 250,000.”

“There’s no coming back from exorcism,” he said. “It’s just 208 dollars a month for a hundred years. It’s the only plan the Neitherworld allows to be a payment plan. For your mom? I was sent back to the waiting room again. No deal. Full price. Up front.”

“274,500.” That was just what was owed. “Wake up mom.”

“I need time to draw up contracts and get things ready for this *maybe* fake marriage thing. Right now, I need two things. To finagle, and to lie to your mom a lot.”

He didn’t trust her to stay. That only made sense. “Lie away, I won’t tell her anything yet.”

Beetlejuice looked down at her mom. “Hey? Know your sleeping happily. Gonna have to end it for you. I’ve been chatting with our daughter a good thirty minutes now.”

Then, the sensation Astrid felt from her childhood was gone. That comfortable funny feeling in her stomach completely disappeared. She could tell without a fact her dad was nowhere there. As suddenly as it had come out of the blue, it now disappeared?

Chapter 9: Loophole

“Chatting?” Lydia opened her eyes and realized she was being held by Beetlejuice. “Put me down!”

“You sure? You were super comfortable in my arms,” Beetlejuice teased her. “Just ask our daughter.”

“No.” He put her down. Ew! She moved away, but still swore she could feel his greasy grip. She adjusted her clothes and checked her leg. “I thought it was worse, that’s good.”

She saw Astrid not very far. Her daughter must have called for him. “Are you okay?”

Astrid looked crossed at her. “You owe Beetlejuice 274,500 dollars.”

What? Lydia’s brows furrowed in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Those are the backfees for everything he’s done for you, including today,” Astrid answered here. “Your show.” She pointed at her mom. “Ghost House. It’s to blame for what’s happening.”

Oh, all the progress they were making together, it looked like it was getting away. Lydia watched as papers started to fall from the sky like rain, all around them. Hundreds at least. “What’s this?”

“Probably a representation of all the contracts on our heads.” Astrid was definitely angry at her. “People have contracts, for *our* lives, because of *your* show.”

Her show? “It’s been over. What about it?”

“Can’t have proof of life after death,” Beetlejuice answered. “Plus, shaming the dead is probably mixed in there too somewhere. Yeah. There’s about a thousand contracts out on you.”

A thousand?

“We are hiring Beetlejuice to protect us,” Astrid said.

Hiring? What did she miss when she was unconscious? “Contracts on us.” For the show. “The show’s been around. There have been similar show’s to mine. No one’s ever done that before to anyone.”

“That’s because no one knew exactly where we were. You have to know where your target is when you fill out the contract. But? When we went over to the Neitherworld, they found out. Especially when you broke in,” she said firmly.

“Oh, you were on the Neitherworld media everywhere,” Beetlejuice told her. “Even newbies trapped in houses were getting it on their tv’s. Location part was sealed.”

That couldn’t be happening. Thousands of contracts from just her show? “I didn’t know about some proof after death?”

“You were living, of course you didn’t,” Beetlejuice said. “Doesn’t stop others from making contracts.”

“I bet several people have them, they just can’t get them because they haven’t broken into the Neitherworld to make the address easy.” Astrid kept riding her.

Oof. “Well, I had to do something,” she tried to reason with her.

“I had to do something too,” Astrid answered back. “I made an agreement with Beetlejuice.”

An agreement? Lydia looked toward Beetlejuice. What kind of agreement did he make with her?

“We need to pay what he’s owed first,” Astrid said. “274,500 dollars.”

That was ridiculous. There was no way his services cost that much, he was just squeezing out what he could get again.

“Don’t look like that,” Astrid warned her.

There was a demon, next to her, and she only seemed mad at her?

“It’s not his fault. He’s the one saving us. I worked out the best deal I could, considering what we are facing.”

“You shouldn’t have done that without me-”

“Hard to do it with you when you were dragged out onto the open road off a cliff!” She yelled at her. “If it wasn’t for the fact that I called Beetlejuice beforehand, you’d be dead right now!”

Oh. *She’s right.* She was just taken so fast, she never even thought about saying his name again. Lydia looked at her wounds. They should feel a lot worse. *He stitched my mouth together so I couldn’t call out his name before in the model.* It didn’t hurt a bit. He was controlling the pain.

No wonder Astrid was mad at her. *I don’t have a choice.* Lydia already knew what was coming.

“I hired Beetlejuice,” Astrid said in an actual nice manner. “Most contracts, according to him, are three to six months. We are going to move around with him, so he can keep us safe.”

Three to six months? Lydia looked at Beetlejuice and squirmed slightly. Three to six months of him?

“You need to agree,” Astrid told her.

Lydia leaned backward as he came closer to her.

“Not getting much choice. Hug on it?”

At least he asked? “Shake. I think.” She looked toward Astrid one more time. Her expression said a lot right now. She made the best deal she could, and there wasn’t a choice. *She almost lost me.* She already lost her father.

Three to six months stuck with him. At least Astrid kept her hand in marriage out of it. Astrid knew she placed a lot of her money in savings, and didn’t spend too much unless Delia was coming over to see them. The house payment ate up some of it. Astrid’s private education. She really did try to save.

He always wanted something big in return though. Was it just money? Was he still scheming to escape to the outside world? “How do we know for sure you are going to honor this deal?”

She watched as his expression went between funny and angry.

“How do you know I’ll honor it? Really? Really?!” Oh, he was mad. “You are the one that wiggled out of the deal, both times! You are the one that *I* don’t trust!”

“Then why do you trust me to make a deal again?!”

“Because if you don’t, your daughter is gonna have something to say to you.”

Hm? Lydia looked toward Astrid. What did he do? How did he turn her against her so much! “Astrid?”

“I worked very hard trying to get him to trust in this,” Astrid said. “Because we don’t have any other option. You’d be dead right now, there would be no option to even do this. It happened so-”

“Astrid!” Astrid was roped like cattle and just yanked across the ground, about to be dragged just like she was! No, that pain, she didn’t want that for-!

The road became soft playdough as Astrid was dragged across it. She wasn’t dragged far before she was cut loose.

By Beetlejuice.

Lydia ran toward Astrid to check on her. *Nothing, I couldn’t have done nothing.* Just like when she saw that door close to the waiting room and ran towards him for help. Just like . . .

////1988 . . .

Barbara! Adam! Lydia just watched as they were shriveling in front of her. “No.” Barbara, although brittle and barely appearing as the person she used to be, tried to reach out. They were dying. She told everyone they were dying, but no one listened.

Even when they did start to believe it, nothing could be done. No one could save them.

She ran to the only other person who could help. She moved straight to the model. “Just help them, please!”

Beetlejuice was dressed in a black and white tuxedo relaxing on tombstones. He spoke a little, getting straight to the point. Marriage to get out.

Lydia didn’t care, she was desperate. “Okay, just save them!”////

It was a risk. It was a big risk. The laughter of the inner child of Beetlejuice killing people in her dreams echoed in her mind. *He did good, yes. He helped, yes, but it was always for his benefit.* He had such massive power. *I can’t lose Astrid. I won’t let Astrid lose me.*

She trusted that nightmare once, and escaped it.

She trusted that nightmare twice, and escaped it.

That nightmare that she dread, just disappeared in front of her. She found her dreading that so much worse. The road lost the playdough feel. Astrid looked at her, eyes so scared. If she was grabbed again.

Astrid was rarely ever scared, no matter what she went through. The look on her face. There wasn’t a choice. “Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse. Betelgeuse.”

They were going to die without him. She had to take the chance. She heard a loud scream in the distance, and then watched Beetlejuice appear beside her again.

“That’s another 3000 dollars, Honey.”

Heaven help me. “Don’t call me Honey or Sweetie,” she insisted. “It’s Lydia.”

He looked so giddy? “Lydia. Do you want a hug? Would that make you happy?"

