Prologue

You Can’t Start A Fire Without A Spark

The first thing it knows is blood. A salty splash of it, like Mother’s milk. It drinks it down in gasping sips, but it’s not enough.

It’s never enough. The tongue is wet, but the throat whistles with the song of the desert.

Hollow. Empty.

Just enough of something to know that it is *nothing.*

If it had a throat, the creature would scream. The anger is there, but not the howl.

But wait.

*Wait*.

There, just above the soil. What is that?

There, past the worms and digging roots—the sharp ozone of magic. The chilled power of graveyards and winter moons.

Death magic.

If blood is Mother’s milk, magic is the heady ambrosia of the gods. The stuff that dreams are made of.

Or nightmares.

The creature only knows nightmares. After all, like calls to like.

It reaches for the magic, grasping with only the faintest whisps of fingertips. If only it could get a grip, it would grab fistfuls. Gobble it up like the candy it is.

Death magic meant *life.*

It could hear words then, pieces of the spell burrowing down through the soil. The closer it came, the more the creature pulled together, collapsing rapidly, like a dying star. Condensing, growing, building, a beating heart in the earth. Shadows made flesh.

Only.

The words, the beautiful *words*, falter. Stop. The spell went from a tight rope, neatly woven, to so much dandelion fluff, born away on the wind.

No.

*No.*

*Nononononono.*

It scrambles in the dirt, but it doesn’t matter. It’s too late.

The power is gone.

The spell unfinished.

The beating heart of magic slows. Ebbs and flows with the slower rhythm of the earth. Slows, but doesn’t stop. Instead it lays there, dormant. Waiting. A seed slumbering in the earth.

Waiting until the right moment.

Waiting for the cold magic to come back.

Waiting to be born again.

That’s When I Come Alive

The French Quarter was too much for Ramon’s sensitive nose. Hell, it was too much for *mine* and I’m human. Still, you couldn’t go to New Orleans and not at least see Bourbon Street.

Ramon’s nose wrinkled into a snarl as he crossed his arms across his chest. Even through his T-shirt I could see the definition of his muscles, no doubt helped out by the thin layer of sweat on his skin. October in New Orleans—at home we’d be enjoying the first steps into fall. Chilly weather, hoodies, hands wrapped around to go mugs of coffee as you stepped among the falling leaves ranging every color of a sunburst.

New Orleans hadn’t got the memo. The air was muggy and thick. You could practically chew it. Ramon rolled his shoulders. My friend would never be tall, but he’d shot up at least two inches this last summer—probably a final growth spurt. He’d put on muscle. Gone was the skinny skater kid I used to know. Now he looked like he could snap someone in half. He was still funny and smart, but there’s a thread of gravity that hadn’t been there before.

Oh, and he could turn into a bear now. That was a hell of a thing.

The last year had brought on so much change, I couldn’t quite keep up. My best friend could turn into a bear, my other friend became a ghost, I’d found—and lost—the love of my fucking life, and I learned I could raise the dead. I’d come to grips with the first thing, my heart broke over the second and third, and fuck if I knew how I felt about the fourth thing.

A group of frat-looking dudes covered in beads—despite it not being even close to Mardi Gras season—passed by, their hands full of yard-long drinks as they whistled and shouted at a bridal party walking the other way. I could tell they were a bridal party because they were wearing matching shirts that said so.

Maybe if we’d made group T-shirts, we wouldn’t have lost part of our group. That bridal party was on to something.

Ramon grunted, annoyance twisting his face. “Smells like vomit.”

“They have to hose down this street every day for a reason,” James told him absently as he looked in the other direction. If Ramon looked annoyed, James looked disgusted. He was crisply dressed in a suit, though he’d abandoned the jacket back at the house we’d rented, his only nod to the heat. Oh, wait, and he’d rolled up his shirtsleeves.

His silver eyes reflected the light of the neon as he examined the crowd. From the way he held himself, like he didn’t want to touch anything, it was easy to see that one of his forms was that of a cat. He also turned into a small dragon, because he was a fancy man. I didn’t turn into a single thing, which felt like a raw deal.

You would think, because of his sneer, that James didn’t like New Orleans.

You’d be wrong.

There was an old world glamour to the city. An exhausted elegance. James fit in perfectly. He just wasn’t fond of Bourbon Street, but there was plenty of the city outside that particular stretch of buckling concrete.

I had nothing against the party scene, but I knew it wasn’t for me. We’d taken my mentor, June’s, advice and spent most of our time in other parts of the city. We’d gone on a swamp tour, listened to music in the Marigny, and took Ramon on a food tour as he ate his way through a dozen restaurants.

We’d skipped the haunted tour. After all, my life was already a haunted tour.

My name was Sam LaCroix, and I’m a necromancer—which meant I had a special affinity for the dead. James might match New Orleans grandeur, but I connected to the city on a different level—we both straddled the line between the living and the dead.

That was also why I was wearing a new protection bag, courtesy of my mother, around my neck. It nestled against the silver chain that held a tarnished coin. That coin troubled me deeply, but I couldn’t get rid of it—didn’t trust it to anyone else. June was helping me get the hang of using it, but so far, it was best left alone. According to James, it was like hitting the nitro button in a car. It boosted the fuel. I wasn’t good at car analogies, because I didn’t really understand how cars worked. All I knew was the coin held onto power until I needed it, then gave me a kick.

