

Waking Nightmares

A Peter Octavian Novel

by Christopher Golden

Chapter One

Octavian climbed out of the professor's car, hoping they had come to this grimy corner of Montreal on a fool's errand, that there would be no monsters tonight. Fighting monsters took time—magic or spirits or demons even longer—and he had promised to return to The Red Door before Nikki took the stage tonight. *Don't make me break my promise*, he had warned the professor. The man had nodded anxiously and tried to reassure him, but Octavian did not feel reassured.

He stood on the sidewalk in the golden light of the setting sun and looked up at the windows of the third-floor apartment. They were dirty, like everything else in this neighborhood, and the glint of the waning daylight only made the glass opaque and almost sinister.

“So this girl is a student of yours?” Octavian asked.

The professor slammed his car door and thumbed the button on his keychain that made the car chirp, its doors locking automatically. He looked even more pale and nervous than usual.

“Last year,” the professor said. “We've stayed close.”

Octavian raised an eyebrow but did not comment. Derek Tremblay had been a professor at McGill University in Montreal for a dozen years. A decade before that, he'd gone to visit friends at Boston College and—after a drug-fueled rave—woken up to find one of those friends dead and himself under arrest for murder. In those days, before the world knew the truth about shadows and vampires and demons, Octavian had been a private investigator in Boston. Helping people like Derek Tremblay, back before he was Professor Tremblay, had been Octavian's way of trying to make up for the hideous things he had done in his first few centuries as a shadow . . . as a

vampire.

“A lot of students in this neighborhood?” Octavian asked, glancing around at the bicycles chained to lampposts, the posters for music events plastered on the bus station, and the old VW bus parked at the corner. Across the street was a coffeehouse, its open door pumping music. Two grungy-looking guys came out as he watched, both carrying skateboards.

“Who else would live here?” the professor asked.

Octavian smiled thinly. There were millions of people who would weep with joy if offered the opportunity to live here, but he knew what the professor meant. There was certainly a Bohemian air in the neighborhood, which spread for several blocks, not far from the university. The Red Door—the music club where Octavian’s girlfriend, Nikki Wydra, was playing tonight—was only a few blocks away. They’d been to The Red Door, or La Porte Rouge, before, and the clientele would fit right in on this street. They were Boho twenty- and thirty-somethings with a passion for coffee, music, peace, and the environment. Octavian figured as long as people like them existed, there was still hope for the world.

Most visitors thought Montreal could be divided into two basic areas: the tourist-friendly Old Town, with its European architecture, cobblestoned streets, and eclectic shops, and the rest of the city, which was much more metropolitan and modern. But it would be too simple to split Montreal between the distant past and the vibrant future, especially when neighborhoods like this one, stuck in the 1960s, still thrived. Vidscreens might show news and advertisements 24/7 in the subway, the underground malls, and bus stations in the city’s business centers, but such technology might as well not even exist here.

So it surprised Octavian all the more when the professor used his own key to open the apartment building’s front door. Tremblay caught himself, but too late. As he pushed the door open and pocketed his keys, he glanced guiltily at Octavian.

“You said you were close,” Octavian said.

The professor nodded. “Yeah.”

Neither man needed to elaborate. If the professor had a sexual relationship with one of his students, that was an issue for the university. Their reason for being here tonight—if the professor and his young girlfriend were right—concerned Octavian much more. Enough to take time away from Nikki to accompany Tremblay on this errand, despite the distance he had been feeling in their relationship of late.

The foyer smelled of mold and piss. Someone had painted the walls within the past few years but had just slathered the latex on top of the old, peeling paint without doing much scraping. If not for the cat on the stairs and the mail stacked on a table just inside the door, the place would have seemed abandoned.

Cooking smells wafted from the closed door to the first-floor apartment. Octavian nodded for the professor to lead the way and they started up the stairs.

The professor had his own key to the girl's apartment building, on the same ring as his car keys and the key to his own place. He unlocked the apartment door, swung it open, and stepped inside.

"Viviane?" he said quietly.