“No.” There’s no way a disgusting demon was going to make her happy. “Just keep us alive, that’ll make me happy.”

“Right,” he snorted. “You bet. Got it. The juice is on the job, totally. A hundred percent, I can do this.”

“Right.” Could he? She did remember that his juice was really strong. He was pretty clever like Astrid. That was a lot of contracts on them though.

“Yep. By the time we’re done, were all gonna be one biiiiig happy family. Anyhow, not exactly supposed to give confident proof of a ghost’s existence, so we better head out. Who’s got chalk? That’d be me.”

Beetlejuice drew a door on a large tree and knocked three times. “We get to go in the front today. Come on.”

“Come on, Astrid.” Lydia took a deep breath and went in. She came back out to see Astrid. “We need to do this. You need to come in here soon.”

Astrid didn’t move. Her mom was giving her space. She did that sometimes, when it was needed.

Beetlejuice gestured her in. “Yeah, first experience was bad for you, almost losing your soul. Can’t be helped. Gotta go.”

“No one can swap my soul for theirs?” she asked.

“You’re fine. Just don’t say anything that’s not in your language. Let’s move already,” he said again.

Astrid sighed. “Don’t call me Honey, Sweetie, Dear, or anything like that.”

“I’m gonna call you a pain in the ass if you don’t move,” he said oh so not lovingly. “Clock is moving, tick tock, waiting rooms aren’t fun, wanna die before we get through?” He held his hands out. “Hey, you were the one that proposed it this way.”

Right. She had to. They would be staying on that side for some time. Astrid went in. She didn’t want to get too far from her mom.

Waiting Room . . .

Yeah. Now that Lydia wasn’t spooked about marriage, maybe he finally had a chance. “So, how’s life been?”

Lydia just glanced at him, not wanting to make small talk. “Good.”

“Good, good.” He looked around. “Daughter turned out okay.”

“Don’t try going after her,” Lydia warned him.

Wow. His reputation was really sealed. He scoffed. “Try and take out a few of the living, and all manner of trust, out the door.” Nope, nope. He had to calm down. She had to see him in a new light.

Astrid was right. If she was going to be his wife, he really wanted to have a willing wife. “You look pretty today?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Lydia stared at him. “What are you playing at? Why are you not begging for marriage? You better not be switching to my daughter.”

Ugh. “I’m not playing anywhere in particular,” he answered. “I’m not going after your daughter.”

“You are a thing of nightmares. Even the dead don’t want anything to do with you.”

Ouch. True but ouch. “Love you too, Honey.” Oh. “Inner child bit too much?” It wasn’t the best skit he ever had. His feelings definitely came unglued from being ignored all those years.

“You blew me up like I was pregnant, broke my water, and did *that*. You’ve done so much to my family.” Yeah, no loving eyes from her. “I know everything you tried with Barbara too.”

Oh, of course. The Maitland yuppies shared everything. “Love it if any of that was jealousy.”

“I don’t like you, but, I’ll do whatever you need,” Lydia said to him, “as long as you don’t bother Astrid.”

Oh, he felt that too.

Yep. Those eyes spelled it out.

“I also saved the Maitlands,” he reminded her.

“For marriage to me. Same for helping me with Astrid before.” Yeah, to her there was nothing good about that. “I don’t know what the deal is this time.”

But the trust was low. Geez. “Saved you, didn’t I? I could have just dealt with that little con-artist, instead I made him tell you the truth at the wedding.” Anything? A tiny sense. A tiny push. “Not one nice dream about me?”

“Last dream of you, I was watching Astrid give birth. Your inner child was born, killed everyone, and she just held it happily. So, no. No nice dreams.”

Oh. Yeah, he had connected with her briefly after the wedding again. He didn’t like to connect nicely after that defeat, and that spun into his dreams as well. He woke up because of it too. It was so intense, they actually connected for a second visually again. He had seen her panicked in bed, and she definitely saw him.

He just looked away toward the counter. He couldn’t say anymore though. He had to stay focused on what was important. Keeping her and Astrid safe in the neitherworld and getting rid of those contracts, while also keeping an eye out for his ex-wife. His soul was still tempting.

Right now, he couldn’t use the real world as an escape route yet. Not until he gained access there legitimately.

He heard their number being called and headed forward. “Hey. Party of one dead, and two not dead. Need to make a deal.” The counter woman just stared at him, clearly suspicious. Yeah, he probably bugged her in the past. He bugged any pretty lady in the past, when he could only make a short time physical connection, it was worth it.

“Come on. Let’s let bygones be bygones?” He gave her his information. All his information, he dumped it right onto her counter. Some of it fell off, but it wasn’t as important as what stayed on.

She looked through most of it. She rolled her eyes. "You know that's wrong."

"Doesn't say it is."

She just huffed. “To stay in the Neitherworld for that kind of case, you have to fill out this.” She gave him a small stack of papers.

“Got it, thanks.” He smiled at her. “The other way too?”

She narrowed her eyes. “Depending on how those trickster papers you fill out-”

“You know they’ll go right through,” he interrupted her. It was nice to see someone else having a bad day today.

“You suck. Get out of my sight.” She wasn’t being mean to be mean. She was dead, she could feel it too. Even thought Astrid and Lydia weren’t just visuals this time around, other dead could *definitely* feel the connection. It looked like it hurt even harder, knowing he definitely wasn’t deserving of the connection. It had pissed Juno off too.

“I didn’t ask for it,” he said in his defense. She didn’t say anything in return.

He went over and started to fill out the papers. He knew all of it, the tiniest details already. He brought it back over and gave it back.

He went back toward them. Both of them were watching him wearily. “So, we are done for now, you just need to get stamped. Let’s go.” He brought them forward.

The secretary had a stamp. “Move closer. The both of you.”

Lydia and Astrid both moved closer, and that woman stamped their foreheads.

“Come closer, I gotta initial.” She chewed her gum louder as she wrote on their heads.

Lydia and Astrid looked at each other.

They both angrily looked back at Beetlejuice.

“It couldn’t be helped.” She stamped the word LUGGAGE on their forehead. Underneath, she initialed *Betelgeuse’s Property*.

Lydia looked back toward the secretary. “Get this off of my forehead.”

“Can’t,” the secretary said in a spiteful delight. “It’s true. It’s the papers he filled out. As long as you are here with him, you aren’t living or dead. You are getting through in a loophole. You are his luggage for a week.”

Lydia looked back toward Beetlejuice.

“Wouldn’t have that junk on your head if you would have just married me.” Okay. Not good. His anger at her always shined through more. He needed to quit before his inner child came back and had a tantrum again.

“Luggage?” Astrid looked toward him. “What did you fill out for us?”

“You aren’t dead or alive. You’re carry on. It’s a loophole they never fixed, fully defining what luggage can and can’t be. You just can’t be more than a few feet away from me.”

“Luggage? You really put us in as luggage?” Astrid’s eyes were wide.

“It’s only gonna work for a short time,” the secretary warned them. “Eventually, it will come up to the board, and that paper *will* change.”

“Yeah, uh huh.” It wasn’t the first time he used a loophole. Only problem was that it did eventually get papers fixed. Each time he used one, it was an option gone in the future.

“You want anything longer, you might as well just kill yourself,” the secretary said. “You’re better off that way than sticking with him. Next!”

Chapter 10: Beetlejuice's Luggage

Lydia looked around the place. Beetlejuice just sent them somewhere.

“This’ll be fine for a short time,” he said to each of them. “Welcome to limbo.”

“Where are we?” Astrid asked. She didn’t recognize it.

Lydia didn’t either. The place was covered in weird burgundy velvet. Like the tuxedo he tried to marry her in twice. It was small. There wasn’t anything there except one single chair, an end table and a newspaper. And a uh? She coughed. A foul odor. “Where are we?”

