Chapter 10

We’re Running with the Shadows of the Night

Creature had been exploring. It found another place so much like this one. The same, but also different.

Apart, but not. Like two birds nestled into the same nest, feathers overlapping.

Or like a shadow gently tethered to where the feet met the earth, both supporting…and trod upon.

*Yes.* *Shadows.* This place existed in the hollow places of the world the creature had spawned from.

But the shadow place…

The shadow place felt like home.

Creature wondered, *had* the too-bright place spawned it? Or was it born in the shadows, only to be drawn kicking and screaming *into* this too-bright place?

It wasn’t sure it mattered, for the shadow world would be home now. The shadow world felt so much richer, so much *more.* Creature could move better in the shadows. Faster. Further.

The cold magic was so much easier to find.

It’s food so much easier to carry.

That had been a delicious surprise, how easy it was to drag the food along with it.

First it had sipped at what cold magic the food had to offer. Not as strong as the cold, bright star, but filling. Creature made sure to leave a little magic this time—a seed of it lying deep and buried, ready to regrow. That way it would come back faster. Not before Creature’s hunger screamed for more, but surely *soon* after.

Creature would simply have to find more. Gather all the cold magic. Make a nest. Build a home. A life.

Become more than just hunger.

*Be. Simply Be.*

Not here. Creature didn’t want to stay here. It wanted something better—something closer to the cold star.

As Creature flowed through the shadows, the food slung over one sloping shoulder, it could hear the singing magic of the cold star. Not loud. More a whispered lullaby.

Not even that.

A whisper of a whisper. The faintest impression of sound. Creature couldn’t tell if it was so faint because it was far away, or if it hadn’t come back yet after Creature had drained it dry.

A hint of shame flickered in Creature. The way it had gorged on the magic. Tore through its food, like an animal.

Creature was *not* an animal. It was not a monster.

No matter how much the food had screamed. The cold star hadn’t screamed! Creature had called and it answered, offering to take away the hunger.

Creature hated the hunger. Always there. Always waiting.

Not endless, but close enough to make no difference.

Creature hadn’t sung to the food today. That took power and Creature didn’t want to waste a drop. Not until the nest was filled with sustenance.

Not until the next meal and the meal after that was assured.

So Creature hadn’t sang and the food had screamed. The awful sound still rang in Creature’s ears. Long and painful.

It was so much better when the screaming stopped.

The food still breathed—Creature could feel the heat of it, hear faint fluttering of the food’s heart as it slept.

Suddenly it occurred to Creature that the food might need its *own* sustenance. Creature stopped moving, its silent glide through the shadows shuddering to a halt.

*What did the food even eat?*

Creature would just have to ask.

If it could stop the food from screaming long enough.

Until then, they would keep moving. The food sleeping restlessly, slung over the Creature’s shoulder. The shadows flickered quickly by as Creature flowed to the next spot of cold magic.

Every step, every movement, taking it closer to the cold star.

Closer to where Creature would settle, building a nest of its very own.

Closer to *home.*

Chapter 11

You Know I'm a Dreamer
But My Heart's of Gold

Leo Moretti considered himself to be, if not brilliant, then at least passingly intelligent. Yet he wasn’t sure what to make of Samhain LaCroix. Oh, he’d looked him up. Done his research as soon as Brid had mentioned the man, but you could only glean so much from words.

Not that there were a lot of words on Sam for Leo to find. As far as Leo could tell, he’d suddenly appeared in the last year or so. He’d certainly made up for lost time, ousting a man who was to all accounts powerful, ruthless, and deadly. Taking a seat on the Council. Winning a woman as smart, as strong, as fiercely loyal as Brid.

Leo was still getting to know her, but as far as he could tell, Brid wanted those same capabilities in a partner.

And yet…Sam didn’t appear to *be* strong. Tucked under Leo’s arm he felt human, fragile. Fit, but hardly built along Leo’s larger lines. Short. He seemed…gentle. Loyal, for sure, but not someone up to Brid’s capabilities.

