

## **Dead Weight**

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Grace Hopper slid her key into the door of her apartment, the cold metal clicking as she turned it. The city outside hummed with the energy of its nocturnal creatures, but for Grace, the only thing that mattered tonight was getting inside and relaxing. Her head still throbbed from the intensity of her last job, healing a rogue werewolf with a temperament. Her shoulders ached from the strain of controlling the magic. Healing had never been easy, and her specialty was anything but mundane. As she pushed open the door, she was greeted by the dim glow of the kitchen light flickering in the corner of the room. The scent of something unfamiliar lingered in the air. Grace stepped inside cautiously, her instincts on high alert. It was unusual for anyone to be in her apartment, let alone at this hour.

“Great. Another client who can’t follow the rules,” she muttered, irritation coloring her voice. She’d been expecting some disturbance, but this? This was far more ominous than a magical intervention.

Grace made her way into the kitchen. There, leaning against the counter, stood a figure she didn’t recognize. A woman with an ethereal presence, one who didn’t quite seem real, though she was standing right in front of Grace. The woman wore a white t-shirt tucked into faded jeans, her long hair cascading loosely around her face. She had mismatched eyes, which heightened the strange nature of her appearance. Her face was beautiful, yet there was an unsettling aura about her, as if she were tethered between two worlds. Grace immediately assumed she was dealing with some form of supernatural being, perhaps a ghost. But the faint energy radiating from her was different than any poltergeist Grace had encountered.

“Who are you?” Grace asked, her tone sharp, eyes narrowing as she studied the stranger with suspicion. She wasn’t in the mood for games, especially not when she was already frayed from her last job.

The woman smiled. “I’m Katt,” she replied, her voice light yet carrying a certain weight. “And I need your help. I’ve been... dead for a while. But I’m not done. I don’t want to disappear completely. I need you to help me stay as I am.”

Grace’s brow furrowed as the weight of Katt’s words sank in. This wasn’t the usual request she dealt with. Souls were delicate things, and keeping one tethered to the mortal world without it returning to its physical form was a fragile balance. Most spirits moved on or were lost in the in-between. But Katt? She wanted to linger in an incomplete state, neither fully dead or alive.

“I don’t understand,” Grace said, crossing her arms as she studied Katt carefully. “You’re already dead. You’re asking me to keep you as a ghost?”

“Yes,” Katt answered simply, her expression a strange sense of longing. “But I don’t want to be just some drifting spirit. I want to stay in a form that feels... real. I want to remain visible, as human as a ghost can be. I want to stay Grace, and I want you to make that happen.”

Grace’s mind raced as she considered the request. The process of manipulating the soul and the boundary between life and death was never simple. Keeping Katt from returning to her mortal remains would require a disruption of the natural cycle, and tampering with a soul’s intended rest could have irreparable consequences.

“Why me?” Grace asked, her voice calm but filled with suspicion. “What makes you think I can do this? I’m not some necromancer, Katt. I work with healing, not... this.”

Katt tilted her head slightly, her gaze locking onto Grace with an intensity that was impossible to ignore. “I don’t need a necromancer. I need someone powerful enough to bend the rules without breaking me. I’ve seen your work, Grace. I know you can do this.”

“I can’t just keep you tethered here without consequences,” Grace said, her voice firm. “There’s always a cost. Nothing comes without it.”

Katt smiled, but it wasn’t the playful grin from earlier. It was somber, almost mournful. “I’ve already paid that price, Grace. I died. This... this is just me asking for a little more time, a little more of what I never got to experience.”

Grace sighed, taking a step closer. She didn’t want to get involved in this. She didn’t want to risk destabilizing Katt’s soul. But the woman before her was so incredibly... alive in her own way.

“You want me to stop your soul from fading away?” Grace asked, trying to grasp the extent of the request. “To keep you here, in some limbo state between life and death?”

Katt nodded, her expression earnest. “Yes. Please. I just... don’t want to disappear completely. Not yet. I want to stay here. I want to stay present, even if I’m just a ghost.”

Grace was silent for a moment. Her mind ran through the available options. There was a way, but it wasn’t simple. And there were no guarantees. Whatever magic needed to do this could easily spiral out of control. But somehow, she didn’t feel entirely unwilling. Perhaps Katt was asking for too much, but there was something in her eyes, a sorrow Grace couldn’t ignore.

“I have an idea,” Grace finally said. “But I’m going to need your help.”

The line outside the Vale Estate stretched down the marble steps like a slow-moving river of silk, velvet, and cheap Halloween costumes. The mansion loomed overhead, its gilded windows glowing against the night sky, promising danger, decadence, and deals struck in the dark. Grace

adjusted her plastic devil horns, barely glancing at the people ahead of her. She didn't need to make conversation. She needed to get inside.

"You sure these people are rich?" Katt muttered beside her, arms crossed. "Half of them look like they got their costumes from Spirit Halloween."

Grace barely spared her a look. "You're one to talk."

Katt flicked an ear on her cat costume. "Excuse you, this is high fashion."

"It's literally just painted whiskers and a headband."

"And yet, I look hotter than you."

Grace exhaled sharply, adjusting the sleeves of her red dress. She wasn't here for a fashion critique. She was here to find Ellias Vale, one of the most well-connected necromancers in the city—and the only person who might have the information she needed. Not that she'd normally stoop to asking for help.