Octavian followed him into the apartment and the professor shut the door. The day had been warm for September, and the air in the apartment was musty and close. Not quite stifling, but it must have been almost unbearable earlier in the day. No air moved. No breeze. The place was closed up tight. If the professor hadn't told him the girl was home, he would have thought the apartment was empty.

The professor pocketed his keys and ventured into a small living room full of mismatched furniture. Based on the décor and the overall tidiness of the place, it was clearly an apartment without a permanent male presence. Chinese paper lanterns hung from the ceiling above the sofa. A light hummed in the galley kitchen, as though the bulb might burn out at any moment.

"Viviane?" the professor said, a bit louder now, as he started toward the short hall that led deeper into the apartment.

Octavian resisted the urge to check the time on his cell phone. Nikki would be doing sound check right now. He had hours before she went on stage. Plenty of time for whatever darkness lay ahead.

A door clicked softly open down the hall. The professor halted, letting his young girlfriend come to him. Viviane emerged from the shadowed hallway tentatively at first, but when she saw Octavian, her expression turned hopeful.

“Hey,” the professor said, reaching for her hand.

Viviane let him pull her into a quick embrace but barely seemed aware of his kiss. She wore a McGill sweatshirt and pajama pants and looked as if she hadn’t showered in days. The dark circles under her eyes, visible despite the deep chocolate hue of her skin, suggested she hadn’t slept in at least as long.

“Is this him?” she asked.

Octavian nodded. “I’m him.”

Viviane smiled, and suddenly she didn’t look so weary. But then the smile faded as she remembered what awaited them in the other room.

“Thank you for coming,” she said, approaching him and holding out her hand. “I’m Viviane Gagnon.”

“Peter Octavian,” he replied, shaking her hand. “And it’s no trouble. I’m in Montreal for a few days anyway.”

Viviane was nodding. “That’s how Derek tracked you down. He saw on Nikki Wydra’s Twitter that she was playing at La Porte Rouge tonight—”

“I explained it all to him,” the professor interrupted.

“Yeah,” Viviane said, nodding. “Sorry. Of course you did.”

Octavian always thought it was interesting when people referred to Nikki by her first and last name, but that was her public identity. She wasn’t a celebrity by any means, but to people who liked the kind of music she played, she was famous enough. And to them, she was *Nikki*

Wydra. Names of famous people were like that; they held weight. And that was indeed how the professor had known Octavian would be in Montreal tonight and had tracked him down—through Nikki’s Twitter page. Octavian hadn’t seen Derek Tremblay in more than twenty years, but the professor knew what Octavian had been up to in that time. A lot of people did.

“It’s no trouble,” Octavian said, trying to soothe the girl.

It was not quite a lie. Nikki had not been entirely pleased with his leaving her to meet Tremblay, but neither was she selfish enough to have attempted to stop him. Her career had become more and more important to her. The time they spent apart had grown more frequent thanks to her music and to his work. Whenever unexplained supernatural phenomena appeared, he would get a phone call. Sometimes he had to get involved. When the two of them were alone together, without the pressures of the outside world, it was easy for her to forget that he was supernatural, and for him to forget that she was not—that she was ordinary and mortal and could not imagine some of the things he had seen and lived.

So it was no trouble for him to meet with Tremblay today. He was in Montreal, after all. But it certainly did nothing to heal the rift that he felt beginning to grow between himself and Nikki. He loved her, but of late he had begun to wonder if that was enough.

“I’m happy to help, if I can,” Octavian continued. “Derek and I go back a long way.”

The professor smiled awkwardly. “I knew Peter before he came out as a vampire,” he said, and then he glanced quickly at Octavian. “Sorry. A shadow. No offense.”

Octavian waved it away, though it did make him tense, being called a vampire. The world had learned the truth of their existence years before, thanks to live news coverage of a bloody battle in Venice between shadows—the blood-drinking shapeshifters who were the source of the world’s vampire legends—and a rogue sect of Vatican sorcerers who’d murdered the pope and launched a crusade to exterminate all shadows, whether good or evil. The world was still feeling the aftershocks both of that revelation and of the events that followed. The Roman Catholic Church had splintered and was severely weakened. Shadows lived peacefully, side by side with

humanity, but there were still some who embraced the word *vampire* and all of the savagery it entailed, and those creatures were hunted by human and shadow alike.