As Leo led the younger man up to the lodge, however, he set aside all that he’d read about Sam, as well as the data his senses were giving him. Instead, he shifted his attention, letting the edges of his perspective widen.

What he saw gave some lie to the surface level presentation of one Samhain LaCroix. Maybe Sam looked like a stiff breeze could knock him off his feet right now. Leo also caught some faint bruising on Sam’s neck and arms along with nasty looking scratches. Like someone had dragged the fellow backwards through several hedges before kicking him a few times for good measure. There had obviously been some kind of fight—he was hiding it well, but there was a certain delicate way people held themselves after a good walloping and Sam was doing it.

But a weak necromancer wouldn’t have been able to make a ghost like Brooke. He certainly wouldn’t have the kinds of friends Sam had. Ramon moved like a shapeshifter and as he’d come closer to Leo, he’d scented something among the ursine family. Werebears were no joke—a person crossed them at their peril. Leo wasn’t sure *what* James was—he’d have to ask Brid—but James practically oozed power and a scary kind of competence.

Like some kind of murder butler.

Then there was Brid herself and her siblings. They’d *all* gazed at Sam with respect and affection. When he’d spoken, they’d listened.

So while Sam might not *seem* like a heavy weight, he most certainly was, and since Leo wasn’t unintelligent, he should damn well listen to his instincts and treat Sam accordingly.

Besides, Leo needed to strengthen his own position. He couldn’t go home. He hadn’t been lying to Brid about the situation, but he might have downplayed it a fraction. His cousin had a lot of backing. A *lot* of backing. While he loved his cousin and thought the feeling might be mutual, several of his cronies would gleefully rip Leo’s head off and do unspeakable things to his corpse.

Not idyllic, really.

Leo had a healthy sense of his own worth, but that didn’t mean he wasn’t also aware of his failings, one of which was the desire to push boundaries. Or as his mother had once put it, “to leave well enough alone.” So maybe he’d annoyed one too many of his cousin’s friends. He also may have dated a few of the wrong people. Either way, if he went home, he was either signing his own death warrant, or he’d have to wade through blood. Though he had no problem with a little violence, wading through blood was hell on the dry-cleaning bill and often disappointingly, irrevocably, *final*.

He had to do his best to make this situation work. He didn’t like the alternatives whatsoever.

Leo squeezed Sam’s shoulder.

“I can’t tell if you’re deciding whether or not to eat me, or if you’re trying to see how easy it would be to snap my bones,” Sam said dryly.

Up close Leo could see the pinch of exhaustion around the younger man’s eyes, the faint purple shadow underneath them underlining the point.

“Let me save you the bother, I’m not good eating and it would take you almost no effort at all.”

Leo couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face.

Sam made a distressed noise. “That fucking dimple.”

Leo threw back his head and laughed, the sound causing Bran’s head to whip in his direction, eyes narrowed with suspicion. Interesting. Leo filed that little detail away and focused on Sam. “Maybe I was seeing how much feeding up you needed.” He made a tsking sound. “My family’s almost stereotypically Italian American, you know. All feelings are shown through food and it’s almost physically distressing to see someone who needs a good meal.”

Sam snorted. “Are you body shaming me right now?”

Leo dropped the smile along with his voice. “No. I truly believe that life demands variety and there is beauty in all sizes, but that’s a different soapbox and now is not the time. This, however, is not a healthy weight *for you.*”

He reached over with his free hand and plucked Sam’s shirt. “Even with the jacket and the vest masking it, I can tell you’ve lost weight quickly—this suit was tailored to you and no longer fits as it should.” Leo indicated James, who was walking ahead of us, ostensibly talking to Bran, though he knew that James had at least one eye on Sam at all times. “Your man there is tailored to perfection. He wouldn’t have let you out of the house in this condition *unless* it had happened so recently that there wasn’t time to either fatten you back up or take your suit in.”

