

# **The Changeling Troll**

**Sample Chapters**

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**The Changeling Troll**  
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## Chapter One

Christine stood in the doorway to her living room while her younger brother Dennis paced up and down the center of the room. He looked so out of place there, his plaid red-and-green shirt and sloppy jeans standing out against the browns and beiges.

Comforting, solid bookshelves lined the walls of Christine's garden-level apartment. She'd nearly squealed when she'd found them in the basement of the used furniture store. They fit perfectly under the long windows near the ceiling. All her friends were there: Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, Clifford Simak and Stanislaw Lem, China Miéville and Clive Kussler, and so many others. Her over-stuffed wing-backed chair sat in the corner, books stacked on tables on either side. The lamp was perfectly placed for optimal light on whatever Christine was reading. A black loveseat was pushed against one wall, piles of books encircling it. A rarely played stereo stood opposite the couch and was also covered in books.

Despite the piles of books everywhere, Christine knew where every single title lay. It was all ordered. Comforting.

But Dennis—he was a ball of nervous energy. Arms wildly gesturing. Complaining. All movement.

Christine tried to pay attention. This was important to her brother. He'd been dumped. Again. Julie? Judy? And he needed something from her. If only he'd get to the point.

“So—you want me to go to this wedding with you?” Christine interrupted.

Dennis turned to Christine, finally stopping, arms akimbo. “You haven't heard a word I've been saying,” he accused Christine.

“I have been! You were dumped by...Jane. And you need a date for this event. A wedding,” Christine guessed.

Dennis shook his head. “You are unbelievable.” He spread his arms wide, taking in her entire living room. “You know why I never come over? Why no one ever comes over? There's no place for anyone else here. There isn't even someplace for other people to sit.”

Christine winced. “I can always clean a path to the sofa,” she said. The books were merely piled up in front of it, making it difficult to reach. But they weren't piled on top of it. Much. She liked to read there sometimes, on a Saturday, her legs stretched out.

“That's not the point,” Dennis said. “At least I'm trying to date and go out and meet people. You're buried here, already, in this tomb. You and your books.”

“I know you've never liked this place,” Christine said. “But it's my home.” She didn't like the open floor-plan of the house Dennis rented. Even their childhood home had always felt barren. All those wide spaces, with just chairs and the odd table to break it up.

Christine's garden-level apartment suited her just fine. The books everywhere. The warm

wooden furniture and brightly colored pillows. The cozy bedroom that was a bed, and just a bed, and not much else. The tiny galley kitchen, long and perfect for just one. The old-fashioned claw-foot tub with optional shower. The sense of being enclosed by the earth, safe and warm.

“It’s a tomb!” Dennis exclaimed. “You never leave here!”

“I go to work every day in the archives,” Christine said. And she didn’t always use a delivery service for her groceries, though she did order almost everything else online.

“Another tomb,” Dennis sneered.

Other people had called the archives that—just because they were located in a windowless office in the basement of the library. Again, below ground, where Christine felt most comfortable.

But Christine only had to deal with papers, there. Being a librarian had meant far too much contact with people. Being an archivist was so much better.

“You know, I don’t have to take this abuse,” Christine said. “You didn’t have to come over here.”

“Yeah, I did,” Dennis said. “Mum called. She asked me to.”

Christine sighed. “I know. I forgot to call her.” She’d missed her weekly call with her mother. She didn’t see why she had to do it, except that Mum insisted. There were a lot of social things that Mum wanted Christine to do. That Dennis did, as well. And her dad.

“It isn’t just that, Sis,” Dennis said. He took two steps closer.

Christine automatically backed up.

“See?” Dennis said.

Christine looked down, ashamed. She didn’t like people coming that close to her. She never had. Didn’t like to be touched. Always had to be reminded to give her mother and father a hug. To call them and stay in touch. She even had to work at maintaining eye contact with her co-workers.

What was wrong with her?

“Life isn’t a chore that you need to finish,” Dennis said gently.

“What?” Christine asked. What did he mean by that?

“You should go out. Live a little. I dare you,” Dennis said.

“Dare me? Why do you think I’m miserable?” Christine said. “I’m not. I like my life.”

Christine heard the lie even as she spoke it. She was comfortable, but even she knew she was missing something. Just drifting. Unfocused. She kept meaning to go back to school. Get a PhD in library science.

But since she had a job—the perfect one, really, that had just fallen into her lap—she didn’t ever do much other than work and read.

“I double-dog-dare you,” Dennis said. “You should go out tonight.”

Christine just shook her head. "I'm happy," she protested.

"Call Mum," Dennis said. He took another step closer.

Christine steeled herself to stay where she was. Her brother wouldn't hurt her. Physically.

"Go out tonight," Dennis urged her. "Go to a bar. Listen to some live music. Mingle. Have a drink. Or three." He reached out gently and touched her elbow. "Live."

Christine sighed. "I am. I do." Going to a loud, crowded bar wasn't really living. She didn't know why Dennis thought it was.

"You know what I mean." Dennis squeezed her elbow and let go of her arm.

Standing this close, Christine realized again just how different she was from the rest of her family. Her mother was British, and her father's family at some point had come from England. Her parents, her brother, and the rest of them all had that fine porcelain skin and rosy cheeks.

Christine's skin was dark, olive-toned. Her eyes were brown, not blue. She was also considerably taller than her brother. Even her father.

It wasn't that there was no family resemblance. She still looked like a Tuckerman. Aunt Edna had even dragged out family photo albums to show her how her bone structure was identical.

However, her coloring marked her as so very different. Her family had also teased her about being the dark-haired Italian cousin.

"Think about it. And plan on coming with me next Friday to Lars' wedding," Dennis said as he turned to go.

"Lars' wedding?" Christine groaned. Lars had been Dennis' best friend in junior high and high school, though they'd lost touch during college. His family was all Swedish, tall and blond.

The first time Lars' mother had met Christine, she'd assumed that Christine was the help, due to her dark coloring. Despite living in Madison Valley, close to Lake Washington, Christine's family hadn't had that much money. It was only Mum's inheritance from a wealthy uncle had let them buy a house outright in the best school district in the city. Their neighbors had all been rich, including Lars. His family vacationed every winter in the Florida Keys and even had a second house in the San Juan Islands.

Lars had teased Christine about being a servant mercilessly, ordering her to go fetch his shoes and bring him pizza. Dennis, of course, had joined in.