“No offense taken,” Octavian said. “Though you know I’m not one of them anymore.”

Viviane nodded. “I read that somewhere. How does that work, exactly? How do you stop being a vam—I mean, a shadow?”

Octavian thought about answering, considered telling her about the thousand years he’d spent in Hell learning magic, and the metamorphosis that had evolved him from shadow to human mage. But then he remembered why he had come.

“It’s a long story,” he said, remembering how much trouble people had understanding how he could have spent a thousand years in Hell while only five years had passed in the human world. *Infernal physics* was enough of an answer for someone used to dealing with the supernatural, but just another conundrum for a regular citizen. “Another time, maybe.”

Guilt and sadness washed over Viviane’s face, as though she had been trying just for a moment to forget her troubles and knew she couldn’t put them off any longer.

“Sure,” she said. She glanced at the professor and then back at Octavian. “He’s in my bedroom.”

Octavian gestured for Viviane to lead the way, and at last she did, walking down the hall as if she wished she were anywhere else. When she reached for the bedroom doorknob, her hand trembled. She pushed the door open and stood aside to let them enter first.

“Jesus,” the professor said, wrinkling his nose. “What’s that smell?”

Octavian had caught it as well, earthy and damp, like a hothouse full of dying flowers. Both bedroom windows were open, but the warm breeze did nothing to diminish the aroma. And unless Viviane had a wilting, rotten garden hidden underneath her bed, there could be no doubt about the source of the smell.

A young guy lay sprawled on the bed, legs tangled in the sheets like he’d been sleeping off a bad drunk or ugly nightmares. His arms were flung wide and his head lolled to one side, a thin

stream of yellowish drool trailing from one corner of his mouth. His throat rattled with every exhalation and his neck looked swollen, and for a second, Octavian thought of plague . . . he'd seen more than his share of such sickness since his childhood, but that had been centuries ago. And there were no welts or sores or even the sort of inflammation that might suggest plague. The sight of the young man and his constricted breathing reminded him of hideous memories, but this was no plague.

Still, even if the professor hadn't already said so, Octavian would have known at first glance that this was no ordinary flu or infection. The smell offered the first clue. The man's complexion provided the second. No healthy human being had flesh of that particular hue—not so much a jaundiced yellow as a slight greenish tint.

“His name is Michael, you said?” Octavian asked, glancing at the professor.

“Michael,” Viviane confirmed from just inside the open bedroom door. She hung back, arms crossed, fretting and tense as though she might flee. “He hates being called Mike.”

Octavian nodded. “Michael it is, then. How long has he been like this?”

“Two days that we know of,” the professor said.

“The sink was leaking,” Viviane said, her voice cracking with emotion, her gaze haunted, as though she blamed herself for her brother's condition. “The landlord kept promising to fix it, but he never showed up, so Michael came over to take care of it. He didn't . . . well, I mean, he wasn't . . . green. Just a little pale. But he didn't look well and he kept coughing and he was short of breath and he seemed a little weird—”

“Weird how?”

Viviane shrugged. “Like he'd been smoking something, y'know?”

Octavian nodded and moved closer. Something was strange about the unconscious man's arms and legs, his body hair. Bending to take a closer look, Octavian saw that amid the hair were tiny growths that looked almost like sprigs of something growing there. Something green.

“He thought he was getting a cold or something,” Viviane went on. “I told him to come in

here and lie down and when I checked on him a little while later, I couldn't wake him up."

He investigated the man's hands. Similar sprigs grew from beneath his fingernails. Unsettling as these things were, the most troubling of Michael's afflictions were the tiny leaves visible in his right ear and both nostrils. Octavian cursed inwardly, wondering how much time had elapsed since he had gotten in the car with the professor, and how much time he had before Nikki took the stage at The Red Door.

"It's awful," the professor said.

