

Bite

by Ella Hansen

The bite pulses with a different type of pain the morning after. In the moment, it had been a sharp sting, a sensation of two dense needles plunged into her veins. She felt the entire length of both punctures, and when it was over, the crisp air of the nighttime filled the divots left behind.

But now, the sharpness of the wound is gone, replaced by a throbbing, surging ache that seeps into her muscles. Lily traces her eyes along the side of her body in the mirror and tilts her head, drawing the skin tight across her neck. Her fingers run across the tendon, across the spiked purple lines that emanate from the bite.

So this is how it starts, she thinks.

She feels colder than usual, something that doesn't subside when she rinses her hands under scalding water, when she pours herself a cup of coffee, or when she crawls into the thickest sweater she owns. The chill is spreading from inside, from the dip in her neck and the mark she will wear for the rest of her life.

Felix finds her huddled against the radiator with her knees drawn up to her chest and hands clenching her mug. "Oh, god, Lily," he exhales, dragging his hand down his face. "I thought you might have left."

Lily shakes her head.

"How are you feeling?" He asks, crouching down to meet her eyes. As his gaze travels around the area she has exposed—not much, only her face and neck—Lily notices him take in a sharp breath.

"How does it look?" Her voice comes out harsher than intended, but she can't stomach the energy to fix it.

Shifting his head from side to side, Felix gives her another glance. "Not awful," he says.

"You're lying."

"No, I mean it," he insists, sliding to a seat across from her. "You look a bit pale, and definitely sick, but you're still yourself. You're still Lily."

She swallows, and it hurts. "Not for very much longer."

"Don't say that." Felix reaches out a hand and brushes a stray hair off of her forehead. "You don't know what's going to happen."

That's the thing: he's right. Lily has no idea what comes next. It wasn't even twenty-four hours ago that it had occurred—it had been late, maybe too late, and she hadn't been paying full attention. They'd all been hearing reports about it on the news, where anyone from college kids to elders walking home in the late night had been ambushed, attacked, bitten. It's too early to say what might happen to her, and most of the other victims have vanished by now. No one's quite sure where they get off to, or if it's even their choice to leave.

She knows by the way Felix is chewing on his bottom lip that he's thinking about the last fact too. "I don't want to disappear," she says, softly. "I don't want to change."

"I don't want you to disappear either," he says. After a second, he leans forward and wraps her in a hug, squeezing just a bit too tight. "But it's okay if you change. I'll be here."

They sit in silence, and Lily can feel Felix's gentle, steady heartbeat through the press of his chest against her sweater. She tries to grab onto the rhythm; anchor herself in the moment. She'd spent all of the late night and early morning in devastation, but now, it all seems... inevitable, like she's walking to the precipice of something deeper than she can even imagine.

"Your producer called while you were up," Felix says, handing Lily her phone as he stands. "He didn't need anything, just wanted to check in before the premiere."

Her heart seizes with the reminder of the event. "What did you tell him?"

"Not much," Felix shrugs. "I mentioned you're not feeling well. I don't think he cares as long as you're there to introduce the film and make a bit of meaningless small talk with critics at the afterparty."

Ignoring her nudging suspicion that she won't be suited to attend the afterparty, Lily sighs. "Can you—"

"Of course." He smiles, and Lily feels the slightest bit of warmth return to her body. "Assuming you were about to ask me to stay with you and do most of that meaningless small talk on your behalf."

"Well." She means to laugh but ends up with a dry cough instead. "What else do I keep you around for?"

Extending a hand toward her, Felix feigns consideration. "Cooking. Cleaning. Eye candy. I'd be a fantastic trophy husband, you know." He winks as Lily reaches up and stands with a wobble in her knees. She knows what he's doing. Trying to stay calm, to act like things are normal. Someone has to stay tied to where they used to be even twelve hours ago.

Felix's fingers are warm between hers, and for a moment, she feels like before.

The boy in line before Lily at the bookstore is writing in his book.

He's a bit taller than her, so instead of the printed words and whatever he's scrawling on the page, she's staring at the messy black waves on the back of his neck and the wool coat across his shoulders.

And because she's nosy, and he seems particularly interesting, she asks: "What are you writing?"

With a jolt, he turns around, holding his pen and book up as though he's being held at gunpoint. "Oh. I'm..." He flips the book around to its cover, and Lily smiles when she sees the title. "I'm annotating."