Though they'd all grown beyond it, Christine still hated Lars.

"It'll be fun. Promise," Dennis said.

"Do I have to?" Christine complained.

"I promise that I won't let Lars tease you. Too much. Besides, it'll be a good opportunity for you to meet people. Which would get Mum off your back for a while. Me, too," Dennis said.

"Fine," Christine said. "I'll go."

Dennis gave her The Look.

“I promise,” Christine said reluctantly. She would never break a promise, particularly not to someone in her family. Dad had taught them there was nothing worse than an oath-breaker.

“Good,” Dennis said. “Now, remember the dare, too.”

Christine groaned but nodded. She had both a promise and a dare, now, when all she wanted was to curl back up with her books and forget about the outside world for the rest of the night.

Dennis paused after he opened the door. “You know, I just want you to be happy,” he added.

“I know. You have the best of intentions,” Christine said. “I just—I don’t think your idea of fun matches mine.” It never had.

“But have you ever tried?” Dennis asked.

Christine closed the door after Dennis left, the words still echoing in the vestibule.

She *had* tried. But maybe Dennis was right as well. Maybe she should try again. Take his dare. Go to a bar tonight. Listen to some music. Like he’d suggested.

Then she could tell Dennis she’d made the effort. And he’d back down. At least for a while.

How could it hurt?

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Christine walked up the sidewalk toward the bar nearest her home that advertised live music every night. The Seattle night was full of mist, the clouds reflecting back the orange light of the streetlights. The air felt soft against Christine’s cheeks and not too cold. They’d had a temperate March so far that year. Crocuses were already blooming. Tulips had started popping their heads out. Trees were budding.

Even from half a block away, the thumping drum from the live performance inside the bar felt like a second heartbeat in Christine’s chest. She was certain the main singer wasn’t screaming. He must be singing. It was difficult to tell the difference. Three girls stood smoking and giggling next to the building. They all wore similar outfits—the hipster’s uniform—skinny jeans, ankle boots, layered tops, jackets and hats.

They gave Christine the stink eye as she passed.

She knew she didn’t fit in. Everyone could see that.

She forced herself to keep walking. Up to the door.

The bouncer sat on a stool outside. He wore a black leather biker’s jacket. His face was round and white, and his head was shaved. Christine would bet that he worked in an office, probably as an accountant. The closest he’d ever been to a motorcycle was watching a TV commercial for Honda.

“Ten bucks,” he said, giving Christine the once-over.

Christine bristled. Ten bucks? She couldn’t afford this. She bet the other girls didn’t have to pay that much. All they’d have to do was smile and flirt to get in.

But then again, they belonged here.

She wasn't surprised that he didn't card her. She knew she looked older than twenty-eight.

Christine dug into her wallet and pulled out a ten. The bouncer took it. Stamped the back of her hand with something red and toxic, the design smearing instantly.

That was going to take forever to wash out.

The narrow hallway leading to the bar pulsed with sound: the drums, the people, and wailing guitars. Bobbing heads filled the center of the dimly lit room. A large paper dragon hung across the ceiling of the room, swaying with thermals built up by so many bodies.

The band stood on a tiny stage backed into a corner. The lead singer screamed into the microphone. Even this close Christine couldn't make out the words. The drummer pounded the drums like he was going to war. Arms up over his head then down. Angry and hard. The crowd mostly hid the two other guitarists. One head, then the other, popped in and out of view.

Christine took a deep breath. She just had to endure this for a little while. Then she could go back home. She took off her jacket and slung it over her arm.

Along the right stood a long bar. Lighted shelves ran the length of the wall above it. Chinese lanterns hanging from the ceiling gave off a weird, red glow. A sea of writhing bodies blocked any path to the bar.

How long did she have to stay here to meet Dennis' bet? At least one drink, she decided.

Christine hated having to push her way through the crowd. Like an obstacle course of icky flesh. Plus, she kept zipping when people were zagging, and vice versa. It took forever to get through.

Of course, the bartender wasn't interested in paying attention to Christine. She fished out a bill and waved it, trying to get the girl's attention. Even after the bartender nodded at her, Christine still waited.

The sound of the crowd fought with the band, people laughing and talking. They must all be deaf. At least they looked as though they were having a good time. How did they do it?

Christine tried to observe the people around her without being too obvious about it. Everyone here knew someone else. Maybe that was part of it. Being with friends. The snatches of conversation didn't interest her, though: Who cared who won that singing contest on TV? Had any of them even read a book?

Even in the dim light, Christine could tell she didn't fit. Despite being only twenty-eight, she was still older than most of the kids here. She dressed differently as well, in a loose fitting dark shirt and what Dennis called her mom-jeans, that were very comfortable but fit all the way up to her waist and weren't tight across her butt.

The bartender finally leaned across the bar toward Christine. "What'll you have?" she shouted.

Christine hated beer. She didn't care much for wine either. She'd tried some mead once, at college, and that had been better. Maybe she could just get a coke? "Orange juice," she shouted back eventually. It would be sweet enough, without the caffeine. And bars carried orange juice for their mixed drinks, right? She wasn't about to try for some fancy drink she'd read about.

"You got it."

Christine went back to waiting. She just had to drink her one drink. She didn't have to tell Dennis that it didn't have any alcohol in it. Then she could go home. And she could push it back in Dennis' face that she'd at least tried.

How could anyone find this fun?

At the other end of the long bar, a woman caught Christine's eye. She was blond. As tall as Christine. Her short hair clung close to her head, like a 1920s bob. Christine had always imagined herself in that style, but had never found the courage to try it. The other woman wore a cute brown skirt that went just below her knees. It was the kind of skirt that Christine had always admired but could never get herself to wear. Her white blouse was romantic and looked soft.

When the girl turned and looked to the side, Christine gasped.

Her coloring was identical to the rest of Christine's family—the same porcelain skin as Dennis and her parents.

However, the girl's bone structure was identical to Christine's.

The same tiny nose. The same wide lips. Feature for feature, Christine felt as though she was looking in a mirror. Or an altered photograph of herself.

"Seven fifty," the bartender shouted.

It took Christine a moment to realize the bartender was talking to her. She pushed the ten-dollar bill she had in her hand (more money she couldn't afford to spend) but didn't bother picking up her drink.

Without thinking, Christine took a step, then another, toward the other girl.