Leo gave Sam’s chest a friendly pat, pulling the man to a halt as he pretended to fuss with Sam’s vest, letting the group get ahead of them. Sam had tried to hide his wince at the pat, but Leo caught it, just like he’d caught the minute head shake Sam had sent to his team letting them know to keep walking.

“You’re injured. Don’t try to argue, I can tell. You’re also exhausted.” Leo let his voice drop again until it was barely a whisper. “Something not only took your power but kicked the ever-loving *shit* out of you.” He shook his head when Sam opened his mouth. “No, don’t—let me get this out before Bran comes back her to make sure I’m not hurting their precious necromancer.”

He straightened Sam’s lapels. “I understand the subterfuge and the need for keeping up appearances. But I need you to understand two things. One—I’ve formed an alliance with Brid, and while that might not mean much to you, it means a hell of a lot to me. I haven’t been here long, but the situation is promising.”

He ran his hands along Sam’s shoulders, straightening as he went. “The other thing you need to know is that you’re walking into a mess. Until Brid makes a final decision, all the young bucks are vying for her hand.” He leaned back, taking in Sam’s appearance to see if there was anything he missed. “You and Brid have a history. I know that—which means they sure as hell do, too. That also means they will do their best to pit us against each other. Take out the competition in one fell swoop, you understand?”

Sam was eyeing him speculatively. “Okay. So what do you want to do about it?”

Leo grinned. “I want to confuse the *fuck* out of them. They will expect us to be going at each other’s throats.” Leo dragged a finger through the air between them, back and forth. “We’re not going to do that. No, we’re going to get on like a house on fire, the two of us.”

“I have never understood the expression,” Sam said, looking a little bewildered.

Leo waved it off. “You don’t have to. But us, we’re going to be best buds. We’re going to hang out.” Leo stepped into his space. “Which means Brid will get to hang out. It also means she won’t have to deal with two people close to her fighting, giving her one more headache, capisce?”

Sam nodded slowly, still working it through. “That’s…almost diabolically cunning.” He huffed a breath. “I was kind of hoping you’d be a meathead or something.”

“I know,” Leo said consolingly. “If it makes you feel any better, I have my faults. I won’t tell you any of them, but I *do* have them.”

“It doesn’t make me feel any better,” Sam said, “because I probably have more faults and mine seem to be impossible to hide.”

Leo patted the younger man’s shoulder. “I understand.” He slung his arm back around Sam’s shoulder, drawing him back up to the house. “I knew you wouldn’t be a meathead, though. Brid would never be interested in a person who couldn’t keep up. I wasn’t sure what she saw in you…” He took glanced at Sam, taking him in again, this time with everything he learned in mind.

“I never knew what she saw in me, either, to be honest.”

“Really?” Leo shook his head. “Because I think I get it now.” They were almost at the front door. Leo could just make out the stern expression of Bran standing by the doorway, customary scowl in place. “Oh goodie, the babysitter is here.”

Sam snorted a laugh. “Bran doesn’t like you, huh?”

“No, sir,” Leo said, straightening. “Doesn’t trust me as far as he could throw me, I expect.”

“Which is saying something,” Sam said. “Seeing as how he can toss people pretty far.”

“He’ll warm up to me,” Leo said, knowing full well that they were now within Bran’s hearing. “They always do.”

Bran’s scowl deepened, the expression clear: not a chance in hell.

He winked at Bran as they walked by. “Now let’s feed you up, hmm? We can cause a little gossip while we’re at it. Chin up. Resting dick face turned up to eleven. All these men are beneath you.”

Sam turned to look at him. “Resting dick face?”

“Doesn’t quite have the cache of resting bitch face, but some people get upset at ‘bitch’ since it can be read as misogynistic, which I get, even though I’ve always treated it as a gender-neutral term, like Californians with ‘dude.’” He shrugged. “And I don’t think bitches should have all the fun.”

Sam laughed, the sound bright and unexpected. “You don’t think the same people would get grouchy about dick?”

Leo snorted. “Yeah, but as I have a dick, I’ll use the term as I see fit. I’ll keep using it until someone gives me a better term.”