"Already?" Lily shifts her own soon-to-be-purchases in her arms. They've stayed balanced for the first half of the line, and now she's praying they'll stay there for the rest. "You haven't bought it yet."

"Yeah," the boy murmurs, scratching at his nose. The tips of his fingers are stained blue, the same color as his pen. "I'm hoping the cashier won't notice. I just couldn't resist."

She can't help but smile. There's something in the way his voice goes soft at the end that gets her to move past the questionable timing of his annotations. "What's so compelling?" That book is something she's scoured front to back, but she's never met another person who's read it—she didn't even know it was being sold here.

"Well, it's a collection of short stories—screenplays, actually," he starts, his thumb cascading through the pages as he finds the page he left off on. "By college students from around New York, you know, people my... our age, one or two from my own school. And the other week, when I was browsing, I found this one."

The book flips around to face Lily. "'Transmutation?'" The page is one she's seen hundreds of times, probably, but this is the first moment she's seen it covered in marks of devotion, rather than critique. This person's handwriting snakes around the paragraphs, woven into indentations and dialogue.

"It's phenomenal," the boy gushes. "I've never read anything like it. The way the author handles the themes of transformation and loss... I knew I had to come back for it. I couldn't just leave it there." His grin is wide and crinkles the apexes of his freckled face, and Lily thinks that if someone can love that script this much, she has to be doing something right.

"Did you like the scene where she's talking to her mother?"

He swipes to the next page, where those very lines are circled in smudged navy ink.

"That's my favorite part, when she says 'one day, when you wake up, your body will no longer be your own.'" And then his eyes flick up, meeting hers. "You know it?"

"Course I do," Lily says with a shrug. "I wrote it."

Lily wakes up to the taste of blood. The minute she's in front of the bathroom sink, she opens her mouth, and it trails down her chin, dark and briny and metallic. For a moment, all she does is watch her reflection as it spreads, leaking through her teeth and rolling over her lips. And with a startling, intense pang of emotion, she loves it.

She grabs a hand towel from the rack and scrubs at her skin until the redness of friction hides the stains left behind, trying harder to wash away that thought than to clean herself. When she's finished, and the flavor barely lingers, she opens her mouth once more.

With a shaking hand, she reaches up and runs the pad of her finger across the bottom of her teeth, unable to control the gasp when she reaches what she's already seen: the budding point of a sharply elongated canine. She must have bit her tongue in her sleep. "No, no, no," she murmurs, dropping her hands to the rim of the sink and clenching, screwing her eyes shut.

As she turns to leave, something catches her eye. Her reflection, skin bordering on stark white now, seems superimposed onto her background. Transparent, almost. Tilting her head from side to side, she watches the dark blotch fan across her cheek, as if projected across it. She moves her head out of the way, and there it emerges: the navy blue of the towel hung up behind her.

With a near-frantic extension of her arm, she holds her hand up to the mirror, waving it across the length of the surface. The smeared impression of the scene behind her dances across her reflected palm, and it hurts too much to think about any longer. She closes the door behind her with a slam.

Felix makes his mom's recipe for huevos rancheros, Lily's favorite, and serves her the plate with a huge grin she can't reciprocate, for fear of giving up too much. "Feeling any better today?"

"A little bit," she tells him, trying to put on a brighter attitude. Really, she's colder than ever, it's just that she doesn't mind it as much now. The bite mark has solidified into a solid deep red, and the shock of discolored veins spreading out from it have faded a bit.

"That's amazing," Felix says, dipping down and pecking her on the top of the head as he passes, taking a seat next to her at the table. "See, it'll be alright."

She does her best to give him a warm, closed-mouthed smile. "Maybe so."

They eat in relative quiet, and Felix's side glances are not as subtle as Lily knows he thinks they are. She stares straight ahead into her plate, trying to keep down each tiny bite of eggs she takes. They taste like sawdust.

Finishing his plate before Lily's cleaned a third of hers, Felix gets up to stretch by the door, the subtle pop of his shoulder bouncing around the room. "Ah," he says, clicking his tongue. "Oscar's out again." While he steps outside and scoops the neighbor's adventurous cat into his arms, Lily sets her cutlery down against her plate. When his high-pitched coos have faded away, she crosses to the sink and scrapes the rest of the meal into the garbage disposal.