Christine didn't know of any cousins living in the city. Was the girl visiting? A tourist? Some other branch of the Tuckerman family that Christine had never met?

That had to be it. The girl belonged in her family. Was a part of her family. Christine recognized her in some deep fashion. Felt a bond with this complete stranger that went bone deep. Like a wizard recognizing her familiar.

Christine had never before wanted to get close to someone, to touch them. Not even in college when she'd made herself try sex for the first time.

But this girl. Christine had to get close to her.

Without thinking, Christine pushed her way past a boy standing between them. Then through a trio of girls, talking. Christine had to get to the girl before she left.

Finally, the girl noticed something was going on. Her head raised and she grew still.

Unerringly, the girl turned her eyes toward Christine.

Christine had read too many stories about love at first sight to believe it actually happened. And this wasn't like that. There was a shock though. A recognition.

*A spark.*

The girl took a step toward Christine, drawn forward as Christine was being drawn, a force that neither of them could resist.

“No. It isn't possible.”

Even in the loud bar, Christine heard the words the girl said.

They were spoken in Christine's voice. Strangers often commented on how it was so deep for a girl.

“You can't be here,” the girl announced. “You have to go.”

“Why?” Christine demanded. “I have every right to be here. Just like you.” How dare this girl. Why was she trying to get rid of Christine? They'd only just seen each other. Just met.

The girl didn't respond. Instead, she put her drink down on the bar (also orange juice) and turned.

She was going to leave.

“No, wait,” Christine said.

For the first time in a very long time, Christine reached out to touch someone who wasn't her family. She caught the girl's elbow with her left hand, like Dennis had caught hers earlier.

A shock ran from Christine's fingers, up her palm, then raced along her arm, directly to her heart.

“Ouch!” She let go of the girl and shook her hand.

The girl fled.

Christine stood where she was, unable to move. What the hell had just happened? And why were the lights suddenly so much brighter in the dim room?

It took Christine another few moments to pull herself together and go marching out of the bar. She didn't bother pushing her way past people—for some reason, people now seemed to be stepping out of her way without her having to growl at them.

Outside, the cool night air wrapped around Christine, brushing against her bare forearms, her neck and her cheeks. The hairs all along the back of her neck rose. She hadn't realized how hot it had been in the bar.

Christine looked up and down the sidewalk. All she saw were drunks and smokers, students and kids, really. So involved with their own petty lives. Unaware that something important had just happened.

Where had the other woman gone? It was like she'd just vanished.

But Christine had to find her. There was something about her. Something Christine needed to

learn. Something vital.

Christine looked up and down the sidewalk again, but she still didn't see the girl. Somehow, Christine knew she wasn't there. Wasn't anywhere close. Like she'd just hopped in a cab and was already on the other side of town, or stepped in a chimney flue and had been whisked somewhere else.

Despite the stamp on her hand, Christine didn't try to go back into the bar. Instead, she shrugged her jacket on, turned, and started trudging back to her apartment building. At least she'd tried to go out that night. Not even Dennis could fault her for that.

The girl *had* to be related to them. She was a Tuckerman, through and through.

Maybe Mum would know who she was, where she was visiting from. And it would make Mum happy if Christine called without Mum's prompting.

When Christine reached her building, she paused again. It was only a step up from student housing, just about all she could afford. Living here, she didn't have to have a car. Could walk to work. Walk to the grocery store (when she felt like it). Walk to downtown, though she rarely did that.

And because her apartment was in the basement, that just made it more like home. A comfortable place underneath the rest of the building. Christine didn't know why she'd always been drawn to living underground, but that was where her heart was. She loved that warm sense of being enclosed by the earth. Dirt and rocks surrounding her, protecting her from everything outside.

Christine sometimes had odd day-dreams about warrens and tunnels leading off from her apartment, tunneling under the hill. They would be carved out of rock, with beautiful gems still *in situ* in the walls. Rambling and curved, unlike the straight hallways above. Not like a rabbit warren or a hobbit hole. But someplace magical and just hers.

That girl though—she lived above ground. In the light and air. She was the opposite of Christine in every way. They merely shared features. And something else, something Christine couldn't put her finger on. Some sort of bond that seemed impossible yet still real.

Christine *had to* find her. Somehow.

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Christine woke up with her head pounding. The darkness in her bedroom pulsed in time with her pain. Above the bed, light trickled through the shuttered window. The bedroom was at the back of the apartment, away from the busy front street, so only very soft sounds of traffic sifted through.

The room reeled when Christine made herself sit up. Just past the foot of her bed was a dark rectangle that caught her attention until her eyes finally adjusted.

She'd fallen asleep with her closet door open. Very unlike her. Not because she believed that monsters lived there, as she had when she'd been a kid. She'd outgrown that. She still wouldn't read horror though, not even those young adult novels that were dystopian and so popular. The closed door meant order. Stability. Everything had a place and was in its place.

What had happened to her? Was she getting sick? It wasn't as if she'd gotten drunk at the bar the night before. She'd paid (ten whole dollars!) for a drink she'd never even tasted.

Maybe she was drunk from the noise. She'd felt that before. Punch drunk from too much stimulation. Something no one in her family understood.

Christine inched her way to the edge of the bed. Slid her feet out from the covers. Dangled her toes toward the floor. Were her ankles swollen?

She must be getting sick.

Groaning, Christine pushed herself up to standing. Swayed. Was she going to have to call in to work sick? No. It was Saturday. She'd be well by Monday. She had plenty of sick time saved up, though. She'd never had to call in sick before.

Slowly, Christine dragged herself to the bathroom. She flicked on the switch. The sudden light made her wince.

Looking in the mirror made her wince a second time. Then open her eyes in shock.

It looked as though she'd been punched in the face. Her nose was easily twice the size it normally was. Her skin had always been dark enough that people thought she was perpetually tanned. Now, it was darker. The skin under her eyes was almost black, like it was bruised. Even her lips looked swollen, as if her mouth was growing. Her jaw ached and looked puffy as well.

She touched herself gingerly. Her entire face was tender. Like she had an infection or something.

What the *hell* had happened? Or was happening to her? Should she go to the hospital?

That meant more people. More lights. No. Better to go back to bed. Sleep through it.

Christine went back to bed, pulling the covers up. Over her eyes. Over her head. Nice and dark and warm.