Octavian shot him a hard look. Of course it was awful. Did he think Viviane needed him to confirm that her brother going catatonic and growing twigs and tiny leaves out of his orifices and pores was something other than a joyous event? Asshole.

With what he hoped was a comforting glance toward Viviane, Octavian turned back to her brother. The thick rattle of his breathing turned into a choking noise, and Michael twitched several times before he began breathing through his nose and relaxed again. The rattle hadn't vanished, but lessened.

Octavian reached for his face. Gently, he pulled back one of Michael's eyelids. Tiny plant roots had grown across the eyeball like the miniature wiring on an old computer circuit board.

"Oh, my God," Viviane whispered.

Octavian glanced at her. "His eyes weren't like that before?"

"I didn't look at his eyes," she said. "But check his throat. I thought . . . I wanted to see if I could clear his breathing or do something to help him, so I got a little flashlight and had a look. I would've taken him to the hospital, or called an ambulance, but once I saw that, I knew there was nothing a doctor could do for him. When Derek said he knew you . . . Please tell me you can help him?"

Her smile was brittle, as though she were teetering on the brink of hysteria.

Octavian did not answer. Conjecture would not help Viviane or her brother at this point. Instead, he worked Michael's mouth open, massaging the muscles of the lower jaw to get it wider.

A dark mass was visible just inside, and at first Octavian thought the man's tongue had swollen. The smell that wafted out of Michael's throat was much worse than the rest of the room—moist and filled with rot.

He glanced around, grabbed the slim flashlight from the nightstand, clicked it on, and shone its beam into Michael Gagnon's throat. The mass had seemed more solid in the dark, but now Octavian could make out the tiny leaves and green and brown strands that made up the mossy clump growing there.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" the professor asked.

"Not exactly like it, no," Octavian admitted, stepping away from the bed.

"What *is* it?" Viviane asked. "How does something like this happen?"

Octavian narrowed his eyes, studying the man in the bed. "Things like this *don't* just happen. It could be a curse. It could be that Michael was attacked by something or someone . . . an earthwitch, maybe."

"What the hell is an earthwitch?" the professor asked.

"Usually benevolent, actually," Octavian replied.

"But can you help him? Can you get it out of him?" Viviane pleaded.

"I can try," Octavian said. Somehow that did not assuage Viviane's fear for her brother, but he had not come to take away her fear. He'd come to help, if he could. "Do you know what kind of plant this is?"

The professor glanced away. Obviously he had some ideas. Viviane only frowned and shook her head.

"It's cannabis," Octavian said. "Marijuana."

Viviane stared at him and gave a soft chuckle of horrified disbelief. "Pot? Michael's got pot growing inside him?"

"Does he smoke regularly?" Octavian asked.

Her eyes began to glaze over with confusion, as though she were looking inward for an

answer.

“Yeah,” she said. “Plenty.”

“Where does he get it?”

At that, Viviane gave a sickly laugh. “Get it? They grow it. Michael and his housemates. They’ve got a whole crop in the basement of their place. Heat lamps and everything.”

“Have you heard from any of the housemates since Michael came over here the other day?”

Viviane shook her head.

Octavian glanced at the professor, then back to his girlfriend.

“Give me the address,” he told her.

“Okay. But . . . can you get this stuff out of him? Derek said you . . . that you knew magic.”

She said the last word as though it embarrassed her. Octavian figured it probably did. Not the word itself, but the suggestion that she might believe it to be more than a word. A lot of people felt that way about magic, right up until they needed it.

“I’m going to check out the house,” Octavian said. “Try to get to the bottom of this. If I can, that might cure him. But if it doesn’t, I know an earthwitch who probably can.”

“But you said you thought an earthwitch might have done this!” Viviane said.

Octavian took a last glance at her brother.

“Time to find out.”

Michael Gagnon lived in a three-story brownstone with a faded blue awning over the door and a peaked roof with a little walk-out balcony. According to his sister, there were three apartments in the building, all occupied by McGill students. Michael and three friends lived on the first floor, which gave them the best access to the basement, but the students in the other apartments didn’t complain about their little pot farm as long as they were able to share in the spoils once in a while.