“Limbo,” he said again.

“No.” Lydia shook her head at him. “You need to be more descriptive than that.”

“Ah.” He nodded. “Were in the model.”

“On the inside of it?” she asked.

“Yeah. It’s home.” He gestured to it. “It’s my grave. Goes with me everywhere in limbo.”

Oh! Oh.

“This is a grave?” Asterid asked. “You stay in your own grave? That explains so much.”

“Deal with it. Right now, you’re my luggage,” he told Lydia.

He wasn’t just being funny when he hung out in the gravesite of the model. Ugh.

“You have to live in your own grave?” Astrid asked him.

“No, but I get to.” He looked pretty offended. “Maybe you missed it, I don’t know. There are a lot of ghosts out there. Real estate isn’t cheap.”

“But can’t you just make something appear?” Astrid asked.

There was probably a reason that wasn’t possible. None of his magic that he performed actually stayed that way. Even with the huge changes for the marriage on the house in Winter River. There were a lot of changes. It all reverted. She didn’t know if that’s because he left the living world, or if everything simply stayed for only so long.

It was something she had wondered about. An actual conversation with him. She hadn’t done that since she was young. There was too much adrenaline to talk much to him when she needed to get her daughter. Nothing but very quick contract stuff she had to do.

Regular conversation with the guy that caused her nightmares. “Mmm . . .” She scratched behind her ear. Had to at some point. “Does your juice only stay for so long?”

“Most times. It’s not supposed to have long term effects. It lasts longer in the Neitherworld, less long in reality,” he said. “Ergo. Yeah. I don’t have a gigantic mansion sitting on the side of a pool.”

Oh. “Barbara and Adam had their house.”

“Yeah, good for them. Over a hundred years, pretty sweet,” he said. “After that, they would have left the house for a lot longer. Gotten a real taste of the Neitherworld. Great thing they found a loophole.”

It was a good thing, they might not have enjoyed that as much. They thought they would move on after that, not just move on to losing the house.

“If you aren’t cursed, then do you get a house?” Astrid asked him.

“What’s wrong with my grave?” He pointed out. “My juice lasts longer here. I’ll have you know, it’s a fun size. Portable.”

“Right, you weren’t always in the model before Barbara and Adam.” So then? “You choose limbo?”

“You two? Are boring as hell right now,” he complained. “You learn all the boring stuff when you die. Just, go with the flow, alright?” He picked at his ear. “Be happy you are my luggage.” He started to check out a nearby drawer for something, muttering.

“What about your wife?” Astrid asked him. “She can’t come here, right?”

“Ex-wife. There’s a good question. Not directly.” He pulled something out of the drawer. “She would have to reach the real world, and that’s hard enough. Even if she does, staying in it is out of the question, so figuring out I’m in a random model in a house upstairs probably isn’t going to happen.” He closed the drawer. “Not at first. She is smart.”

“Then that means the contracts can't find us here either?” Lydia asked him.

“Another good question.” He didn’t speak as fast. “Mostly.”

Mostly? “People can still find this place?”

“Well, some bioexorcists might know. I might have dropped where I was once or twice in a random bar. Haven’t moved in awhile.” He rubbed the base of his chin. “Yeah. If the old Mrs. takes one of them, then she gets the information they had.”

Ooh.

“She’s not out yet. I’ll know when she comes out,” he pointed out.

“The grave home would be okay if it wasn’t so bad,” Astrid said bluntly. “If it had beds too.”

“Oh, that’s easy.” He juiced up two beds. One was a single, the other a double.

“That’s not going to work.” Lydia knew he could fix that.

He put in three singles. “Funner the other way.”

Still an odd demon. At least he wasn’t changing her body this time.

Nevermind, he did. She looked at herself and at Astrid. No fancy wedding dress.

PJ’s. Green PJ’s with patterns of black skulls.

“Get some sleep. I need to go do some stuff,” he insisted. “I’ll be back.”

“You aren’t supposed to leave far, you labeled us as luggage,” Lydia reminded him.

“Yeah, but, everyone forgets their luggage at home sometimes,” he said.

“Hey!” Astrid went over toward him. “Don’t mess with us with your juice. I don’t know how you know my dimensions, but I want my old clothes back, and don’t do that again without my permission.”

Oh, Astrid. That wasn’t a good idea. Times had changed above to be more respectful of personal things, but Beetlejuice had been dead for who knew how long. All that was going to get her was-

A bunny costume. Then it changed in a puff of smoke to a duck costume. Then it changed in a puff of smoke, to her regular clothes. Then it changed in a puff of smoke, to the pj’s he juiced on her before.

Astrid being Astrid though. “You’re such a jerk.”

“You have no idea,” Beetlejuice answered her. “Living world freedom isn’t here, Kiddo, get it straight in your head. Gotta be more careful when speaking your mind. Know who your speaking to first, what power they’ve got against you, and then figure out your next move.”

“Just, don’t juice things on us, you already said they don’t last forever,” Astrid tried again.

“Clothes last a long time,” he said. “Small things are easy, they last weeks.”

“Really?” Astrid’s voice lifted up. “So you can make us custom clothes?”

“Yeah, it’s easy.”

“Well? Just make sure you ask first,” Astrid said.

“Astrid.” Lydia tried to reel her back in. She was talking to the demon like he was an average guy. “This isn’t a hill to die on.” She didn’t recognize the phrasing of what she just said, until after she said it.

Beetlejuice started to laugh. “Actually, this is the perfect hill to die on. See?” He juiced the ceiling open and revealed the sky. Well, the room.

Lydia could see the old Winter River house. It hadn't been bought yet. "That house belonged to my dad and Delia in the end. When this house sells, this model might get torn apart."

"Then I find a new limbo," he said.

"Everything is so giant," Astrid said. She saw an easy walkway. "Can we go out?"

"Sure."

"Astrid." No, no.

Astrid walked up some and looked behind the top of the ceiling. "This is a tombstone with your name on it. We are in a tombstone." She came back down. "It really is a grave." She gestured around. "We need some deodorizer for this place."

No, no, no. Astrid was getting too familiar with him. She still didn't understand what he could do. "It's fine. We'll rest while you go and do what you have to. Please close the door of your tombstone." He gave her a funny smirk right before he vanished. Finally. Now? "Astrid, why are you pushing a demon's buttons? He kills people for fun, this isn't the time to get upset about clothes or ask for a tour."

"We are going to be here for some time," Astrid reminded her. "We have to get to know him. The more he thinks of you as an actual person, maybe the less he'd treat you like a commodity."

"Wishful thinking." Lydia sighed.

"Mom?" She seemed to want to say something. "I asked him if he wanted to marry me instead to save us."

"What?!" How could she be so stupid? "What were you thinking?!"

"That he wouldn't say yes, and he didn't," Astrid said as she went toward the bed. "He's only interested in you."

Astrid. "Please don't take unnecessary risks."

"I think you should take more," Astrid said instead. "The demon's in love with you. Don't let him throw his weight completely around." She smoothed out the bedding. "The PJ's are bones, and the bed sheets are skulls."

Lydia looked at the headrest. They were skulls too. They were metal silver beds with skulls on the top. That's so radical. She'd never say it out loud though.

"You know you love them," Astrid said bluntly as she climbed in her bed. "Not where I thought I'd go to bed tonight. It's better to feel safe though."

Feel safe? How could she feel safe? She was resting in Beetlejuice's grave. Lydia moved toward her bed, knowing that she should get some rest. "Just, don't take as many chances, Astrid. He may seem fun or silly, but-"

“He kills people. I know,” Asterid said. “I know you don’t get it. I don’t either.”

No, she didn’t get it. “Astrid?” Her daughter wasn’t answering her anymore. She had already drifted to sleep. It was late. They went through a lot, but sleeping in basically the demon’s den.