The next thing Christine knew, someone was pounding at her door. *Who? What?* Groggy, Christine dragged herself out of the covers. They tangled her feet, and she wobbled when she stood. Her body felt different. Uncomfortably large. She wiggled her jaw. It didn't fit her head anymore.

"Yes?" she croaked out, ducking into the bathroom to glance at herself in the mirror.

Christine didn't recognize the face that stared out at her. Her brow had come forward, like a Neanderthal's. Her nose had peaked at the bridge, then flattened out, as if she'd broken it in a fight more than once.

But what was worse—Christine's skin had grown darker. And...maybe something was really

wrong with her. Because it wasn't just dark. Or brown. It was more olive toned.

*Green* olive toned.

What was happening to her? Did she want anyone to see her like this?

"It's me," came a familiar voice.

*Her* voice.

The girl from the bar.

Christine fumbled with the three locks and the chain, finally throwing the door open.

There must be something wrong with her eyes. The girl...*glowed*. Like she had some kind of internal, white fire.

"I'm sorry," the girl said. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Christine asked. Even her voice had changed—so much rougher than it ever had been.

"For breaking the spell."

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"I'm Christine," the girl announced as she sat down primly on the edge of Christine's love seat. She hadn't seemed bothered by all the books in the living room at all. In fact, she'd found the same path Christine always used, automatically. Soft morning traffic filtered down into the room from the street. The day was overcast, as was typical for Seattle in March. They wouldn't see the sun for at least a couple more months. It was Christine's favorite time of year.

"You have my name?" the original Christine asked. She didn't sit down. She felt as restless as Dennis must have felt the night before, and paced along the only clear path in the living room. Though she kept her steps shorter, smaller, she still felt as though she was lumbering. She was afraid to swing her arms, afraid that she'd knock down her carefully stacked piles of books.

"No, you have mine," the girl said. At Christine's glare, she hastily added, "Let me explain."

"I'm not calling you Christine," Christine told the girl. That was *her* name. The girl already had her face. Or what had been her face. Before she'd gotten sick.

"Well, you can't call me Chrissy," the girl said.

They both winced. Evidently they'd both had bad experiences with that nickname.

"How about Tina?" Christine proposed.

The girl nodded. "That...that's okay." She took a deep breath, let it out. "I don't know where to start."

"Are you a relative?" Christine asked. "A Tuckerman?"

"You could say that," Tina replied. "It's just that I'm the original. You're the changeling. You were matched to me."

"What do you mean?" Christine asked. "A changeling? Like from the myths?" That was

almost kind of cool.

Except it meant that she wasn't necessarily human.

"Yes, exactly," Tina said, nodding. She started to glow again. "We were spelled together, bonded magically. So that as I grew older, you'd continue to look identical to me. We're like—sisters. Only different."

Had that been why Christine had never felt right in her body? Because in some ways, it hadn't been hers?

Tina continued to glow brighter. That was also kind of cool. Christine had read about magical light. Often people were enveloped in light when they were about to do magic.

Only Tina wasn't casting any kind of spell. Was she about to explode? Christine didn't like how bright Tina was growing. Like a mini-star, sitting on her couch. She better not leave scorch marks.

"I was taken to be trained in all the magical and mythical pathways. So that I could live up to my full potential," Tina intoned. It was obviously something that she'd been told often. "The Great War is coming. We must be prepared. Or demons and hell-spawn will take over the earth."

"So how do I fit in?" Christine asked. Was she part of this Great War as well?

"You don't," Tina said, her glow diminishing. "You were just a stand-in. A replacement. For me. So that the other side wouldn't realize I'd been taken."

"Oh," Christine said. All the hope stirring in her chest faded. "So I'm not important?"

"You are!" Tina said. "It was very important to fool the other side. So that they didn't realize what was going on."

"So I was just a surrogate for you," Christine said.

Tina nodded sadly. "I'm afraid so."

Part of Christine was relieved. It explained so much, why she never fit in with the rest of her family. Why she'd always felt so awkward around them.

Part of her felt very sad, lost, and alone. Her family, for all its flaws and demands, meant a lot to her.

But it wasn't really hers. Not anymore.

"Then who's my real family? My bio-parents?" Christine asked.

Tina shrugged. "Some trolls."

"Some what?" Christine asked. "Trolls?" Did that mean she was really a troll? That couldn't be right. She also bristled at how casually Tina brushed off her bio-parents. Maybe they weren't important to this Great War, but they were important to *her*.

"Trolls are the most malleable," Tina explained. "So they're often used for changelings. And..." Tina paused, then sighed. "They give up their children for adoption all the time."

"Huh," Christina said. She was going to have to do some research. She did vaguely recall

myths about trolls being used to replace human babies, but not something as elaborate as this. And why did trolls give up their children? That didn't feel right, not when Christine thought about how much her family meant to her.

"But you saw me," Tina said accusingly. "In that bar. You *touched* me. You broke the spell."

"You shouldn't have been there in that bar in the first place," Christine said, stung. How dare Tina say that it was all Christine's fault!

"I just wanted to go out for a night! Have some fun! See what all the fuss was about. Go to a bar and have a drink and listen to music," Tina said wistfully. "I've never been allowed to go. It's been too dangerous. I shouldn't have gone. It's still dangerous. With all the demons. Plus I've always had so much homework. Training and lessons."

"What did you think of the bar?" Christine asked, curious.

Tina shrugged. "Kind of boring. And really hard to hear anyone."

Christine felt a smile tugging at her mouth. *Finally*. Someone else who understood. Then her happiness faded. "What spell were you talking about?" Was that the reason Christine had been so driven to touch Tina? She hadn't felt the same urge since Tina had come into her apartment.

"The changeling spell," Tina said. "The one that hid me from the demons. Kept me safe so that I could learn. The one that made you appear to be human."

"I am human," Christine insisted. She just didn't feel well. She wasn't *transforming*. Despite what the mirror showed.

"No, you're not," Tina said. "Why do you think you live in a basement? I bet you work in one too."

Christine nodded unhappily.

"And you don't feel as though you fit in. You can't stand to touch people. Or have other people touch you," Tina continued.

"What, are you saying I'm some kind of troll? That I've always been a troll, on the inside?" Christine asked. "And now I'm turning into one on the outside too?" No. This was *not* happening to her.

"Yes," Tina said. "You're reverting back to your natural form. Go take a look in the mirror."