Octavian had learned all of this from Viviane before leaving her place. Now he and the

professor stood outside Michael Gagnon's brownstone, studying the dark windows and quiet façade. The place seemed almost abandoned. One of the first-floor windows had a crack in it. A strange moss grew from beneath the window frames on the ground level.

"You've been here before?" Octavian asked.

The professor clicked the tab on his key fob and his hybrid chirped, doors locking.

"Never inside," he said. "I've dropped Viviane off a couple of times, but never met her brother."

Octavian looked down at the weeds growing up between the cracks in the sidewalk and the concrete pathway leading up to the front door of the brownstone.

"She didn't want her brother to know she was sleeping with her teacher," he said.

"Why is this relevant?" the professor asked.

Octavian glanced at him, saw the pain in his eyes, and softened. "It's not, Derek. Sorry. It would've been helpful if you knew the internal layout of the place, that's all. Since you don't, I'm going to ask you to stay outside."

For a moment, the professor looked relieved, but then he frowned in irritation. "I'm not exactly frail, Peter. I can take care of myself."

"No doubt," Octavian agreed. "But you're human. Okay, technically so am I. But unless you're secretly a mage and have real sorcery at your command, then whatever happened to the people in that building is probably going to happen to you the second you set foot inside."

The professor looked as though he might argue further, but then he glanced at that strangely silent house and said nothing more. Of course it was impossible to know if there was activity inside a building simply by looking at it, but Octavian had a sense for such things. The place felt *still*. As if it waited, holding its breath.

"There's nothing I can do?" the professor asked after a moment.

"If I don't come out in ten minutes, call my cell. If I don't answer, go over to The Red Door and tell Nikki what happened."

The professor nodded and went back to his car, leaning against the door. Octavian bent to study the weeds growing in the sidewalk cracks. There were small leaves with a very familiar shape. He stood and started up the front walk, noticing the ragged grass in the small yard and the tiny plants that had begun to grow.

Cannabis plants grew like vines inside the door frame, poking out in fringes along the top and bottom. Viviane had given Octavian the keys to her brother's place, but the knob was crusted over with a strange moss, the lock bursting with a bristly marijuana bud. The key wouldn't be any use to him at all. He held out a hand and nearly cast a spell that would have burned away the plant growth, then considered another that would have caused it to age and rot, but he worried about the building and the people within it. Instead, he settled for brute force, launching a hard kick at the door.

It barely shuddered.

Force was still the answer, but he needed more than he could muster with a kick. A thousand years in Hell had given him time to become a true mage, so intertwined with magic that he wielded it by instinct and reflex. With a gesture, he cast a concussive spell, causing the doorknob itself to explode. The door blew open with a loud ripping noise as tightly latticed tendrils of plant matter tore away from the frame. Where the doorknob had been was a smoking hole in the wood, and the door hung at an angle from its shattered frame, but the spiderweb of pot plants that filled the foyer would not let it fall.

The plants grew up through the floorboards and from cracks they had forced through the walls. They hung from the light fixture overhead and had woven together in a hanging mesh, a cannabis jungle. The house was filled with the same aroma of damp decay that had come off Michael Gagnon, but another smell lingered beneath it—one Octavian knew all too well. This was a different kind of rot. He smelled death in that house, and a moment later, he saw the source.

He could see the body through the curtain of marijuana plants. The girl lay on the stairs, halfway up to the second floor. *Or halfway down*, Octavian thought, and realized that made more

sense. He grabbed a fistful of plants and tore them away, ripping himself a path toward the bottom of the stairs. Moving nearer, he could see down the short corridor to the left, where the door to the first-floor apartment—the one Michael Gagnon shared with his friends—stood partway open.

The door to the basement was farther back, set into the wall beneath the stairs. The door was closed, but so many pot vines had pushed through between door and frame that the wood had cracked and warped. In some places, it seemed as though cannabis plants were growing right out of the cellar door, and now that he looked more closely, he saw that the same was true of the floor, and the banister at the bottom of the stairs.