It would be anything but peaceful.

—

“I know there’s more.” Beetlejuice was getting his men to gather any information on all of the bioexorcists, while he was trying to get the requests for marriage in. He looked at the door. His ex-wife Delores wasn’t coming through yet.

He knew Wolf would be ready. He knew there was a good chance the afterlife would deal with her separate pieces since she was seeking immortality. He didn’t know for sure though, and he didn’t want to take chances.

He looked back at what he had. “It’s the afterlife, there’s a lot more than this.” He was going to have to find each of them and steal the contracts away, or kill them before they could go out and kill Lydia and Astrid.

While killing was pointless, the waiting room was on average a good year to five year wait. Sometimes it was so dead that it was super fast, and they’d be out in a few months. All they had to do was keep them away long enough for contracts to expire.

He was pretty buddy-buddy with a few. Traded missions with some of them. “Oooh. That’s a nice one.” One of his crew just handed him a sweet assignment. Double the usual amount, and just one human. He could probably get it done in fifteen minutes.

Time was a strange thing though. He better not risk it. “Okay. Call me if we find more.” For now, those two were fine. It was his ex-wife he was worried about. She was eaten by a sandworm, not chopped up and stored in separate boxes. When she made it through, he’d have days if the afterlife was too lazy to fix her in separate boxes. “Probably going to be moving limbo, so stay in touch.” He couldn’t risk anyone finding out where he went soon.

He returned to his grave. Both of them were actually sleeping. Crazy. His grave was comfy to him, but he was surprised they were sleeping so soundly. Astrid’s senses and suspicions were throwing tests on him.

Lydia didn’t sense anything differently. Yet. He might even be in her nightmares right now. “Ooh, good idea.” He should check. He moved closer to her.

“Why?” Why that dream again? She banged on the window. Everyone was dead in the delivery room except Astrid and Beetlejuice’s inner child. Astrid always looked happy about it. Why?

Then? She was outside? A lovely day. Astrid was over in the corner, with a picnic basket. What? She saw Beetlejuice's inner child scamper through the grass and then leave the area.

Only for Beetlejuice to show up himself next to her in his stupid therapy outfit he wore last time. "Hey."

She closed her eyes and looked away.

"Now, now. Didn't we talk about closing thing's off?"

"Don't spill your guts to me," she insisted. "Keep your inner child away from me."

"Okay? How about this instead?"

Lydia looked down and saw herself in a red dress. It wasn't a wedding dress though. "What's this?"

"I don't know. Um. Gift," he said. "Sorry I scared you. You pissed me off a lot."

Pissed him off? Wait. "Did you enter into my dreams?"

"Guilty," he said. "It's funny you don't get that dream yet."

"That my daughter births the same thing that I did from you?" What was she supposed to get from that?

"Nah. My inner child kills everything around it for a good time, except you two," he pointed out as the environment became a ball room. "There's another big hint in it, staring you right in the face."

"Oh. Yeah. That's better." Really? "Your playing mind games with my mind. Please leave my sleep."

"Make me," he teased her.

She looked around herself. Astrid was gone. They were just in a huge empty ballroom. "What do you want now?"

"Wow." He took a monocle and looked closer at her face. "Never saw someone so exhausted in their dreams. Life got you down? Death isn't much better. How about a dance?"

A dance? "You just said how exhausted I had been, and you want to dance?" Oh, she couldn't help it. "Betelgeuse, everything is bad enough, leave me alone!"

"Hey, hey, there's some of the old Lydia I finally see bubbling forth again," he said as he spun her around, and pulled her back. "You know, the one that actually talked to the dead guy in the model?"

"That Lydia didn't know better."

“Well, that Lydia was in the middle of trying to end her life too,” he pointed out.

“You didn’t help, saying you could find Barbara and Adam for me.” She got spun out again, and then spun back in.

“Nah, but I did manage to keep you from leaving the house to jump, oh, to ‘plummet’ off the bridge like them,” he reminded her.

How did he-? “You don’t get credit for that when it was just a coincidence of when you used me.”

“Who made that rule?” he said. “Not me. I hate rules.”

“Why are you bothering me in my dreams? It’s bad enough you get involved in my life, that you are yanking our will around with your power, you even dress us! Quit it!” Ugh.

“That’s why,” he said as he continued to dance with her perfectly. “That rebellious side I liked. Your mind is tired in your sleep. You can’t help but speak your mind, and your damning the consequences.”

Oh no. “I’m gonna regret what I do in my dreams?” She couldn’t think clearly right now. Then?

She woke up. She saw him right next to her bed.

“Yeah. Like telling me what to do, when I’m clearly right beside your bed?”

She moved away. She couldn’t even get away in her dreams.

Beetlejuice gestured to Astrid. “Out like a light.”

Yeah, she had been. “Just don’t mess with her. I know any contract you make isn’t going to work for our situation but?” She couldn’t believe this was happening. “I’ll marry you ahead of time, if you just help us in the living world and let us live our lives.” She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. He didn’t answer at first. “We could go right now to any church. Interrupt any wedding and take over?”

That self-righteous grin on his face. “Wow. You are really begging for a wedding now? Reality set in, huh? The fact your sleeping in comfy pj’s in my grave just dropped the weight of it all on you.”

No, no! Lydia tried to move from the bed, knowing a huge weight would fall with those words. Instead, just little feathers saying ‘it all’ drifted down on the bed.

“Yeah, it wouldn’t be hard in the living world.” He rubbed it in. “I could sense ghosts way faster, probably stop them before you knew they were there. You could have had your normal lives the whole time, I could have just been tagging along without you even knowing. Yep. Would have been nice.”

He lightly cackled. “Tomorrow? We get to have breakfast together. I’ll take you to my office in the call center and you get to hang around it boringly. We get to have lunch. Then we’ll head back to the office. Then we’ll get supper. Mexican might be great. Then we can relax with a fun game and go to bed. Then, after that? It’ll be all over again. Again and again and again until I eventually get this stopped or you two die from old age. One. Big. Happy. Family.”

Ngh! The marriage would be so much better than being stuck there. “Just marry me already. I won’t run, I promise.”

“Promises from you? I don’t know, they never work out,” he teased. “You don’t even have a ring for me. This isn’t a fancy setting at all.” He lifted his leg and showed off a bridal shoe. “Not so fun now that the shoe’s on the other foot?”

“Stop joking around. You want freedom, and I am literally giving it to you first,” she pointed out. “It can’t be a con this time. The marriage is first.”

“Well?” He wiggled his hand. “I would, but it turns out that your a habitual liar and I like Astrid’s idea better. Plus, you know, you and me straight to marriage, didn’t work out twice. I know I’m insane, but let’s not beat the definition down that much.”

“Marriage would let you be free in the living world, to escape your ex-wife. It keeps you around to deal with anyone coming after us, without a curse on you.” This should be fairly easy for him. It’s what he always wanted, why wasn’t he taking it? “What was Astrid’s idea?” She just caught on to what he said.

“Can’t tell you. It’s a secret between us,” he said.

A secret? “She isn’t going to-” She watched something fly across the room and shatter.

“Broken record,” he said. “If I do shoot for marriage.” He pulled a gun and aimed it at her. He pulled it and it popped out a flag that said bang. “It’ll be for you. Not interested in anyone else.”

Why? “Why does it have to be me?”

“Also a secret,” he said again. “Relax.”

“It’s hard to relax around you of all people.”

“Gonna have to learn.” He juiced on his own PJ’s, and went over to the last bed. He jumped in the air and fell back on it. “It’s gonna take more than a couple nights to figure these problems out, Toots.”

Her nightmare. Sleeping in the next bed over.