Christine stayed where she was, standing in the middle of the living room for another long moment. Did she really want to see? Maybe this was all a bad dream.

But somehow, she knew it wasn't. She wasn't a troll, or at least, she didn't feel like one. Not on the inside.

What she looked like, however. That was going to be a completely different matter.

Christine turned and walked away from Tina, from that bright *other*. Who had her face and her complexion and would have fit in with her family, more so than Christine ever had.

It was time for Christine to face the music and see what she really looked like. What face was

emerging from deep within her. To see if her visage matched the heaviness her body was accumulating.

Time to face the troll.

## Chapter Two

Christine stood in the doorway to the bathroom after she'd flipped on the switch, blinking. Why was the light so much brighter? It glared off the green and gold tile that lined the top half of the walls. The bottom half was wooden wainscoting, which always made the room seem warm. Beige tile with matching gold flecks covered the floor in a decorative diamond pattern. It felt cold under Christine's bare feet.

She didn't look down, though. Didn't look at her arms or hands or toes.

Not until she closed the door and was able to see herself in the full-length mirror hanging on the back of it.

She had...changed. A lot. More than she'd expected. She could see the troll now. Or what a troll must look like. She'd never seen one, actually.

On the one hand, it kind of freaked her out. She no longer looked like herself at all.

On the other hand...it wasn't completely unfamiliar, though she'd never seen this face before.

First of all, there were *fangs*. An upper and lower pair, just starting to push out of her jaw.

Christine ran her finger down to the right canine that prominently hung out over her bottom lip, pushing at the tooth, then at the matching one on the other side. It was real. Not a prop. Not her imagination.

And the points were really sharp. Ow.

How was she supposed to eat with these things? She opened and closed her mouth. Wow. The rest of her teeth had grown jagged as well. It would take one hell of an oral surgeon to fix them. To make them pearly again, and human-straight.

She gave a full-body shudder. She really was turning into something that wasn't fully human, wasn't she?

With an effort, Christine looked past her fangs to the rest of her face, marking the changes.

The ridge across her forehead stood out prominently, making her eyes seem sunken and piglike. Despite how small they seemed, she could still see really well. She'd never needed glasses. Had the pupils changed? They seemed larger, even in the bright light. Maybe that was why it seemed so much brighter in here.

Another ridge had formed across the bridge of Christine's nose. She ran her finger across it. *Bony*. Was it to protect her in battle? Was she going to be getting into lots of fights now?

The bottom of Christine's nose had melted into her face, her nostrils tiny holes. She actually approved of her new nose. It seemed like a good mix of the old and new. She took a deep breath. Despite the size of her new nose, she still felt as though she could breathe normally. And the air seemed to hold more scents, like the smell of toast from the people upstairs, and her own coconut shampoo, and even the light floral perfume that she was certain came from Tina.

Christine looked away from the mirror, down to her hands. The nails were still pink. Well, the nail beds, at any rate. The nails themselves had grown longer, harder, sharper. More like claws. The nails were sharp, like her new fangs. Her hands felt stronger, too. She wasn't going to have problems opening jars of spaghetti, not ever again.

She growled and made a face in the mirror, mimicking clawing at someone. No one would mess with her now. She snorted. They'd probably just run screaming the other direction. She looked kind of like a monster.

She still didn't know how she felt about that.

Christine turned back to the mirror, examining her skin. She didn't know exactly what color she'd use to describe it. It wasn't quite khaki green, that drab olive coloring of military jackets. But it wasn't a forest green either. Something in between. Her skin also felt quite smooth now when she touched it. All the little hairs along her arms had been absorbed. Or had fallen out. Ew. She was going to have to vacuum later.

When Christine dragged a claw (because really, what else was she going to call it?) across her arm, the skin didn't get marked up at all. Didn't show the scratch. Despite how smooth her skin now felt under her fingertips, it had also grown tough as a leather hide.

What other changes could she see? She hadn't suddenly grown tits, which was a shame. She had grown broader shoulders. She could tell from how her shirt wasn't fitting. (She'd really been hoping it had been her chest making her shirt tight.) Her waist hadn't changed, along with her hips or her sex. Her legs were the same, though maybe more muscled, while her feet had grown bigger and longer. The toenails had made the same changes as her fingernails, pink nail beds with longer, claw-like nails.

Christine readjusted her clothes. She still *felt* human. She lifted an arm, sniffed at her armpit. Still smelled the same. And she really needed a shower.

All that had really changed was her face. And her skin. And, okay, maybe her shape had changed a little as well.

Was she really a troll?

Christine peered more closely at her face in the mirror. How were those fangs even useful? Was she supposed to bite people with them? Ugh.

Objectively, Christine knew her new appearance wasn't attractive. Most people would probably find her monstrous, now. She liked some of the changes. The new color of her skin was almost pretty. She liked her nose. But those fangs....

Christine sighed.

The only good thing was that she felt more normal now, whatever normal meant. This body felt good to her.

She knew there would be more changes that she'd discover over the next few days. Her

transformation wasn't complete. She didn't feel like this was her body, not yet. It was still something in between.

And she had no idea what she was going to do now. She couldn't go to work this way. Hell, she couldn't even appear in public like this. And what would Mum say?

Who was her mom? And her dad? Did she resemble them, now? What did they do? Where did they live?

Christine hesitated as she reached for the bathroom door. She wanted to stay in the tiny room just a little bit longer. Take some more time to adjust. But she had a guest waiting. Mum would scold her for being a bad hostess. Even if she wasn't really her mum. Even if she didn't know who her family was, or if they'd given her up. They'd still expect her to be hospitable.

After a deep breath, Christine opened the door and walked back out into the living room.

Two creatures had Tina by the arms. They looked like really well-done werewolves—part man, part wolf—except they also looked as though they'd been created out of shadows. Like true monsters, carved out of nightmares. Their matted gray fur was the antithesis to Tina's whiteness, her shine, her glow. While Christine had felt connected to Tina, these two repelled her.

Red eyes glared at Christine from wolf-like faces. Mouths full of fangs bigger than Christine's hissed at her.

"No!" Christine shouted, rushing forward. Her hand automatically formed into a claw. She slashed at the first wolf creature.

Her hand passed through nothing, as if it were merely a shadow.

Tina let forth with a string of words in a language Christine had never heard before. Didn't recognize. Thought she should. The creatures froze.