With a flick of a switch, she grinds her shame into the steel and tries to swallow back the fleeting wish for the taste she'd had that morning.

She checks her email, hunched over at her desk between the wilting, bookmarked pages of *Transmutation's* final script and rows of unwashed coffee mugs. It's full of notes from the crew, both confirming last minute details and sending congratulations in lieu of attendance at the premiere that evening. Phrases echo around her screen, saying things like "the best breakout director this year" and "high potential for great acclaim", and all Lily can do is pin her forehead to her palms and wonder *how can everything be fine for them?* It's unfair. Everyone at the showing will be expecting big things from her—in everything from her work to her outfit to her comments, waiting for what happens now. Everyone will be expecting a next.

But there is no next, not anymore. And there is *nothing*, not any sort of hint or guideline or rulebook, to tell Lily what the hell she's supposed to do about that. She doesn't know if this is something she can hide, or if the disappearance is necessary. No one's stuck around long enough to inform their successors what happens.

Really, she should have seen it coming. Before that night, she'd assumed the threat would pass, same as all the other whispers of danger that passed by her ears prior. Nobody she knew personally, only auxiliary presences such as the nephew of the head editor or her sister's ex-roommate, had been taken, but it was only a matter of time before it came closer, took something she assumed would be safe. Words of the condition—the transformation, as it were, flicker in and out of recognition, passing between fable and science and mythic all the same. Names, too, some that verge on conspiracy, some that sound like niche illnesses. Most have settled for "the night attacks", with the knowledge that anyone listening will know exactly what they mean. Now, the media swarms for any sort of connection to a victim. They want to know how, and why, and who, and every little detail Lily that would rather eat actual sawdust for than tell them. Maybe she can understand why the others have disappeared. She doesn't want to be studied either, not like this.

She pushes herself through responding to as many messages as she can, trying to write in the ghost of her demeanor from before the bite. No one has to know yet. Email after email flies out of her inbox, until she reaches one from an address she doesn't recognize.

To Lilith Westenra

We hope this email finds you well. Our condolences for your condition. Those of us here try our best to not contribute to the growth of our kind, but unfortunately it seems someone has brought you into this state. As strange as we know it must be to experience this, you are not alone. You are likely wondering what happens next, and while we aren't the most confident ourselves, should you find yourself seeking answers, refuge, or escape, we will be there to meet you. Please do not reply to this email—it will not be answered. Instead, should you choose, you may contact us by sending a handwritten letter to the address attached. If immediate sanctuary is required, kindly travel to said address and await further guidance.

Our sincerest apologies once again.

There is no sign off, no name or title, but Lily knows who it's from. So that's where they all disappear to. Writing emails with the formality of an obituary. She stares at her computer screen until the words etch in her vision even as she looks away. *You are not alone.* Her hands clench, nails digging crescents into her palms. *We will be there to meet you.*

With a click, the message is gone.

She doesn't have the time to consider uprooting everything she knows and worked for, because by the time her head clears, dusk has arrived, and with it, the advent of the premiere. The makeup artist was her producer's idea. Lily doesn't like thinking of herself as some pretentious director that requires all the work to be done by others, but even she can't deny that her skills with makeup leave much to be desired. The girl is young, maybe college-age, but the perfect organization of brushes and tools in her bag suggest a sharp skill in her craft.

Lily invites her inside, and knowing that there's not much she can do to hide, she asks: "Can you keep a secret?"

The artist tilts her head, her colorful braids shifting with the movement. "Yes."

She leads the girl toward the bathroom, points out where she can put her equipment, and then turns, meeting her eyes in the mirror. As she stares into the translucent mimicry of her face, the background usurps the majority of where her form should be. By some gift of chance, the dress she's chosen fits her new existence, the half-sheer sleeves adorned with embroidered roses in a simple, but elegant deep burgundy, with a low neckline that puts her collarbone and neck on display. Her neck, which as she has almost allowed herself to forget, is punctuated by two equally simple marks. They would be easier to hide on her own, Lily thinks, if she could see where they were in the mirror.

It takes a few seconds for the truth to register in the makeup artist's expression. "Oh my," she says. "I've never seen one in person—the bite, that is."

"But you know what it means?"

She nods. "Yes. I'm sorry. I won't tell anyone."