///Nah. My inner child kills everything around it for a good time, except you two.///

The fear of what he could do was starting to ease up, and Lydia didn’t know if that was good or bad. He was a demon, a demon that killed for a job. A demon that made deals. A demon

that tried to marry her twice.

But, he also . . . saved them in the car. Saved her when she was dragged out of the house. Revealed the truth what a bastard Rory had been. He made some kind of deal that didn't involve her marrying him, nor did it involve Astrid marrying him either. I don't know how to feel about this. She was depending on him for survival now. Even sleeping in his grave with Astrid.

Trusting one demon, to keep them safe from others. It wasn't the first time she had to put her trust in him though. She made him help save the Maitlands, and she made him help save her daughter. Both times, she shortchanged him, and didn't give him what he wanted. Totally reasonable at fifteen, she wasn't even an adult.

But, at her age now? The second time around? I fully understood what I was agreeing too. I knew the second I ran to that house. I let that loophole Astrid found let me out. I should have just shot myself in the foot the second time and did it. She had no idea this would happen.

Now, they were in serious trouble, and instead of at least staying in the living world, they were going to be dragged around like luggage because he wouldn't marry her. By definition.

Luggage.

Beetlejuice's Luggage.

Chapter 11: Afterlife Call Center

Beetlejuice's Grave

Lydia was up first, staying near her daughter’s bed. Astrid was still sleeping soundly. After yesterday, she must have been worn out. She had no idea what time it had been, but she had heard a sound that woke her up.

Sleep wasn’t something Lydia was going to get more than the basic amount of, she was too unaware of what would happen.

“Morning, Lydia.”

She jumped. He didn’t touch her, but he’d appeared just right beside her. “Morning.”

“Breakfast, Lydia?” Second time he used her name.

She did tell him that she wanted him to use her name, so she couldn’t blame that on anything. “I don’t know.”

“Too bad, breakfast. Being late for work has really bad ramifications when it’s a punishment,” he said. “What do you want? Juice?”

She shouldn’t be picky, but she should make sure it was edible. “You can make orange juice.”

“Sure can. Sweet of you to remember that.” He juiced up a pitcher and poured some into a glass.

She took the glass when it was full. “Thanks.” She looked back toward Astrid.

“She sleeps like the dead,” Beetlejuice said. “Makes sense, she’s in a grave. How’d you sleep?”

“Rougher.” He entered into her dreams last night. Her one place where she could escape, was not escapable. In fact? When she had gone back to sleep, in her dreams. She wore the red dancing dress he gave her in it. “That dress won’t disappear.”

“Course not, it’s a gift,” he said.

“In my dreams,” she reminded him.

“Yeah.”

“Is there anyway you could just stay out of my dreams?” She did it as kindly as she could. Anyone entering into her dreams, let alone him, didn’t leave her feeling well rested. She felt trapped.

“I will, once you figure out that nightmare you keep having,” he said. “Hey? At least you have a pretty dress for the nightmare.”

Her repeating nightmare. “Your inner child wants to kill everything, but Astrid and I.”

“Right, yeah, but there’s more to it than that. Why?” he asked. “Why do you think that is?”

Because he was a possessive scrungy demon that for some reason loved playing with them. “I don’t know, why?”

“Yeah you do.” He leaned in closer and stared straight at her a few seconds before saying, “I’m nothing but a demon that wants to play with my prey. Pretty close?”

Way too close.

She watched him move back some. “I’m not what you think I am. I mean? Well, yeah I am. But, there are some good qualities in me. Somewhere. I think? Maybe, I don’t know, it’s been awhile. Good juice?”

She looked at the juice. She hadn't drunk it yet. She never actually ate or drank anything that was whipped up by him before.

“Don't worry,” he smirked, almost seductively. “It’s not gonna kill you. I would never get paid.”

Paid. Right. “We should address that.”

“Later, gotta go to work. Wake our daughter up- your!” He said. “Your daughter. Sorry, what can I say? I was looking forward to being a real family man when we were supposed to get married.”

Oh, that was creepy. Could he ever not be creepy? Still, if she did marry him. “Well, it's not too late?”

“Nah.” He turned her down and didn't add anything to it.

Lydia touched her daughter’s forehead. “Astrid.”

Astrid opened her eyes. “Hey.” She stood up.

As soon as she stood up, they were both juiced into some kind of office wear.

Astrid went toward him. “You are supposed to ask first.”

“You are supposed to remember who you are talking to,” Beetlejuice said right back to her. “Power compare. Who’s stronger?”

Astrid didn’t say anything.

“Yep, there’s the answer.” He gave her some juice. “Breakfast.”

Astrid took it. “Yeah, but I don’t back down on bullies.”

“I know.” He actually sounded happy. “Powerwise, I’m way stronger, Astrid. So what do you have over me?”

Lydia watched Astrid glance toward her. What did she do that for?

“Right, yes. Leverage,” Beetlejuice answered to her, juicing her back into her clothes from yesterday. “Power isn’t everything.” He went ahead and juiced himself into office wear. “Okay, let’s go before the Wolf comes after me.”

Afterlife Call Center

Okay. To say he didn’t feel a lot of his energy come back yesterday would be an understatement. Ever since he’d been trapped with the botched ceremony results? It bugged him. A lot.

He dealt with it. He dealt with her marriage. He dealt with never seeing Astrid. Hell, he was dead, they didn’t hang out with the living. But when the dead kept seeing the living?

Yeah. It was a pain. Nobody felt sorry for him either when he complained. They thought he should be ‘grateful’. Eternity decided he would feel other people’s emotions to become a better person and get on the soul train.

He didn’t see it that way. Most of the time it was just a form of torture. At least when everyone else died, they weren’t tied to the living again.

Now though? Lydia and Astrid. They were actually, finally, there. Though he’d wandered through eternity for centuries, the last thirty years or so, it felt like it was three centuries in itself.

The two people that if they were to look at the records of the Neitherworld, would be shocked to see their labels. As long as Wolf Jackson kept quiet until he had everything in place, the better.

Still. He finally got to have one, small, teaching lesson with Astrid. Lydia didn’t blow a fuse either. She was probably still wondering how the hell to get his help and then leave him behind. Heh. Making her think he had absolutely no interest in marriage had to be some of his best work.

The one that kept fighting him on the marriage, was now the one begging for it. She thought she’d be strapped in as luggage probably forever. Well, they didn’t have that long.

He had his luggage sitting over in a corner. Astrid was on her phone. Since there weren't living connections to Earth, she was probably playing one of those mobile games.

Lydia just waited in the corner, looking around, not knowing what to do.

Which was fine, let her be bored. She could be bored less than fifteen feet away from him. Because that's where they'd be now. Right next to him.

He watched as one of the shrunken heads handed him a phone. Usually, they wittled out the non-important people that just needed basic stuff. "Important?" He shook his head. "Gotta shit?" He nodded. "Off ya go."

Beetlejuice answered the phone, hearing the yapping from there. New ghosts were always a pain in the ass. *Let's see which drawer this asshole goes in.* He walked toward the filing cabinet. "Uh huh. Uh huh. Did you try scaring them? Yeah? Couldn't see you, huh? Alright. Go work on your scares, and uh, try again in three years."

Yeah, no, that didn't go over well. "Uh huh. Yeah, last time I checked I had a pair of ears. Just like a pair of legs I could-" Use to kick their ass. Man, this job sucked. The only good thing about it was that sometimes, rarely, he'd find a client for himself.

Not often though. "Uh huh. Name again?" He got the name and thumbed through the unprocessed files, grabbing the name.

He looked at his basic drawer labels. Dicks that can't Scare. Dicks That Can't Listen. Dicks that Didn't Read the Handbook. Oh, he found it.