Christine reached for Tina, grabbed her arm. Tried to pull her free. Slowly started succeeding, breaking Tina loose from the grip of one of the frozen monsters.

Tina's words suddenly cut off. Christine could no longer move her. Tina was as frozen as the creatures. Had the spell backfired? Or been reversed?

The two shadow demons came back to life. They reached for each other. Over Christine's arm. Once their hands touched, a billowing cloud puffed out around them.

Then they were all gone. The demons and Tina. The stench of wet fur remained, choking the back of Christine's throat, foul and unclean.

What had just happened? What were those things? Why had they taken Tina? And where had they taken her?

Christine knew it was all her fault. She'd touched Tina. Broken the spell that made Christine look human.

Tina had said it had also hidden her from the demons.

How could Christine get Tina back? Christine had too many questions. A whole world ripped

open before her, with no guide. There was nothing like this in any of her books. Even the internet probably wouldn't be of any help.

Only Tina had the answers Christine needed.

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Christine waited in the darkened bedroom while leaving on the light in the vestibule. She could see perfectly fine in the dark, now. She'd checked her pupils again. She'd been disappointed when she'd found that they weren't slitted like a cat's, but still perfectly round.

Dennis should be there any minute. Christine had no idea how she was going to tell him. But calling him was all she could think of. And even though it was early on a Saturday morning, he'd still agreed to come over.

She heard Dennis coming into the apartment building. Recognized his walk. She was really glad that he'd insisted on keys to her place.

Then it occurred to her that that ability was new. Which of her other senses had grown more acute? She was going to have to do some testing later. Look up what was standard human, then determine where she fit on the scale.

Dennis' knock sounded loud in the quiet apartment.

"It's open," Christine called out, aiming for a softer, higher tone. Her voice had been changing too, growing gruffer.

She must have sounded at least a little like herself, because Dennis seemed to recognize her.

"Is this a trap?" he called through the closed door. "Because you never leave your door unlocked."

"I knew you were coming over," Christine said. However, Dennis was right. She never left her door unlocked. She'd have to be doubly careful now, so that no one walked in on her unexpected.

Particularly now that she looked like she did. Now that she was less than human.

"You were the one who insisted on extra locks. Two of them. When you moved in," Dennis pointed out.

"It's just me and it's not a trap," Christine said, exasperated.

"Okay, that sounded more like you," Dennis said. He turned the door handle and walked into the apartment.

"Stay there," Christine told him as he turned toward the living room. He wore his typical Saturday outfit—T-shirt, jacket, jeans, and sneakers. He looked a little worse for wear. Had he gone out drinking last night as well?

"Why? What's going on?" Dennis asked, perplexed.

"I went out. Last night. Like you dared me to," Christine told him.

“Good!” Dennis said. “How did it go?”

“Not like how you expected,” Christine warned. “I met someone.”

“Really?”

Seriously. How could a twenty-five-year-old man suddenly sound like a thirteen-year-old girl?

“Not like that,” Christine said. “I met my twin. A doppelganger.” *Your real, human sister.*

“Okay,” Dennis said. “And so that’s why you’re hiding in the bedroom?”

Christine sighed. She was just going to have to show him. Kind of like ripping a Band-Aid off. All at once. “Dennis,” she warned. “Now, don’t freak out too much. I won’t hurt you. This is still me.”

She stepped forward, out of the darkened bedroom and into the light.

Dennis frowned. “So this twin made you wear a mask? Did she double-dog dare you as well?”

“It isn’t a mask,” Christine said. She took another step forward. “This is me. The real me. She’s the human. I’m...not.”

“Oh, come on,” Dennis said. “You’re pulling my leg.” He stepped closer.

Christine braced herself. She didn’t want him touching her. Was that because she was a troll? Tina had seemed to imply that. Or was that just essentially part of her?

Dennis gave a low whistle. “Whoever did your makeup job is a fantastic artist.” He peered up at her, then down at her feet. “You’re even taller than you normally are, though you’re in bare feet. Great hidden lifts.”

“It’s just me,” Christine assured him.

Dennis reached a hand up, then hesitated.

For the first time, Christine reached for his hand, pulled it up to her face. “It’s really me. It’s not a makeup job.”

Dennis pinched her cheek.

“Ow!” Christine managed not to swipe at his hand with her claws, but just barely.

Dennis pulled back for a moment. “What do you mean, this is really you?” His hand reached out suddenly and tugged on her right ear, which now stuck out from her coarse, black hair, pointed and elegant.

Christine had to admit she liked her new ears better than her human ears. She was still trying to see if she could swivel them like a dog’s.

When Dennis tried to make a second quick tug, on the other side, Christine blocked her brother’s hand. It was just through luck that she didn’t break the skin. She did squeeze his wrist, however.

“Ow,” Dennis said, pulling back instantly.

Christine let go. “Sorry,” she said. She hadn’t meant to hurt him.

“I know you haven’t been going to the gym,” Dennis said slowly. “But somehow, you’ve grown freakishly strong.”

“Did I mention that the other girl—Tina—she’s the human?” Christine asked. “Your actual human sister? That I’m not?”

“Then what are you?” Dennis asked, taking a step back.

“I’m...I’m...I’m a troll,” Christine finally admitted. The words echoed and rippled through the apartment, taking on a deep, bell-like tone. Christine felt a huge relief, like an enormous burden had just been lifted off her shoulders.

Dennis shook his head. “I’m not saying I believe you,” he said slowly. “But I want to hear the whole story. From the beginning.”

“Before you decide to commit me?” Christine asked, amazed at herself that she could joke at a time like this.

Then again, it was just Dennis. And though he technically wasn’t her family anymore, he would always be her little brother.

“Sis, you’ve always been certifiable,” Dennis teased back. He stopped. Paused. “This really is you. This really is happening.”

“Yes,” Christine said.

“Then let’s figure out how to fix it,” Dennis said confidently.

Christine followed Dennis into the living room, uncertain if “fixing it” was what she wanted.

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Dennis listened carefully to Christine’s tale—making her tell it twice—before he started asking questions, most of which Christine couldn’t answer.

No, she didn’t know what the Great War was all about, except that it seemed to involve werewolf-like shadow demons. Two of which had grabbed Tina. Which, thanks to Christine’s newly enhanced senses, she could still smell. Ick. No, she had no idea who her bio-parents were. Where they lived. If they’d given her up for adoption or if she’d been stolen (and wasn’t that a pretty thought?)