"Oh, don't worry about that," Lily says with a wave of her hand. "I'll probably be gone before you get the chance to." She takes a seat on the chair, and the artist readies a swath of foundation on a wide brush.

"It happens that quickly?" She asks. The brush glides over Lily's cheek.

"I'm not sure," Lily says. "I just have a feeling."

There's a hum of acknowledgement from the artist, before her hand freezes. "And... it's—you're safe, right?"

The question catches her off guard, though she should have been expecting it. The widespread portrayal of whatever thing Lily is morphing into isn't exactly positive. "Yes," she says. "If anything happens, my partner's right outside. He'll make sure you're okay."

Tentatively, the artist resumes her work. "Okay. I don't mean to accuse you of anything," she clarifies. "I just want to be sure. And he knows?"

"He was there."

"I see. What's he going to do when you leave?"

Lily sighs. "I'm not sure. He's not exactly entertaining the idea." Leaving, or disappearing, whichever she decides to call it, is the exact opposite of what Felix wants to talk about. She wonders if he's even letting himself think about it.

"Then what do you think *you're* going to do?" The makeup artist asks, on a new, smaller brush now.

For a moment, Lily stills. "I don't know." She smooths her hands over her knees. "I'll find somewhere I'm not a burden to anyone. Maybe wherever the others like me are."

"It must be a very hard decision." A pad of powder falls over Lily's face. "I'm sorry you're going through this."

Lily can't help but exhale the smallest laugh at her formality in such a strange situation. "Thank you," she says. "You're very kind."

There's a while where neither of them speak, the silence more of a comfort to Lily than she's used to, before the makeup artist talks again. "You're going to the premiere of your film, right?"

"Yes. I was the director and writer."

"What's it about?"

At this point, Lily hardly remembers. It's changed so much, from her first draft all the way in sophomore year of college, to when it had been picked up by something much bigger than she'd anticipated, to when they finally offered her the role she'd wanted all along. "It's... about a loss," she starts. "The main character loses someone very close to her, and in dealing with that grief, she changes."

"Into what?" The artist asks, tilting Lily's chin up as she starts to apply eyeshadow.

"Someone else, essentially. Someone she doesn't recognize." In the corner of her eye, she sees the translucent form of her body shift in place. "In the end, I guess it's about her losing herself."

Glitter explodes out of the artist's hand as she knocks the brush against the side of her case. "It sounds incredible."

"I hope it is," Lily says. "I wrote it in college. It wasn't until years later, once I had film experience, I finally got the chance to do something with the story. My partner, Felix, was the one who pushed me to go further with it."

"What's it called?"

"*Transmutation.*"

The makeup artist clicks the cap off of a bright red lipstick. "I'll see it the second it releases."

For the rest of the decoration, she and Lily make light talk, and for the first time in a while, Lily feels like she can just *be*. No expectations from this stranger, no unanswered questions she'll have to deal with someday. The makeup artist rustles around in her bag, finding a bottle of opaque foundation.

"It's the kind they use on tattoos," she explains. "No one will have any idea." She spreads it over the bite in thick strokes, and Lily looks down and watches her secret disappear. If only it were that easy.

In the hallway, she can hear Felix on the phone with his mother, speaking in rapid Spanish that Lily, even after five years, can only pick out a phrase or two from. He's been talking to her since she kicked him out of the bathroom. While she's certain Felix isn't unveiling her condition to Gloria, her gut still warps with worry. The bite itself may very well be the least of her worries in the upcoming days, yet he's devoted so much to caring for her in such a short time that anything more might run him into the ground.

Then again, this whole time, from when he'd found her in the alley until now, he hasn't cracked. He's been calm, *too* calm, adhering to a normal that should have vanished with the bite. But that was how it always was, wasn't it? Lily was the one who went out and did things, took risks, got recognition, and Felix was always there when she came home, ready to heal and comfort until all was well.

"You look amazing," Felix says as he cracks open the door, when the artist has left and he's been granted permission to enter again. He's already dressed, wearing a lightweight floral shirt and formal black pants. "I brought your necklace." The silver metal glints as he holds the piece up; it was one of his gifts to her on their second anniversary.

"Thank you." Lily steps backward, out of range of the mirror. She doesn't know what exactly he'll see when he looks into it, but she'd rather it not be noticeable. "Would you mind helping me put it on?"