Fuck That Guy drawer. "Yeah, I got it. I got your name down, Ma'am. Someone's gonna come see you in your house in one to six months. If you don't get anybody in six months, there's a number to call in the handbook on page 293, paragraph 8. Call that number. Tell them your file is 164-AD-129-FY. Don't mess your number up, you'll spend years trying to find your file, bye." He hung up before they could ask him to repeat the file code.

It was easy to file these. He went to the side of the filing cabinet to the shredder. He shredded the file, then put the shredded file pieces into the stack of other shredded file pieces in the drawer.

He looked at the bottom of the shredder. "Missed a piece." He grabbed it and also put that piece in the Fuck That Guy drawer.

His job wouldn't let him get rid of a single file. It never said he couldn't shred that shit and mix it up with other shredded pieces of others just like them. Loopholes. It was a specialty.

"Why is the word luggage stamped on their heads?"

Beetlejuice turned and saw Wolf. "I got them here safely, that's all that matters." He brought out measuring tape and measured. "It's less than fifteen feet away." He put the measuring tape away.

"What are you doing?" Wolf asked.

“Just filing another customer’s complaint,” he said as he walked past him. He watched his employee head back as he made his own call. Wolf probably wouldn’t mind if he worked on their issue right now, as long as he was doing real work between. “Hey! Yeah, you remember me. Who forgets me?”

He sat down. “So, do you have any contracts for Lydia and Astrid Deetz? I’ve been in a collecting mood. Uh huh.” Yep. “Forty two, huh? What a haul. Wow. So, can I have those?” The direct way was usually best. “I can buy them. What’s the asking price?” He thonked a pencil up and down. *That’s a lot.* He didn’t have that. He wouldn’t have that until he got the deal.

He looked toward Lydia. She cheapened out on two deals. If she left him without paying somehow? *She’s stuck. For good. She can't leave me again.* Still. “I might buy those off you, just hang onto them.” What? “No way, I’m good for it. I got the money.” She better pay up this time.

Wolf came right in front of him as he took a customer’s call. “Afterlife Center, we are here to help.” He moved away. “Oh yeah?” He pulled out some paper and started to put the ideas for the contract he needed to make. “Yeah. No, I’m writing the whole situation down.” He would be able to juice the contract up, but he needed to make sure he got everything in it, even the small agreements and compromises.

Ugh. Astrid was going to regret wanting him to take a bath. She must have thought he’d never done that before. Well, she’d learn. The toothbrush thing, he couldn’t forget that. The no touching relationship marriage tie. *Either gonna make enough money to live in luxury out of the grave, or marry Lydia.*

He knew which one he wanted more. He always knew which one he wanted more.

“Do you have something else to eat?” Astrid had wandered over. “Orange juice won’t work for too long.”

“Are you taking good care of them?” Wolf accused him.

“Totally.” Of course. Let’s see, what did regular humans eat? Eating wasn’t his specialty, he was fine with what he ate. He’d have to juice up something he knew, he couldn’t juice up something he didn’t know.

He knew a lot of stuff. He didn't know shit when he first died, had to learn just about everything.

If he wasn't using his juice, then he was learning what was going on in the world. The time he was born in, was boring as hell. It was a shitty time to be alive. “What do you want?”

“Maybe some cereal? It would be easy to eat.”

Super easy. He juiced up a bowl, spoon, milk and a cereal box.

She took the free-floating things and made cereal. “Thanks. I will make some for Mom too.”

He juiced up a second bowl and spoon and looked at Wolf. “See?”

Wolf didn't seem impressed. “It's basic but no father of the year.”

Beetlejuice looked toward Astrid. None the wiser by what Wolf just spewed out she took the bowls and walked away. Man. “Isn’t your job to keep me out of trouble?” He knew Wolf wanted to question him, but he couldn’t right now.

He was still working on the phone. “No, Sir, I had to handle an emergency, sorry. Yeah, with cereal. Why would I be lying? I’m not your wife. Yes, the situation, still got all the details here.” That seemed to cover most of it, but he did want to see how far he really was from his goal first.

He took an official piece of paper, wrote down the actual client’s name, and then jotted down ‘Fight between ghosts. Shit happened. House is falling apart. Recommendation: Separation.’ He didn’t need any of the explanation about how they felt about each other, how they died, who killed each other, or what they’d been through. Just the facts sufficed. “Uh huh. Someone will be down there soon to check it out.” He hung up and got up, putting the filings where they actually belonged this time.

Afterwards, he went over to the file drawer Dicks that Didn't Read the Handbook. He moved backward in it and grabbed a file at random. He dialed up the number. “Good Morning, Sir, this is the Afterlife Call Center-”

On and on the client droned about waiting three years for help and getting nothing.

“Uh huh, and did you read the handbook like you were asked to?”

A little was the answer.

“Got it. I’m gonna have to put you on hold for a minute.” He hung up and picked another file in the drawer.

“Richard?”

He was distracted when Lydia called her ex husband’s name. She got so bored, she fell asleep? Nah, that didn’t make sense. She was getting drowsy though. Sometimes newcomers had a hard time staying awake, like jetlag.

That sensation of almost being asleep and almost being awake, was leaving her open to feeling the connections in the Neitherworld for the first time. Would she figure it out now?

Lydia rubbed her eye slightly and looked around.

Meanwhile, Astrid was staring at him. She still wanted to know too. She still had her bowl of cereal, but the other was next to her, uneaten. Lydia wasn’t eating his food yet. Not like he poisoned it.

Eh, later. He really had to work. He had to get things figured out. Now wasn’t the time for some emotional crap to get in the way. Spewing out the truth would have to wait. He dialed

the next number.

Chapter 12: I Don't Know What You’re Talking About

Richard? Lydia looked all around the office. Shrunkenheads, an officer, and Beetlejuice working on the phone. He gave her an odd sort of look, but didn’t say much else.

It felt like Richard was around though. Not just him. Not in their later years when she fell out of love with him for no reason. In their early years. Her heart felt warm. Loved. *He’s somewhere around here.* The person she used to love.

What would he be doing there though?

“I know,” Astrid said to her. “I felt it too last night. You feel dad, right?”

Lydia didn’t know what to say. “I feel something.” It was like, when she was smaller. “You feel it too?”

“Beetlejuice,” the officer called back to him. He was probably messing around or something.

“Right, yeah, yeah, I’m going!” He sounded mad. Nothing new.

Lydia was much more concentrated on that feeling. Richard and her in the beginning, had such a strong connection to each other. When she was younger and left her family, she had missed them. If she saw them again there, that would be nice.

But, Richard? It was a pull between them that couldn’t be defined. Lydia had experienced several things dealing with the supernatural, but there was never anything close to that connection. It was so strong, she thought it could never break.

Then just one day, poof. It didn’t make any sense. She tried to rekindle it, but she couldn’t find it again. That led her deeper into the supernatural, trying to refind that lost connection. From there, the makings of the show began.

And her love for him withered. They stayed together, but it was only for Astrid. Richard felt like a totally other man at that point.

But now, that feeling! That lost feeling. Even Astrid had felt it? Why was it there of all places? Was it hiding inside him, and died with him?

No. She saw him in the Neitherworld not too long ago. That swoon, that sensation didn’t exist. So why now?

“It has all the properties of cereal, so eat it before it gets soggy!”

Beetlejuice sounded mad about her not eating the cereal that Astrid brought over yet. She hadn’t drunk up the orange juice he made that morning too.

There was something very uncomfortable about eating something conjured. Using magic. Wearing magic. It was one thing.

Eating juice?

“It’s not going to kill you to eat,” Astrid told her. “You have to. He can’t go back and forth without us calling for him all the time. It’s pretty good too. It tastes better than the real thing. Like, less dry.”

Lydia took her bowl. She would have to. *Grin and bear it.* It was fine, flavorwise. Still, it was magic. His magic. His magic that she was putting inside of herself. His magic, in her. That couldn’t be more unwanted.