The dead girl was sprawled on the stairs, face first, hands outstretched as though she had not only been crawling, but dragging herself toward the foyer . . . toward the front door. Marijuana stalks and leaves and buds had burst through her dead flesh. The thickest and strongest of the plants grew up out of the back of her skull, but whether it had taken root there or grown up through the stairs and then through her brain, Octavian couldn't tell. Her vital fluids had dribbled down the stairs and puddled at the bottom, but were dry now.

She had been pretty, once upon a time.

“Jesus,” a voice said.

Octavian turned to see that the professor had followed him up to the door.

“What are you doing, Derek? I told you to stay back.”

But Octavian knew. He'd seen the naked curiosity in the professor's eyes before, usually on people who ended up dead.

“I just . . .,” the professor said. He shrugged, trying to look penitent and failing. “This is awful. But it looks like whatever happened here, it's over.” He covered his face with his hands, peering out over the tops of his fingers. “This is like a nightmare.”

“Enough of that. It's real enough. And it's not over.”

That troubled the professor. He furrowed his brow. “It's not?”

“The plants are still growing. They’re thriving.”

“Is it magic?” the professor asked, taking a nervous step back, looking at the plants fringing the frame of the broken front door. “Witchcraft?”

Octavian shook his head, tearing away more of the cannabis web, moving toward the open door to the first-floor apartment. “I’ve only ever met one earthwitch capable of something like this. But if one of them had done this, she’d have moved on by now. Whatever did this, it’s still here. Can’t you feel it?”

“Do you think they’re all dead?”

“That,” Octavian said, “or they wish they were.”

“So . . . what is it?” the professor asked, his voice barely a whisper. He’d moved back several paces from the door, looking as though he might be starting to understand how stupid he’d been to come up after being warned off.

“A wood god, maybe. Some kind of forest spirit, for sure. It must have slipped through.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?”

Octavian shot him a hard look that sent him scampering back down the front walk to wait by his car, the way he should have from the beginning. A wood god wasn’t something he would joke about, but to the professor he knew it must seem almost ridiculously fanciful. Octavian would never understand the human mind’s reluctance to believe in the extraordinary even after learning how common extraordinary things were. In a world where vampires and demons existed, why was it so hard to believe in forest spirits and goblins?

From the days of its founding, the Roman Catholic Church had spent nearly two thousand years driving unnatural things, creatures of darkness that preyed on humanity, out of the world. The Vatican trained sorcerers to wall off this reality from others, to keep those creatures out. The accumulated knowledge of those sorcerers, passed down from the time of Christ, had been kept in a book called *The Gospel of Shadows*. But that sect of sorcerers had been corrupted, and eventually destroyed, and the church had fallen into disarray. Splinters of the church still existed,

but without the central power that Rome had represented, and *The Gospel of Shadows* had been lost to them.

No one was keeping the monsters out anymore. They were slow to realize that the barriers between worlds were deteriorating, but once in a while, something slipped through. Considering the role he'd played in the destruction of the church and the loss of the book, Octavian did what he could to combat whatever dark forces slipped through. But monstrous incursions into this world had become more and more common. He couldn't be everywhere.

For tonight, however, he found himself in the right place at the right time.

No, he chided himself, the moment the thought crossed his mind. *Not the right time. Too late for the girl on the stairs.* Too late, he figured, for everyone who lived in this house, except perhaps—if he worked quickly—for Michael Gagnon. And if he didn't stop this here, how many others would die? Somehow the entity, whatever it was, had gotten into the cannabis growing in the basement here. But now that it had spread out into the yard, where grass and weeds grew, its influence would touch those things as well. Plants and trees, all over Montreal. And who knew where it would end.

The time for hesitation had passed. If he tried to tear his way through the jungle inside that house in search of someone who might still be clinging to life, he might be hours, and Michael would end up like the girl on the stairs. Even if he found someone alive, the first step in trying to save them would be to kill the thing growing inside them.

Octavian took a step forward and felt his shoe catch on something. He looked down to see the plants that had started to curl around his ankles.