Three years ago, the House of Hopper had been one of the most powerful magical bloodlines in the city. Their manor had stood as a symbol of dominance, the family name carrying weight in every room that mattered. But then the debts caught up with them—the consequences of old, dangerous deals made by ancestors who had assumed they'd always be on top. One by one, their allies turned away. Their power fractured. And when the Hopper family collapsed, no one had been left to pick it back up. Her name still carried some power, but not enough. Surely not enough to save Katt.

Four weeks ago now, Katt had clawed her way out of an unmarked grave with no memories, a request, and talent for getting under Grace's skin. Whatever magic had revived her was unstable, cracking at the edges, worsening with each passing day. If Grace didn't find a way to fix it, Katt would eventually—

No. Not happening.

Katt came to Grace for help, and that's exactly what she was getting.

The bouncer waved them through. Inside, the estate was alive with music and conversation. Candles floated above the grand hall, casting flickering shadows across the sea of guests. The air smelled like expensive perfume, magic, and something metallic underneath it all, something rotting.

Grace scanned the room. At the far end, Ellias lounged on a velvet couch, surrounded by people who smelled like blood money.

"There's our guy," she murmured.

Katt smirked. "You gonna charm him, or should I?"

"You?" Grace scoffed. "You'd get us thrown out in five minutes."

Katt placed a hand over her heart, pretending to be offended. "Five whole minutes? You think so highly of me."

Grace ignored her and walked toward Ellias. Katt melted into the crowd, playing distraction.

Ellias' eyes flicked up as Grace slid into the seat across from him. "Miss Hopper." So, he knew who she was.

"Mr. Vale," she said smoothly. "I need information."

His lips curled. "So quick to business, are we? And what do I get in return?"

"I don't offer," she said. "I take."

Before he could react, she reached across the table and touched his wrist.

His body locked.

Magic surged between them. His mind peeled open like a book in Grace's head, pages flipping too fast to track—secrets, spells, answers.

And then—there.

A binding sigil. One that had to be drawn in the space between life and death. A cemetery.

Perfect, there was one right behind the manor.

Grace pulled back. Ellias inhaled sharply, yanking his arm away. "You little—"

The fire alarm blared.

The room went from elegant to chaotic in seconds, drenched by sprinklers. People cursed, pushing toward the exits. Through the madness, Katt appeared at Grace's side, looking far too pleased.

"Oops," she said.

Grace sighed. "What did you do?"

Katt shrugged. "Just... a little arson."

They slipped out into the night, weaving through the panicked crowd.

When they reached the street, Katt grinned. "So? Did we get what we needed?"

Grace exhaled. "Yeah. I just have to draw a sigil in a cemetery before midnight."

Katt's smile wavered, just a little.

"You're not going anywhere," Grace said.

Katt's face softened, and for once, she didn't have a snarky response.

Once they reached the graveyard, Grace pulled out her dagger and pressed it against her palm. A clean cut. Blood welled instantly.

Katt tensed. "Dramatic much?"

Grace ignored her and took to the empty patch of dirt they were standing on. Slowly, she traced the sigil. The second it was complete, the air shifted. Katt gasped, shuddering, like something had snapped.

Then—

Silence.

The clock struck midnight.

And—

Katt let out a breathless laugh. "I'm still here."

Grace exhaled, relief washing over her. "Told you."

Then Katt's veins darkened.

Blackness crept up her arms, spreading like ink through water. Her skin cracked like porcelain fracturing, with bones gleaming beneath.

Her breath hitched. "Oh."

Grace's stomach plummeted.

A slow, mocking laugh echoed from the shadows.

Ellias Vale stepped forward, adjusting his cufflinks.

Grace went rigid.

Katt froze.

Ellias tilted his head. "What a shame. She was never meant to last, you know." His gaze flicked to Grace. "And you? You never could let go of dead weight."

Katt's body convulsed, bones creaking, her form splitting apart.

Her hand slipped from Grace's grasp.

And something inside Grace broke.

She didn't think. Didn't hesitate.

She reached—

A new line of energy surged.

The air shuddered.

Something tethered.

Katt snapped back, her bones solidifying. The rot halted, veins pulsing gold instead of black.

Ellias faltered. "What—"

Katt exhaled sharply. Looked at her hands. At Grace.

Then she grinned.

"Oh," she said, flexing her fingers. "That's new."

Ellias took a step back.

Katt tilted her head. "You feel that?" Her voice was silk and steel. "That's me, alive."

Ellias's breath hitched.

Katt lifted a hand towards Ellias, her power coiling around her like smoke.

And then—

His body collapsed.

Grace let out a slow breath. “Now that—was satisfying.”

Katt dusted off her hands. “God, I hope they throw him in the worst prison.”

Sirens wailed in the distance—fire trucks and authorities responding to the mess at the manor.

Katt turned to Grace. “So, what did you do back there?”

Grace rubbed her temples. “I think I tethered some of my magic to your spirit.”

Katt smirked. “So you don’t hate me?”

Grace groaned. “Don’t make me regret it.”

Katt bumped her shoulder. “Too late.”

And for once, Grace didn’t mind.