Maybe there was something they could do now, being in the Neitherworld? Maybe others with magic that were gone could help sort things out for a few months? Richard didn’t want to bother them living, but if it helped them-

Beetlejuice was having another fit on the phone, going off on someone else. He was in a bad mood. The officer called him out for it, and he yelled out to him as well.

He shouldn’t be complaining. *He’s getting everything he ever wanted.* Lots and lots of money. Almost 300,000 dollars for them to follow around him like his luggage.

She watched Astrid walk back over to Beetlejuice.

“I need to use the bathroom,” she insisted. “One of your guys did that earlier. Where was that?”

“Can’t be farther than fifteen feet,” he insisted. “Officer Wolf, um?” He glanced toward Lydia. “Can you watch some of my baggage for me? It’s pretty heavy baggage, but you’re an officer of the law.”

The officer didn’t look real happy to do that.

“Actually, I want to ask the officer some questions about the Neitherworld and his acting,” Astrid said. “I feel safe with him, so I wanted him to take me to the bathroom.”

That perked him up. “Well, I’m a lot safer than Beetlejuice.”

Astrid? What was she playing at? Lydia knew she had some kind of plan for wanting the officer to leave with her. Whether good or bad, she wouldn’t interrupt. Maybe it would leave them safe again and away from there?

Astrid was hearing all about his background before they even got close to the bathroom. He really did miss his life as a B movie action star, and that was going to get her closer to the truth. “It sounds like death was hard. No action star roles in the afterlife?”

“No, I got detective,” Wolf said to her. “I play a mean detective too. There are action star roles, but I didn’t get it for some reason. They thought detective fit me better.”

“Your profile must be extensive though, with all your roles.” She almost had it. “Can I see everything you were in, in your lifetime?”

Oh, he dug into his phone and showed her right away. He started going into his small roles and his major roles, and continued to talk.

Meanwhile, Astrid nodded. She already picked up something important in the afterlife. “That’s neat, tell me more about your first roles.” Meanwhile, with him having the profiles part open, and now not even paying attention to the phone, she typed in her name.

And found it. And. *This doesn’t make any sense. Daughter? He’s not my dad.* She typed in her mom’s name. “That’s cool, tell me more.” She waited for the page to pop up. *Error-wife. What’s an error-wife? Is that why I’m daughter?* The botched wedding her mom told her about, it wasn’t so cut and dry after all. She went and typed back in Wolf Jackson’s profile so he didn’t catch her. “That’s great, sorry, we can talk later, I have to use the bathroom.”

After Astrid used the bathroom, she followed Wolf Jackson back still talking about his roles.

When she reached the office again, she noticed Beetlejuice was just sitting there, staring at her.

“Informative bathroom break?” he called her out. He already knew she had found a way to look probably.

She narrowed her eyes at him. How? “None of it makes sense.”

“Sure it does,” he said acting more lively. “No two ghosts are the same, some are closer to the living than not, so some eat and shit like the living, while others just hobble around like clouds without thought and everything in between.”

“That isn’t what I’m talking about and you know it.”

“Oh.” He gestured around him. “Why does everyone here have shrunken heads and I don’t? Well, I didn’t feel like waiting for a long time in the waiting room, kind of borrowed a guy’s number, and he wasn’t crazy about it for some reason. Shrunk my head. So a mix up in processing put me in the shrunken head division of the Afterlife Call Center. Yeah, I tried to flirt with the secretary with it, and the shrunkenhead just wasn’t doing it for her, so you know.”

“That wasn’t it either.” Geez, he was making it worse.

“Well if it wasn’t either of those two things, I don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.” He just grabbed his work phone and started to work again.

“Well, this was fun, I always enjoy meeting new fans,” Officer Wolf said to Astrid, “but I have other places to be. I’ll be around, don’t you worry. I’ve always gotta check up on Beetlejuice. It doesn’t take long for him to get into trouble.”

It didn’t matter. She couldn’t talk about this yet, he wouldn’t answer until her mom was gone. She wouldn’t leave more than fifteen feet though. She just waited back beside her mom. She was enjoying the last of her phone since the battery would go out. She couldn’t even do much, afterlife didn’t have internet. Or, at least not the internet that she had used.

Chapter 13: Didn't Even Make It To Lunchtime

Beetlejuice had to wait for Wolf to shove off again before he could do this. All bets were off, he had no idea how this would turn out.

While things had been ho hum at first, he had caught signs something was wrong. His employees. The shrunken heads weren't answering the phone half as much. Even though they couldn't speak, it was still their job to answer phones and listen.

Two of them were handing something around the office that he couldn't see too. It left his mind for a little while, while he'd been on the phone. He'd been going through a personal rough patch, so he didn't catch it right away. But.

Most people in the Neitherworld were selfish assholes. There was no 'better for the community' frame of mind. People were stuck in houses, they didn't want to be nice. They got sent to do civil work, why would they want to be nice? They didn't get paid for that work, it was pennance or a role they had no choice to play until they hit the soul train. Screw it up, bad consequences.

So, the fact these guys were suddenly not doing their jobs half as well, meant they had something else going on. When Astrid and Wolf were out of the room, he knew whatever was going on would move up faster. No law enforcement in the room meant more things could happen.

Which it did. He didn't know whether to be proud or disgusted by them. They were handing him more contracts as they walked by, in stacks.

They thought he wasn't there to protect Lydia and Astrid. They thought he was lying to them, so they could get the big chunks of pie. On the surface, it did look like that. He was even fishing around for extra contracts. Hell, any other day he would do that to anyone.

He had about 200 contracts on his desk now. He looked through them. The price differential was heavy, but it looked like the shrunkenheads had been choice picking some good ones. *If I didn't fucking care.*

There was about a million dollars right there in his hands worth of contracts. He placed them to the side, and acted normal while also looking around. Only certain employees were doing that. Others were answering phones like normal. Acting like normal. While others, seemed to be running some other game. They were checking their watches, and some of them glanced at the door.

Fuck me. Three of his guys were acting normal. Three of the guys were looking toward the door. Six of the guys had dropped off contracts. Most of them expected him to kill them off, while three of them was clearly waiting for someone else to come to do it.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

There was no choice. He waited until Wolf said he was leaving.

If he did nothing, he'd just end up in the waiting room again. Get sent back to the Afterlife Call Center. But?

Lydia and Astrid would die. Neither of them wanted to die, plus his chance to get out would be forever gone. Astrid was pretty young to die too. Young and old died around him alive. He was numb to it after awhile, even robbed them when they were dead. Those two though. Maybe . . . *Ooh!* Oh yeah, he knew what to do. *I love it when I do that!*

He took the contracts and put them away. At least 200 were off the market now. He got up and headed to the shrunkenheads that were fine. Fifteen foot rule wouldn't matter soon. "Hey Steve, you Mark and Gracie go ahead and head home. Early day off. Yeah, you go enjoy yourselves. Scootch. Fast." Step one, get his employees that weren't doing anything taken care of.

They each gathered their stuff pretty quickly and headed out. Lydia was just staring ahead, probably contemplating her life's decisions or some shit like that while Astrid was playing a game.

How fun. They would both be playing a game. He went back toward them. "Okay, you two." He smiled, trying to look as friendly as possible. He probably shouldn't, a lot of people said it looked unfriendly but whatever. He was trying. "Close your eyes and count to twenty. I've got a surprise for you."

Neither of them did and just looked at him.

"Oh come on," he urged them. "It's not like I'm gonna kill ya here. Just close your eyes already."

Astrid closed her eyes first. After a few seconds, Lydia closed her eyes.

"Good. Keep them closed. Count to 20." When someone could only mumble their intentions, hands became so important. So, he'd make sure they pay for this.