"Enough." He reached out his left hand and grabbed a fistful of the cannabis lattice. With his right, he began to sketch at the air with contorted fingers, muttering a few words in a guttural tongue that had been old before Babylon. It was not death magic—Octavian feared the consequences of wielding death—but the outcome was the same.

The plants began to turn brown and then to wither, dying all around him. The lattice jungle

of cannabis wilted and drooped and decayed so badly that it started to fall apart. *Dust to dust*, Octavian thought. That was the nature of the spell he'd cast, speeding up the process of entropy, hurrying something toward its natural corruption.

The effect spread, plants dying and withering all through the foyer and hall, and up the stairs. He watched the dead girl on the steps a moment, hoping that it would affect only the plants that had taken root in her and not her own dead flesh. If the spell jumped from the cannabis to her, it might do the same to the others in the building, and if any of them had a chance of survival, that would be the end of them. But he'd had no other choice. Doing nothing would have killed them just as surely.

Octavian moved down the hall, brushing away the dry, rotted remains of the cannabis web with ease. He went to the open door of Michael Gagnon's apartment and pushed it open the rest of the way, looking inside. A dead man sat on the sofa, almost as though he had died watching the television. If not for the pallor of his skin and the wilting plants growing where his eyes ought to have been, he might almost have been alive.

The entropy spell spread. Octavian moved deeper into the apartment. He would have to confront the wood god before he left, but he wanted to see if anyone was still alive.

The floorboards creaked underfoot, but then the walls seemed to do the same. Plaster flakes drifted down from the ceiling. He glanced at the walls and saw that the paint had begun to yellow and peel. A crack spread slowly from the upper corner of the door frame.

"Shit." The cannabis had so completely infiltrated the house that it had become a part of it. The entropy spell was eating away at the building itself. It wasn't going to be safe in here for much longer.

He ran, darting through rooms. Two other bodies, long past hope. But there were the upstairs apartments to think of.

Octavian raced back into the hallway, hearing the creak and moan and crack of the brownstone's structural integrity beginning to crumble. Dried, desiccated pot plants gave way like

spiderwebs as he ran for the stairs. But he hadn't made it halfway up to the second floor before a scream of grief and fury rose from beneath the building.

From the cellar.

Green shoots erupted between floorboards, and then the boards themselves splintered. The dust of desiccated pot plants sprayed across the foyer. Octavian took a step back, raising his hands, and his fingers contorted into claws as he cast a spell to solidify the air into a defensive shield in front of him.

The green shoots twined together, branches and leaves and flowers growing off them with a fluid grace, sculpting a figure. Vines crawled along the floor, anchoring it there, spinning a new sort of web. From the budding figure, she bloomed, unfolding herself and standing up to her full height, nearly two feet taller than Octavian. Her hair was golden corn silk, spilling down her back, and her body pulsed with some semblance of breath. The wood god had a female form, lithe and strangely erotic, and Octavian thought of a thousand fairy tales, and the men who had been lured into the forest to find fleeting bliss and enduring regret.

Her mouth opened, dewy sap stringing between her newborn lips.

"You've hurt me," the wood god said.

Octavian made a fist of his right hand, summoning a raging flame. Entropy had not worked on her, but fire might. All he needed was a moment to distract her so that he could work a banishment spell and drive her from this reality.

"You don't belong here," he told her.

"I don't belong?" she said, sneering. *"It's you who are the abomination here. You and your accursed civilization!"*

She lunged at him, fingers hooked into thorny claws, ready to flay his flesh from his bones. Octavian lifted a hand, a sphere of fire burning around his fist.

Which was when the floor gave way, entropy crumbling it away beneath his feet.

Fuck.

Nikki Wydra took the stage at The Red Door with a smile on her face, but it felt like a mask. The applause filled the room, blanketing her in welcoming energy and the happy aura of people who were, in that moment, exactly where they wanted to be. She let it wash over her, taking strength from it as she always did. With a nod toward the band—a handful of Montreal musicians she'd played with the last time she'd come through town—she launched into “Not Enough to Exist” and a cheer went up from the audience. People started to move to the music and some to dance. It was the right choice, a track off her second album that had never found its way onto the radio but had taken off online and quickly become a favorite among her fans.