"No need to ask." As she turns around, Felix moves behind her, gently brushing her hair away from the base of her neck. "Hey, you know how proud of you I am, right?"

Lily smiles. "Of course I know."

"Just making sure," Felix says. "Especially now. It takes a lot of guts to show up to something like this after what happened. You really are something, Lily."

If she could design the perfect partner from scratch, every detail, she'd still ever end up with someone as perfect as Felix. "You're too good to me," she murmurs, and she's about to say more, but as Felix sets the necklace down, the area beneath it erupts in a bright, scalding agony. Lily gasps and lurches forward, ripping the necklace from her throat and throwing it.

"What's wr—" Felix sets a hand on her shoulder, but Lily shoves him off in a panic, dropping to her knees on the frigid tile floor. Sliding her head into her hands, she heaves, her brain spinning out of control.

She doesn't know how long it takes for her to scramble back into cognizance, but when she feels strong enough to form a thought, she's staring at her palm and the jagged red line where she'd grabbed the necklace. "Silver," she hisses.

The floor shakes as Felix drops down to her level, reaching out and delicately taking her hand. "Oh my god," he exhales. "I'm so sorry. I should have—I should have known, I'm so sorry, Lily."

Shaking her head fervently, Lily clenches her fist in on itself. "It's fine. I'm fine."

"You're not fine, you're—"

"*Felix*," she says, and her voice comes out much firmer than intended. "I'm *fine*."

His face flickers with a semblance of frustration, but he relents. "Okay. Can I—you should probably..."

Lily follows his eyeline to her neck, which is etched in the same bold brand as her palm. Fury brews beneath her skin, hatred for the way her body has decided to morph itself without her permission. "I'll handle it. Let's just go."

Though she sees the way Felix hesitates before getting up, she doesn't give him the satisfaction of helping any longer. With the makeup artist gone, she obscures her newest blemish with another gift, a tarnished bronze necklace from an ex-girlfriend she'd never gotten rid of, and steels herself against the sink, taking deeper breaths than she once thought possible, until she's finally whole enough to step outside again.

The theater is classy, more opulent than Lily thinks *Transmutation* deserves, but regal enough that she garners a sense of importance as she steps inside, cameras flashing and reporters thrusting microphones in her general direction. She simply smiles—without her teeth—and gives the shortest answers she can manage. Those she genuinely cares for, the crew members, actors, and her co-writer, who took her college script and brought it to life, find her before the screening starts. She says a silent thanks to them all, as they spend the bulk of the time talking between themselves and Felix.

Watching the film is supposed to be the easy part. Lily's seen it going on a thousand times, but the experience of the visuals she's spent a year with on the big screen feels better than she could have possibly imagined. For an hour and a half, she tries to forget, but the themes Felix fell in love with years ago are still there even under the rewrites, coming back around to bite her.

One day, when you wake up, your body will no longer be your own.

When the credits roll, her name in blocky letters looms over the seats, and the audience is standing, the applause and cheers raining down around her. She starts to grin, but stops herself, keeping her lips sealed as she bows. Between the hugs of her lead actors, the handshake of the producer, and Felix's kiss, she's overwhelmed by love, in the dark theater where no one can see the ways she's changed, where no one knows how she's directed her work into reality.

Back in the hall, things are different. The lights bore into Lily's skin, so intense she can't even trust the artist's work. Bodies swarm her, most strangers with questions she barely knows

the answers to, who she suspects will catch on to her condition and force her to admit she's been corrupted. Nausea rises in her chest, and she feels faint, knees weak under the eye of so many.

She's hungry, but in a way that feels unlike the hunger she's used to. Her stomach is empty, only the scraps of her breakfast lining her digestive tract. The craving from earlier chews at her mind, and while she'd been able to push it down hours ago, now it eats away, dragging more and more of her focus with it.

"Ms. Westenra, a word about your plans for the future?"

Lily grabs a flute of champagne from a passing waiter.

"How would you describe your creative process?"

She lifts it to her lips, but the second the liquid hits her mouth, something in her revolts.

"Do you think this film will go to the Oscars?"

Clenching her fingers around the stem, Lily tries to relax, tries to breathe.

"When can we expect a second showing?"

The glass shatters in her hand.