“Fair enough,” Sam said. “Resting dick face it is.”

“That’s my boy,” Leo said, dark glee coating his voice. “Let’s show these fellows what’s what.”

The Den was put together along the lines of a large cabin—the kind you’d see at some luxury “rustic” resorts. It was obviously built to house a large collection of people. As such, the dining hall was exactly that—gigantic enough to basically be a cafeteria. Despite the size, it had a homey feel. Large, rustic chandeliers poured buttery light down onto the diners. The tables were hewn from a honey-colored wood, all of them sporting mason jars full of fall appropriate floral displays, little pops of red, yellow, orange, and greenery.

One of the walls had framed photos of the pack, while another had a bulletin board for notices as well as a display of art done by various pack children. It should have given the dining hall a sort of summer camp vibe, but it didn’t. Instead, it felt like the family dining room done on a grander scale.

Leo’s pack didn’t eat like this. They did more of a white linen table cloth kind of thing, and while it had never bothered him before, he found that he liked the way Brid’s pack did it better. Instead of feeling like each meal was a test—a combination of table manners and jockeying for pack position—the Blackthorn pack meals felt like a welcoming.

A homecoming.

It made something in Leo’s chest feel weird. Since he didn’t know what to make of it, he put that aside and focused on now. Which meant selling the idea that he and Sam were fast friends.

Sam seemed content to let Leo take the lead, so he chose where they sat—next to Brid at one of the big tables, with Sam between her and Leo. That would cause gossip—pack would see that as Leo seceding territory to Sam, his rival. The fact that he placed Sam there himself, happily, would confuse everyone.

Dinner tonight was served family style, the large platters being passed around the tables. Lunch was usually set up as a buffet, more informal, but the pack used shared dinners to bond, so family style it was.

Once their plates were full, the general clamor and noise of the hall dropped while people concentrated on eating. Shapeshifters were serious about their food. While James sat across from Leo, Ramon ended up at a different table. Brooke, not needing to eat, pulled up a chair anyway, taking Brid’s other side. Bran, surprisingly, had picked the seat next to Leo. Bran usually avoided Leo, or at least stayed at a better glaring distance. Difficult to glare at someone sitting directly to the left of you without being obvious about it.

Even when chatting resumed, Bran kept to himself, leaving Leo to entertain Sam and Brid. Leo couldn’t blame Bran for being overprotective of both his leader and his baby sister, but it was interesting that he chose to sit next to him nonetheless.

After the plates were cleared, Leo managed to get Brid and Sam separated from the general herd on the pretext of showing Sam something that was back in Leo’s room. Bran followed, a familiar scowling shadow.

Leo ignored him, focusing instead on getting them to their destination. Leo’s guest room was more of a suite—it had its own private bath, along with a separate bedroom and small living area with a couch and TV, giving him a place to entertain if he should so wish.

As soon as they were there, Leo waved the two of them off to his room so that Sam could explain to Brid what was going on while Leo played lookout. He couldn’t buy them a lot of time, but they needed privacy so Sam could tell Brid what had happened—which Leo hoped she would tell him later—and to just give them a moment. He’d seen the way Sam had looked at Brid, though he tried very hard to mask what he was feeling. More importantly to Leo, he’d seen how Brid had looked at Sam.

It wasn’t the kind of thing Leo wanted to get in the way off. Maybe he was overly romantic. He certainly wasn’t as bloodthirsty as some of his kin, despite him being pack alpha material. Not that a person couldn’t be bloodthirsty *and* romantic. But something in him wanted to see *someone* get a happy ending to their story. If he couldn’t get one for himself—and at this point he was willing to settle for survival and an existence that wasn’t one huge regret—then he would sleep better at night knowing he’d helped Brid get what he couldn’t.

Leo leaned against the wall, watching the closed door and listening for footsteps in the hall while Bran scowled at him. No surprise there. And because Leo really couldn’t leave well enough alone, he grinned at Bran knowing full well that he wouldn’t like it.