She tried to focus, feeling that she owed these people that much. They had put up their hard-earned cash for this show, and she wanted to make it worth their while, to connect with them. The set list had been cultivated with care. She pruned it every show, adding and subtracting, playing the best and most popular of her own songs, plus a few of her favorites from other artists. Sarah McLachlan's “Ice Cream” didn't always go over as well as she wanted, but she played it for herself, not for them. For them, she did “Cantankerous Bitch,” from her first album—she'd come to hate that song, but God they loved it.

Finishing up the opener, she scanned the audience. On the last note, the hooting and cheering began. She said something appreciative into the microphone, then repeated it in French, but wasn't really paying attention. She smiled, but her gaze slipped across the faces, searching for the only one that really mattered. With a glance into the wings, she sought him backstage, but there was still no sign of Peter.

Nikki figured most girlfriends would have been pissed if their guy didn't show up when he promised, especially for something like this. And with the too-long silences and unspoken pressures that had been putting a strain on them over the past year, even Peter couldn't have blamed her. They had a lot of things they needed to sort out.

But she wasn't angry; she was worried. Peter Octavian wasn't the sort of man who broke his word without a damn good reason, and for him, a damn good reason probably had sharp claws.

Where are you, Peter? she thought, peering out at the crowd. Some of the faces she saw looked restless, and she realized that she must look a little lost on the stage.

“Cantankerous Bitch!” someone called from backstage, off to her left.

She turned and saw him there, tall and lanky, that laconic gunfighter stance, and relief flooded through her. He wore a mischievous grin, and no wonder—shouting for a song he knew she hated—but he looked a wreck. His shirt was spattered with what could only be bloodstains and there were scratches all over his face, along with what looked like soot smudges. His night had not gone well so far, but he was there and in one piece. God, she loved him. Whatever distance there was between them, she wanted to erase it.

With a throaty laugh, she turned back to the audience and grinned. This time, the smile was real.

“My boyfriend wants me to play ‘Cantankerous Bitch,’” she said.

The audience erupted with clamorous applause and shouts for the song.

“You think he’s trying to tell me something?” Nikki asked her audience, who answered with whistles and hoots.

They started to chant—“Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!”

Nikki laughed and shook her head. The song was supposed to come later in the set, but for once, she *wanted* to play it. She turned to the band and signaled them, nodding. A stagehand ran out and traded her electric guitar for the acoustic she’d opened with, and she hammered out the first, crashing chord.

The crowd sang along.

When she’d hit the last note, she ran to the wings, whipping off her electric. The applause raged, but she could spare a few seconds while she swapped guitars again. She ran into Peter’s arms, smiling, and shook him.

“Where the hell were you? You scared the shit out of me!”

His gray eyes brightening, he smiled the lopsided grin that had first made her want him.

“You know the expression ‘Let sleeping gods lie?’”

Nikki frowned. “It’s ‘dogs.’”

“The rule works the same either way,” Peter said, speaking up to be heard over the crowd. “I’ll explain later. Get back out there.”

Then he kissed her, and Nikki pressed her body against his, thinking about washing all of that blood and soot off him later tonight. How he could make her so frightened, make her laugh, frustrate the hell out of her, and make her want him all at the same time, she would never understand.

They kissed deeply, the bristly stubble on his face scraping her skin, inspiring her to kiss him all the harder.

She pulled back, narrowing her eyes, finally figuring out the taste and smell of him, and at last noticing how bloodshot his eyes had become.

“Holy shit,” she said. “Are you *high*?”

Octavian laughed and pushed her away. “Go. I’ll tell you all about it over a late dinner.”

Staring at him in amused disbelief, she backed away. “I can’t wait.”

Nikki took her acoustic from the stagehand who held it out for her, slung it over her shoulder, and ran back onstage, basking in the cheers of her audience. That was life with Peter Octavian—always fighting against the darkness, and finding their way back into the light.