Around her, the crowd gasps and shuffles away, concerned gazes flicking across the scene. Lily's half aware of Felix at her side, clutching her elbow and whispering something in her ear, but she stares straight ahead, too scared to react any other way. Someone reaches down, grasping at the shards on the ground—

A scent hits the air, so powerful it knocks Lily's eyes wide open. Her heart spins to life, the beating so loud in her ears that all other sound is muddled. *Blood.*

The person who was cut—a production assistant, maybe—starts backward, holding their hand to their chest. Everything blurs but the red on their fingers. Others step in, trying to get a closer look at the wound, and Lily feels herself move, before she even has the thought to act. Right before she reaches them, a tug on her arm stops her.

Whipping around with a glare, she stares right into Felix's wary face. He balks, eyes shining with a twinge of fear. "What's going on?" He asks, voice soft.

The metallic scent still lingers around Lily's brain, but she screws her eyes shut, digging into her bottom lip, trying to wring out the insatiable urge to turn back around and pounce. "I don't know," she says through gritted teeth. "But we need to leave."

"Leave? Lily, this is... you can't leave."

She grabs onto the edge of Felix's sleeve. The pressure on her lip increases with her dread, gnawing, consuming. "I can't stay here."

"But don't you think—"

Opening her eyes, she looks straight at him and lets the pooling blood from her lip leak out the corner of her mouth, running off the slant of her sharpened teeth. *"Please."* Felix pales, his figure tensing before her, and then he grabs her by the hand and starts walking.

They make it to the car before anyone else can get enough time to ask questions, Lily spitting the remaining blood onto the sidewalk and slumping against the passenger door as Felix cranks it into ignition. Tension fills the space between them as they drive, neither saying anything until the car turns the final street into their neighborhood.

"I wish I knew what you were feeling," Felix says, running his hand through his hair. "I look at you, and there's this cloud of smoke hiding what's really going on."

Lily's cheek is cold against the window. "Don't wish that. You don't want to know."

"Yes, I do," he stresses. "Listen, I know this is hard, trust me, but I can't help you if I don't know how."

"You don't need to help me." Even as she says it, she regrets it, and the way Felix's expression falls makes it worse.

"Well, if that's the case," he says bitterly. "Why couldn't you have stuck it out for just a bit longer?"

Anger bubbles just beyond Lily's sternum. "Because I was going to lose my mind being trapped there for a second longer."

Felix clenches his jaw as he pulls into their driveway. "That was the most important night of your life so far, Lily. That was your *future*."

Pulling her arms closer to her body, Lily drags her nails down her sleeves. The threads rip at the seams. "That's not true. I have a movie that people are going to watch years down the line and say *hey, whatever happened to that girl?*, but I don't have a future." Before Felix can respond, she continues. "The most important night of my life was two days ago, stuck in that alley. There is *no* going back."

"Don't *say* that." Felix shifts the car into park with a shove. "Please, don't say that. You don't know what's going to happen."

Lily tugs at her necklace, revealing the mark below it. "I think I have a pretty good idea." The email from that morning worms its way back into her mind: a way out if nothing else works.

Felix opens his mouth, but is cut off when a thud sounds from outside. Lily jolts in her seat, peering onto the hood of the car, where a cat-shaped blur leaps onto the pavement.

"Oscar," Felix mutters, rubbing his forehead. "Scared the shit out of me."

Turning to face him, Lily reaches out. He twitches as she sets her hand on his arm. "I can't live like this, Felix. Back there, when they started bleeding..." She doesn't need to finish the sentence to see it settle in understanding behind his eyes. "That's not safe. What if it had been you?"

"I wouldn't... I wouldn't mind," Felix says, but his voice wavers. "God, Lily, you know I'd do anything for you."

Her throat tightens. "I don't want you to feel that way. I don't want you to give everything up just for me. You've already sacrificed so much." It was true; he'd moved across the country, quit his job and picked up another, and directly funded parts of her film, all because she'd asked him to.

"And what's love but one more sacrifice?" Felix asks. Lily doesn't answer. "Just tell me what you need me to do. I can't lose you, not this quickly."

She thinks for a moment, and then says, barely above a whisper: "I think I need you to let me be."

When she looks up at him, he's crying, tears running down the slant of his jaw. "I can't do that," he says. "You know I can't do that."

In lieu of a response, Lily reaches across the center console and pulls Felix into a hug, letting him bury his face in her shoulder and stain the fabric with his tears. Past him, she focuses her gaze on the low light of the street, shadows stark and deep over the sidewalk.