Sure enough, Bran’s scowl deepened. He glanced at the closed bedroom door before returning his gaze to Leo. Minutes ticked by, Bran’s scowl becoming more entrenched while Leo’s smile only grew.

Finally, Bran huffed. “I don’t understand you.”

In answer, Leo simply spread at his hands as if to say, “what is there to understand?”

Bran’s eyes narrowed. “Why leave them alone? Why not make an example out of Sam and shred him into little pieces?” By now he was growling, his voice deep, his jaw tense. Bran didn’t *like* not understanding Leo. “Why are you *here*?”

Leo liked to read, and sometimes while doing so he’d come across phrases like “their eyes flashed fire”—a description in which eyes were likened to burning, to embers, to the kind of heat that could sear the object of their attention.

Though he’d seen such looks before, he felt he hadn’t truly understood that phrase until now. Bran’s eyes burned.

Leo thought about how he wanted to answer that question, but didn’t realize he’d been absently tracing his thumb along his own bottom lip in thought until he caught Bran’s eyes following the movement.

Just to make sure he wasn’t imagining it, Leo froze for a second.

So did Bran.

Leo started up again, keeping the movement slow. Bran’s eyes tracked along with it.

Well, well. Now wasn’t that interesting?

Because Leo’s besetting sin was *not leaving well enough alone*, he stepped forward into Bran’s space.

Bran stilled.

Leo leaned in, their cheeks almost touching. He discovered that Bran smelled of salt and musk and inexplicably of oranges.

Leo found that he liked it. He gave a soft laugh.

“What?” Bran snapped.

“Alchemy,” Leo drawled. “How delightful.”

Bran growled. “I don’t *understand you*.” He packed a lot of frustration into four words.

Leo took pity, but only so much. He moved slowly, stopping when his mouth was a breath away from Bran’s ear, hovering there until Bran had no choice but to breathe Leo in. Bran remained frozen, but when Leo dropped his gaze, he could see the rapid flutter of Bran’s pulse. He decided to answer Bran’s last question and ignore the rest. “To find a place to call home. Isn’t that what we all want? Isn’t that what *you* want?”

“I am home,” Bran whispered.

For a dazzling second, Leo thought Bran might be referring to him. That someone could find a home *in him* hadn’t actually occurred to Leo before now.After all, he was the slightly brilliant, often charming, kind of a fuck up werewolf who didn’t quite fit in with his own pack anymore. That someone could find home in him? Well.

Then Bran ruined it by adding, “I was born here.”

The dazzle died and Leo came crashing back to earth only then realizing how much the idea had appealed to him.

How unexpectedly vulnerable he’d made himself.

To a *stranger.*

Who did nothing but snarl and glare at him. Well, he didn’t deserve that, now, did he?

Leo stepped back, pasted on a smile, and winked. “Keep an ear out for a second for me, will you? Thanks.” He didn’t wait for an answer, but stepped around Bran, heading for the bathroom.

He shut the door quietly behind him. Turned on the faucets. Soaked a wash cloth in cold water, wrung it out, neatly folded it, and put it on the back of his neck. Then he let his hands dangle in the cold running water. Only then did he drop his barriers, letting the stress, the fear, the anxiety, and the *what the fuck just happened* roll out of him on a shaky breath.

His hands trembled as he turned off the water. At that point Leo conceded that he’d probably made a huge mistake a moment ago.

A giant, *awful*, mistake.

He suddenly remembered a moment when he was very young, when he’d decided to knock a wasp’s nest down with a stick so he could get a better look. His mother took turns tutting over him and laughing at his misery—not in a mean way, but almost lovingly.

She’d clucked her tongue, holding his chin in both hands. “What did I tell you? Next time, think twice before you act, huh?” She shook her head, her eyes fond. “You never learn.”

His mother was right. He really never did learn. Here he was a grown man contemplating *marriage*, but he was still knocking down wasp’s nests just to get a better look.

Only time would tell him how much the consequence would sting.