Though Tina had said trolls gave up their children often for adoption, that still didn’t sit well with Christine.

When Dennis had finally run out of questions, Christine told him, “I need to go rescue Tina. Those monsters...they weren’t right.” Christine wasn’t certain what they’d do to Tina, but killing her and eating her heart under a full moon came to mind.

Plus, even if they weren’t going to hurt her, Christine still had too many questions. And Tina...Tina was her human sister. She’d said they’d been bonded magically. They had a bone-deep connection, like twins did in most of the stories Christine had read.

Christine *had* to find her.

Dennis nodded. “And get her teachers or her family or whoever to put back the changeling spell. So you’ll be human again.”

Christine cleared her throat. “Dennis—I’m not sure it will be possible to change me back.” She hadn’t ever really been human, had she? Right now, she felt, if not normal, at least slightly more comfortable than she ever had before. She wasn’t used to the double fangs yet. Those would take a while. Or the green tint to her skin. But this body felt a whole lot more like *her*.

“We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,” Dennis assured her. “Come on. Let’s go see Lars.”

“What?” Christine asked, also standing. “Why on earth would we go and see him?” Christine knew he’d been Dennis’ best friend and everything. It hadn’t occurred to her to try to get some kind of promise from Dennis not to tell anyone.

Dennis shrugged. “Lars knows everybody in Seattle. And if he doesn’t personally know about the Great War, he’ll know someone who does.”

“I can’t go out like this!” Christine complained. She no longer looked human at all.

Dennis looked at her critically. “You got a cape?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Christine asked, perplexed.

“You live on Capitol Hill. In Seattle,” Dennis pointed out.

“Central District,” Christine said stubbornly.

“All right. Fine. You live in the Central District. You’re three blocks from Madison Street, only half a dozen from Broadway. Surrounded by students. Put on a cape and people will just think you’re cosplaying,” Dennis explained.

Christine opened her mouth to protest, then closed it again. He was probably right. People would probably think her face, her true face, was just a costume.

And she did have a lovely, floor-length purple cape that she bought on impulse. (It had been on sale!) But she’d never had the guts to wear it.

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Despite how cloudy and overcast the day was, Christine still found herself squinting. She should have worn her sunglasses. It made sense, really, that if she could see better in the dark, she might not be able to stand sunlight as well. The cool March air felt good against her new skin, though she noticed that it took a much stronger wind for her to feel chilled by it.

And though she wouldn’t tell Dennis to his face that he was right, well, he had been right. There weren’t that many people on Broadway—it was far too early on a Saturday morning. Most of the places that served brunch wouldn’t open until 10 AM. However, nobody ran away screaming when they saw her. A few did seem startled. Those who weren’t too involved with

their own phones as they walked down the street smiled and nodded at her.

At least one person told her, “Cool costume.”

As they walked up Broadway, passing the two restaurants that were open, Christine finally asked, “So where are we meeting Lars?”

“The DIY store,” Dennis told her.

“The where?” She’d heard of DIY—do it yourself—before. But there wasn’t some kind of craft store, or even a hardware store, on Broadway.

“The Hack Space,” Dennis explained. “It’s for hackers. And makers. They have a 3-D printer people can rent. Along with a laser cutter. And other tools people can use for making stuff themselves.”

“Why on earth would Lars work there?” Christine asked. Really? She’d always imagined Lars would become an investment banker. Something with tons of money attached to it.

Or an IRS auditor. Someone who could ruin other people’s lives with a single call.

“He owns the place,” Dennis confided in her. “Part of a franchise. It’s one of his investment properties. He’s putting in a little extra time at this store, just before the wedding, because he’ll be gone for a few weeks afterwards. Wants to make sure everything will run smoothly while he’s gone.”

That made more sense. Because Lars wouldn’t have anything to say to real geeks and nerds. They probably didn’t even speak the same language.

The store was located in the basement of a building, two currently closed restaurants over it. Both smelled of grease and sweet drinks, making Christine’s stomach growl.

As they descended the wide stairs, Christine found herself breathing easier. While she’d always liked being underground, evidently that was something that came natural to her as a troll.

Though the shop had only been open for fifteen minutes, there were already three guys working at the big table in the main room. They all had laptops, tablets, and phones arrayed around them. The wires connecting all the machines formed a complicated net.

Were they playing some game together? Doing some kind of testing? Or were they hacking the Pentagon?

Christine wrinkled her nose at them. They hadn’t bathed recently. They all wore either gray hoodies or flannel shirts, with beards of varying lengths.

“Dude!” Lars said, calling out from behind the counter. He pushed aside the soldering iron and wires that covered the desk so he could reach across and shake Dennis’ hand. He stood tall and blond, dressed in a red shirt and black vest. His beard was patchy, but he kept trying.

“Cool cosplay. Are you a she-hulk?” Lars asked, turning toward Christine.

Christine took a deep breath. It had been one thing to show Dennis. It was something completely different to tell this stranger, who wasn’t family. Someone she’d known forever, but

had never trusted.

“No. I’m Christine,” she announced. At Lars’ blank look, she added, “Dennis’ sister.”

“Christine? No way,” Lars said, shaking his head, his eyes wide and shocked. He glanced from Dennis to Christine and back again. “You’re serious. This is your sister? What, did you lose a bet or something?”

“Sure,” Christine said. “A bet and a spell.” She knew it had been a bad idea to bring Lars into this.

“It’s okay,” Dennis said, raising a hand to placate Christine. “Is there someplace we can go to talk?”

“Sure. Come on back here. But I’ll have to keep an eye on the place,” Lars said. He lifted a corner of the counter so Dennis and Christine could walk behind the desk, into the room that held the laser cutter. It smelled of copper. Small metal shavings covered part of the table that took up most of the space.

Before Dennis could say anything more, Christine asked Lars, “Do you know about the Great War?”

“The war to end all wars? World War I?” Lars asked, confused.

“No. The Great War. That’s going on now,” Christine said.

Lars looked from Christine to Dennis and back again. Then he gave a long low whistle. “That’s really you, isn’t it?” he asked. “Not just a great mask and makeup job.”

“It really is,” Christine said. It was easier this time. To acknowledge that this was her true form.