"I really loved your film," Felix says, words muffled.

Lily's cheeks strain with a sad smile. "I know. You were its first fan, remember?"

"Of course I do. Most important day of my life."

It would be, wouldn't it. Her eyes stay fixed on the street before her, and the nudging hunger continues to grow. "I'm going to take a walk," she tells Felix, and he moves back, concerned.

"I'll come back," she assures him. "I promise."

Once he's stepped inside the house, Lily sets off, the light in the living room window at her back. The chill of night envelops her, her breath emerging in small clouds, the only sign that something in her is not yet frozen. As she walks, she feels her limbs grow weaker, malnourished and exhausted, and her vision grows muddled as her pace slows.

There is only one thing on her mind, and she knows if she had gone inside with Felix, it would have been from him she stole, something not worth the risk to even tempt.

Between waves of nausea and shaking, she spots a darting shadow in the hedges.

She's running.

The evening air is crisp and nips at her face, though it's nothing compared to what she left behind in midland New York. She misses the stable presence of Felix beside her, but he isn't too far back. They're barely a block from the car as it is.

She busies herself with the buttons on her new coat, a soft white garment that had been a gift from her producer. It's a bit too fancy for what Lily prefers, but it was well suited to the night's dinner. Too focused on the rhythm of each notch, she steps in front of the alley without a second thought.

It happens too fast for her to stop it. Her back slams against the brick wall, before something dark, indiscernible, and cold moves over her, keeping her frozen in place. And then pain, sharp, blinding pain sinks into her skin. Two points. Two needles. They're deep in her neck, deeper than she's ever felt something in her body, and she gasps, trying to force something else into the space beyond her trachea.

As quickly as it started, it ceases, the presence vanishing before she has the time to see her attacker. Her eyes spin and roll back into her head, and she crumples, hitting the ground so hard her teeth send a rattle up to her temples.

There's blood on her new coat.

So this is how it ends, she thinks.

She regains consciousness to a shout. "Lily!" Felix's voice carries from the street, weaving its way around Lily's wilting body. "Where'd you go?"

Dryly, she murmurs: "Felix." It's nowhere near enough. She can't think, can barely stomach breathing. There's so much blood. A form appears at the end of the alley, and she knows it's him, but he won't be able to see her unless he turns his head to the ground.

"Felix," she groans, her hand falling flat against the pavement as she attempts to reach out. "Please." There's no way she can be heard, but her mind pounds at the walls of her head and demands: look at me look at me look at me.

And he does. By some incredible, privileged turn of fate, he does.

The relief is so great that Lily can't help but smile, eyes beginning to fall shut, but the ground beneath her shakes as Felix slides across the alley. His knees stop just shy of her

"Bite" by Ella Hansen

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shoulder. "Hey, hey, I'm here." The words are strained, and he lifts a hand to her face. "What happened?"

"Bit me," she manages to choke out. "Here."

With the slightest movement, she rolls a bit onto her side, so that he can see the bite. It's still gushing blood, if the gathering warmth at her back is anything to go off of. Felix lets out a shaky exhale, and Lily grimaces. News articles flash across her vision. She knows what kind of bite this is.

"I'm gonna die," she says, her words breaking with a sob that threatens to burst loose.

"You're not. Not if I have anything to say about it," Felix tells her, voice kind, yet firm as he rips a sizable strip off of his shirt and presses it to her wound. "It's okay, Lily."

She grabs onto his sleeve, holds him tight until she can get a full breath in.

While Lily gulps down as much air as she can take, Felix keeps his fingers compressed to the bite, brow furrowed. "You're shaking, but I think the bleeding is slowing down."

Panic settles in her throat. "How are you so calm?" She asks, trying to hold back the tears that prick in the corners of her eyes.

"I've seen the stories," Felix says. "No one dies from this. If we can just get you home, we can—"

"Felix, it's over. You don't have to—" her voice cuts out, and she grits her teeth to push through the pain. Tears roll down her cheeks, apathetic to her resistance. "You don't have to try and fix me."

"I do." Felix raises his hand to his neck, at the same spot she's been bitten, and when he moves it away, Lily's blood streaks across his jaw. "I always do."

Warmth.

That's what she wants.

That's what she *needs*.