Lydia instinctively grabbed Astrid once she heard the swishes of something sharp. Probably an axe. It was fast, and the sound of gushing was mixed with it. It sounded like someone cutting up tons of watermelons at once. She heard Beetlejuice's voice, cackling wickedly. That same familiar sound she knew so well.

She knew Beetlejuice wasn't going to tear them apart, but he was doing it to his employees.

"You forgot to count."

Lydia opened her eyes first. On the ground, there were nothing but hands. No one else was in the room.

“Didn’t even make it to lunch staying legal,” Beetlejuice said. “We are leaving a different way, folks. Grab my hands.” He held out his hands.

Lydia looked at his hand, then Astrid. Astrid’s eyes were wide, seeing the devastation too. They had already seen a lot of disturbing things in the Neitherworld, but? Knowing a demon who just chopped off a bunch of hands to owners who disappeared, now wanted to hold their hand?

“Okay, look!” He yelled at them. “Two options. We stay, we get caught, you two die soon and make someone filthy rich. Or we get the hell out!”

Yeah, he was serious. Lydia grabbed his hand at the same time as Astrid.

“Good. Now say it, Lydia.”

Lydia said his name three times.

Las Vegas . . .

Oh? That isn’t what Lydia expected. They were all just sent around a craps table. Why were they here?

“I’ll be back, gotta have a talk with Astrid.”

“What?!” Lydia looked around. Gone. She called his name three times.

“Yeah, I knew you’d do that,” he complained when he returned with Astrid. “Luckily no one’s paying attention to each other.”

“We need to talk,” Astrid insisted. “Things are going wonky.”

“Then I should be part of the talk.” Why were they leaving her out of it?

“I’ll be back,” Astrid promised. “I have to. Things need answers.”

She watched them leave again as she stayed out on the casino floor.

Beetlejuice took them to another side of the casino.

“So? Not a week. Not a day. Didn’t even make lunch,” Beetlejuice said to her. “Gimmick’s done, Astrid. I can’t keep you there. Hell, I just knocked myself out of there with what I did.”

Yeah, she knew that. “What happened?”

“Oh, just, over half my staff thought we were supposed to kill you and get the contracts ourselves, while some were double crossing me and having someone else come,” he said.

Damn. No more luggage.

“I need a quick marriage, now. We don’t have much time, the law will find me.”

“Quick marriages are against the law,” she pointed out. “You’ll still be in trouble.”

“Nuh uh uh,” he told her in a sing songy way. “It’s against the rules to have a quick marriage. It’s not against the rules to have been in a quick marriage.”

Oh, another loophole. “The marriage is a retainer.”

“Yeah, I knew you were gonna say that, so I already got the solution.” He put his hands out, like the idea was brilliant. “I’ll marry Lydia and stay married until it’s over. Then if she can keep paying the bill, I walk away. Just like before.”

No way. “You end the marriage first, and then walk away,” Astrid demanded. *If I can’t save mom from the marriage, I can at least save her from him.* “You also don’t get any relationship with the marriage. That’s after. Permissions are still in effect.”

Beetlejuice groaned. “I get a wife. But I can’t-”

“No. No touching without permission,” Astrid said firmly. “Even with her being your wife. Marriage is still just the retainer.”

“Eternity marriage is the payment then, if she can’t pay,” he said fiercely. “That means she stays married to me, no matter what. Nothing changes. She dies, she’s still married.”

“Fine.” No choice.

“Oh really? It also means, she is going to board the same train as me,” he added.

What?

“Yeah. When we eventually shove off, we shove off together too,” he said. “Only I can stop it. If I want to.”

Astrid rubbed her chin vigorously. “You could be sent somewhere bad, and mom would go with you?”

“Could? Heh. Sure, could.”

Then no. “You would send mom to hell.”

“Probably not,” he answered. “See? When it’s an eternity marriage, you know, a real marriage made in death and not some short-term life marriage?” He clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Both parties actions will be accounted for. No matter how awful I am, Lydia’s practically an angel. We’d go anywhere but hell now!”

Ooh. He was so giddy. Too giddy! “Is that why you tried to marry her in the first place?” He better be careful how he answered that.

“Hey, I didn’t plan on that.” He spread his hands out, trying to act innocent. “I *just* saw the goodies right this minute.”

“You just spotted my mom as a good way out from paying for your crimes.” Ugh. “How did a botched marriage make me your daughter?”

“Oh. Yeah, that,” he said. “Marriage in life verses death is different, you know? It’s all words. Words have power. That’s why the handbook isn’t supposed to be read by living people, they can end a spirit for good with just words.”

Oh the marriage ceremony words were all it took.

“Yeah, we were just missing wife,” he admitted. “One word. Wife.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she clarified. “How did you know we were tied?”

“I just see you in your lowest lows and highest highs in the Neitherworld. You’ve been haunting me since you were born,” he insisted. “That’s why I know you so well. It’s more than just on a profile. I am your dad.”

“Bull.” No way. “Prove it.”

He held his fingers up in an okay. “Your third grade recital where you were the star and your mom didn’t come? Yeah, took her a good extra 30 minutes to get there even after the play?” He beat his chest once with his hand. “I’ve been there with her before. Twice.”

That? “A lot of kids have recitals in the third grade.”

“You were dressed like the sun,” he said. “The top thing in the solar system. Halloween wasn’t anywhere near there.”

Whoah. “What else do you know?”

“You did something wrong and didn’t get caught before you were in kidnergarten,” he answered. “No idea what it had been, but you walked on legos in your room for no reason

and cried. Yeah, I knew at that point I had to interfere and start corrupting you so you didn't grow up to be a nun or something. Had to start small, so I told you to get rid of whatever was driving the guilt."

Astrid barely remembered that, but she did remember the scattered legos. She had stolen a sticker from somewhere. No one had found out and it ate her up inside. Eventually, she just decided to drop it over around where it had been before. "You told me?"

"Well, we can't hear or see each other between the worlds, but we can feel each other," he answered. "Sometimes, we can pick up what the other is wanting."

"She was supposed to be at the recital. She promised," Astrid said. "The whole play I wanted to feel miserable, but I could feel that my dad was there somehow. He never said he would even show up." That was him.

That was this crusty dead guy that just got giddy that marrying her mom for an eternity would get him out of hell. The guy charging them exorbitant amounts of money to keep them safe. "You stayed for the whole performance."

"Well? You made a cute sun," he admitted, "and I'd been on the receiving end of people promising things and not paying up. So."

Wait. "My friends thirteenth birthday party?"

"Total bitch. Loved the way you dumped her perfume and replaced it with water." He grinned, a little bit of a beetle sticking out of his teeth.

Oh! Where else did her dad show up, but didn't show up? "At the theatre that one time."

"I would have done more than a slap."

All of those times. "I always swore that dad showed up. I'd always ask him afterward and he'd say that he was busy for those times. I thought he was hiding his visits for some reason. Especially when I was . . . not being good. I never got it." Until now.

"Yep, and as touching as this all is, we've gotta decide on this." Beetlejuice pointed to an array of watches on his arm. "No matter where it is in the world, we are running out of time. So. I marry your mom. Everything stays the same in the contract. If she can afford the bill, I let her go at the end, with no eternity marriage. If she can't, she stays married, and when she dies, she's mine. Forever." He extended his hand. "Deal?"

Astrid touched the side of her neck. They needed to move. The law enforcement didn't take long to find him last time. Staying still too long spelled disaster. She shook his hand.

"One kiss," he said. "We are getting married, we need to seal the deal."

"On the cheek."

"But marriage, come on! I'll drop the 22,500 you just got from the shrunkenheads," he pointed out.

22,000 wasn’t as much, but every penny could count soon. Plus? It was . . . unsanitary. “Brush your teeth until you can’t see anything in them, with mouth wash, then give mom this deal, not me.”

“Geez, you cut a hard bargain.”

They shook on it.

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