“I want the full story sometime,” Lars said, pointing at Christine. “But I bet that you need information first. Right?”

“Yes,” Christine said. The whole world was turning upside down. Lars might actually turn out to be useful.

“I don’t know much,” Lars said. He steepled his fingers together, then started tapping them rapidly. “I’ve heard that there’s supposed to be this great war coming. Between humanity. And Hell.”

After he paused for a long moment, Christine prompted him. “And?”

“That’s all I know,” Lars said.

“You’re lying,” Christine said.

“What?” Lars said.

“Christine!” Dennis said at the same time.

Christine shrugged. She’d never trusted Lars. She still didn’t.

“Look. Okay. I’ve heard some rumors. But nothing I know for certain. There was this one really drunk guy one night at a bar—who swore to me, that in the morning, he’d revert back to a

pixie—told me that Thomas was the head of the non-human recruits.”

“Why would he tell you that?” Christine asked. That made no sense at all. And it would be just like Lars to only tell her part of the truth.

“Does it matter?” Dennis said hurriedly. “Where would we find Thomas?”

Lars held up his hands. “Now, don’t hate me. But this guy swore that he’d be there every night during services.”

“Where?” Christine growled.

“Where else? Under the Aurora bridge,” Lars said with a smug smile.

Christine blinked for a moment, trying to figure out where he meant. “You *are* kidding me,” she finally groaned.

“Nope. Major religious services there. Every night,” Lars said.

“In Fremont. Under the bridge. Where the statue of the troll is,” Christine said. Why was she not surprised?

“Exactly,” Lars replied.

Christine wanted to strike her claws through his smug face, but she controlled herself. “If you’re lying, you’ll regret it,” Christine warned Lars.

“Not lying,” Lars said.

Christine didn’t believe him. However, she also wasn’t sure how to get him to tell the truth. Beating it out of him seemed to be out of the question. He was Dennis’ best friend. And she’d always been opposed to violence.

But somehow, that didn’t feel as important right now.

She was going to go find this Thomas. Find out more about the Great War. Find out where Tina had been taken.

And come back and deal with Lars later.

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On the walk back to Christine’s apartment, Dennis agreed to come and pick Christine up later that evening. They’d go visit the Fremont troll under the bridge together.

When they reached the front of Christine’s building, Dennis paused and asked, “You sure you going to be okay?”

Christine shrugged. She was tired. And starving. This transforming was exhausting work. But it felt to her as if the changes were almost complete. “I’ll be fine,” she assured him. “Just—you won’t tell Mum or Dad yet. Right?”

“They’ll be fine with it,” Dennis assured Christine.

“It isn’t like I’m coming out as gay or something,” Christine told him, exasperated. “I’m *not human*. It’s a little different.”

Dennis shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. But I won’t tell them. I’ll let you do that the next time you go to visit.”

Christine thought about it after Dennis had gone. At least he still treated her like she was family. But what would Mum and Dad say? She didn’t think they knew that she was a changeling. Would they love her anyway? Would they still consider her part of the family, even though she wasn’t even human? They’d certainly tried to put up with her different nature, though they’d never understood her.

She tried to assure herself that they were still her family, though she wasn’t biologically related to them. However, Tina would fit in with them so much better. She looked like them. Was human, like they were.

It was far too easy to imagine Tina taking Christine’s place with them.

Between naps, Christine spent the rest of the day looking up trolls on the internet. Not much of it seemed applicable to her. The only thing she found was that it did appear that frequently, troll babies were exchanged for human babies. Her human parents had never been cruel to her, though, so her troll family had never had any reason to come and rescue her.

But why hadn’t they come? She felt hurt at that, though she didn’t know their circumstances. Did they know she existed? Had they given her up freely, in some kind of adoption process? Or did they think their own girl had died, as a child?

And how could the humans be the good guys here? What kind of good guys would do that kind of thing? Left a family broken that way? It didn’t seem right.

Christine also experimented with her strength. She’d grown *much* stronger. It didn’t take any effort to turn a wooden spoon into splinters. Her skin was considerably tougher as well. She didn’t actually succeed in cutting herself, but she didn’t try that hard, either.

It was more difficult to test her hearing. Her ears still couldn’t move or swivel, which she considered a serious defect. But maybe she could train herself to do that later.

Teach herself “stupid troll tricks.” Like stupid human tricks.

Her sense of taste hadn’t changed—spicy things registered the same, along with sweet. What she was hungry for was no longer the same. While a pizza had sounded good, she found herself scraping off all the meat and just eating that. She didn’t want a sandwich—all that bread. Ugh. All she wanted was the insides. Cheese. Meat. Lettuce. Sauce. Even broccoli sounded good.

It didn’t take too long for her to figure out how to eat despite the fangs. She just had to be careful not to think about them, or she’d end up knocking her spoon or fork into them at inappropriate times, spilling all over herself.

Typing with just her claws proved to be easy enough, though she might have to resurface her keyboard. Those claws were sharp. But she hadn’t lost any dexterity.

By the time Dennis knocked on Christine’s door, she felt as though most of the transformation

was complete. Her hair had finished turning black. It waved naturally, though it felt coarse to the touch. She was only a smidgen taller, and an equal smidgen wider.

Solid, though. She felt like her feet connected more to the ground than they ever had before, which didn't make any sense. She'd been walking for decades.

Still. It was good to be so connected to the earth. Something she'd never considered before. She'd always liked being in the earth, not walking barefoot through the dirt or something hippish like that. But living underground. Working there.

"Let's go," Dennis said, looking over Christine critically.

"What?" Christine asked. He obviously wanted to say something to her.

"You just seem...comfortable with this. More than I would have thought," Dennis said.

Christine shrugged. "What good would weeping and rending my garments do?" she asked. She still wasn't ready to tell him just how more natural this form felt.

"You *hate* change," Dennis pointed out. "You've stayed in the same apartment for years. Followed the exact same routine, to the letter. But this?"

"It isn't so bad," Christine told him as she slid into the front seat of his car. It didn't have a strong scent, which she appreciated. And being surrounded by metal didn't seem to bother her either—something that many of the internet sites had claimed, that trolls didn't like cold iron.

"Well, don't get too used to it," Dennis warned. "We'll find a way to get you back."

Christine bit her tongue, literally catching it between her sharp, jagged teeth, rather than tell him that she *was* back. Feeling like herself. More than ever before.

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