Warmth. And here it is, caked between her fingers and smeared over her jaw, gathering in the folds of her dress as she holds herself up, palms to the ground. It flows down her neck and drips from her mouth with a slow click into the puddle forming at her knees.

Lily feels alive again.

If she had known it would be this easy, she would have done it the moment she'd heard the cat at the door that morning. It had been harder than expected, chasing him down, but she'd done it, and for good reward too. Everything is okay now. Everything feels *better*.

She drags her tongue over her lips, catching the final stray streaks of blood around her mouth. Her breath comes fast and heavy, echoing around her ears.

It isn't until she hears a rustling nearby that she looks up, eyes wide, and sees Felix stumble into the yard.

"Lily!" He yells, rushing forward, and then stopping abruptly in his tracks as he takes in the sight before him. "Oh my god." His hands fly to his mouth. "*Oh my god.*"

The sound forces something in Lily's brain to kick into gear, and as she gradually clues back into reality, the absoluteness of what she's just done hits her like a truck. She looks down at the mangled, gory mess below her, and screams.

Felix comes back into her vision, blurred as she swings her head back and forth, unable to find anything to settle on as she scrambles backward. He begins to say something, but retches instead, lurching to the side to throw up into the brush. Lily knows she's babbling something incoherent, but has no idea where the swarming thoughts in her brain are going before her mouth spits out whatever gets there first, blood and word alike.

She manages to rise to her feet, hunched over and covered in blood, staring down at her hands and bawling, long and painful sobs that stab into her chest and take root there.

"What did you *do*?" Felix's voice asks—she can't tell where he is, but it doesn't matter.

"*Don't!*" Lily cries, shielding her face with her tainted hands. "Don't look at me!"

Whether he responds or runs away, she doesn't know. She falls back to the ground, out before her head hits the dirt.

When she comes to, she's half submerged in a bathtub—*her* bathtub, Lily realizes. The scenery around her is hazy, but she can make out the battered, stained form of her body, and Felix's form a short distance away, sitting on one of the kitchen chairs and slumped over the bathroom counter. From the way his shoulders rise and fall, he must be asleep. The water beneath her is dyed red, but it seems much of the blood has gone. Her neck and hands maintain their crimson tinge, marked for good.

Her arms are shaky as she reaches out, bracing herself against the sides of the tub, yet she finds the strength to stand, the water running off her in rivulets. For the most part, her hair is dry, so she dries herself quickly with a hanging towel before reaching for the spare outfit set beside her soiled dress. She feels numb, and somehow more alert than she has in hours, fueled by the blood, assuredly, in conjunction with the unconsciousness. Typical sensations return as she moves and bring her body back to life—to some form of it, at least.

The first thing she finds is her computer, where the message she needs shows up in seconds, buried two down in her deleted mail. She grabs a notepad, pops the cap between her teeth, and etches the address onto the page. She stuffs the sheet into her pocket.

She packs a bag, full of the bare necessities, half items she isn't sure she'll continue to need. Only three aren't crucial: the final script, a childhood keepsake, and the framed picture of her and Felix from the night of their first date, five years ago.

On Felix's nightstand lies a book she hasn't seen in years. But there, blue fingerprints smudged onto the cover, the edges worn and faded, is the book responsible for all she once had. She flips through the pages. Every single one that lies outside of "Transmutation" is untouched. And there, the marks half a decade old, is proof of Felix's immediate, utter devotion.

Lily leaves it be.

The last item she grabs is stuffed under a pile of film textbooks in her closet, tucked neatly into a corner. She was going to get a better box, something more sturdy than the flimsy velvet it had been put in, but there's no time now.

Felix is still sleeping when she steps back into the bathroom, face pressed against his arm. Lily opens the box with a gentle flick, and then grits her teeth to bear the searing pain as she plucks the ring from inside, setting it beside Felix's hand. Silver. What an ironic choice.

Her heart seems too numb to allow her to cry, but whatever is left of her human self permits one tear to roll across her cheek, landing softly in Felix's hair from where she stands

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behind him. She leans down and presses a kiss against his head, but as she moves back up, his eyes flicker open. Lily freezes, watching as he squints at the reflection before him.

But she's not in it.

"Lily," Felix murmurs into his forearm. He doesn't turn, and she doesn't move, and the same part of her that let her cry is screaming for Felix to look back, to say something, to realize that she's there.

His eyes close, and Lily is gone before his next breath.