I didn’t need it. I certainly didn’t want it. But in New Orleans? I needed to be careful with it.

New Orleans was an old city—at least for the US—and much older than my native Seattle. It was a city with history—a city that celebrated the dead in a way that we didn’t in my neck of the woods.

It also had a murder rate that was through the roof. It didn’t have the highest—last I checked that dubious honor belonged to St. Louis, but it was definitely in the top ten. But there was something special about this city. Was it all the focus on death? The fantastic cemeteries? A unique magic to the place?

Whatever it was, New Orleans held onto its dead. Practically cradled them in its arms. That was hard on someone like me. I had been told in no uncertain terms by June to leave the coin alone and my protection bag on at all times while I was in the city. She was worried I would be overwhelmed. I didn’t argue with her. I was new to the whole necromancer thing, which was why we were down here in the first place. I was here to train with June, though that wasn’t what we’d told everyone back home. Technically I was here to escort Frank and one of my garden gnomes, Chuck, and aid in the negotiations between them and a local colony of gnomes.

Yes, I had gnomes. Yes, they’re alive. No, they’re not sweet. What they were was a pain in my ass.

June had found a colony of gnomes close to her place and we were trying to convince them to send a delegation of female gnomes up with us to consider marrying into our gnome posse. A necessary mission, but also a cover. Mostly, I was here to learn from June, but as a member of the Council in Seattle, I couldn’t let anyone know I still desperately needed training. It would expose a weakness, and I didn’t need to deal with anyone challenging me for my position right now. No, it was better they thought I was a gnome matchmaker.

I rubbed a hand over my face. It was official. My life was weird.

“Do you see him?” I peered into the crowd. We’d managed to lose Frank about an hour ago. He wasn’t answering our texts. If we’d lost Ramon or James, I wouldn’t worry. Both of them could take care of themselves. Frank, though. Frank was a little younger than us. Smaller. And completely one hundred percent *human.* He also had no tolerance for alcohol and had been released onto Bourbon Street with a top-notch fake ID. Not that anyone had been checking our IDs.

People walked around us with to-go cups of neon-colored cocktails and slushy daiquiris. I grimaced. “By the time we find him, he’s going to puke a rainbow.”

Ramon barked a laugh. “What about Chuck? It’s going to be a double rainbow.”

“Don’t you call that evil down upon us,” I said, shoving his shoulder. He didn’t budge. I’d been lifting weights, trying to get some sort of strength going on, but I’d never catch up to Ramon now.

“A teeny, tiny rainbow of puke.” Ramon laughed again.

I grunted. Chuck may be a gnome, but I didn’t for a second think any mess he made would be *tiny.* Chuck the Norriser was the gnome we’d brought with us. We’d tried to leave him at June’s but he wouldn’t have it. After all, it was his job to protect us. Never mind that we often needed protection from Chuck more than anything else. “Can you catch Frank’s scent at all?”

Ramon just looked at me.

“Right,” I said. “The vomit.”

“Among other things,” Ramon muttered.

James dug out his phone, flipping through several screens until he found the app that would track Frank’s phone. We’d had spotty reception in the city, which wasn’t helping things. “Finally.” He turned and started weaving his way through the crowd.

I grabbed Ramon’s sleeve and tugged him along. James had clearly found our boy, but being James he couldn’t just say he’d found him. Oh no. He would just expect us to keep up. He didn’t even glance back at us.

We followed James down the street for several blocks until he stopped in front of some place called Lafitte’s Blacksmith Shop Bar. I could hear the piano and a group of people singing off-key. James pushed his way into the packed bar and we jogged after him.

Lafitte’s was dimly lit, the ceiling low. The humid air thick with sweat and spilled beer. A few tables were scattered here or there, all the chairs full. A handful of people were dancing.

Tucked away in the corner was a grand piano. The pianist was gamely belting out a song, the crowd singing right along with him. It appeared to be Billy Joel’s, “My Life.” Apparently, people still listened to Billy Joel, which was surprising. I only knew who he was because I collected records and had several of his handed down to me by my stepdad when he died.

James was still pushing his way through the crowd, Ramon and I trailing in his wake. The drunken crowd may not know what James was exactly, but he radiated calm menace the way some people radiated joy. You could just look at James and know he could break your bones down into a powder and wouldn’t lose a wink of sleep or wrinkle his suit when he did it.

The crowd parted and I saw something I will never, ever forget. Frank was lying on the piano on his back, one leg bent up, his converse shoe flat on the piano top. He had a microphone in his hand and was singing his heart out. On his chest rested an empty baby carrier. We had several collars that we could put on Chuck to activate a glamor—a disguise that kept what he was from human eyes. Sometimes it was a baby, but we tried to avoid that one because Chuck thought it was funny to swear in that form.

It made people make judgey faces. Chuck loved judgey faces.

The parrot one was the guise we used most, but tonight we’d gone with a fat orange tabby.

Which meant that currently there was a rotund orange cat yowling along with Frank as he sang. A few people had their phones out.

Ramon leaned close and shouted in my ear. “It’s Jon and Garfield do New Orleans.”

I shook my head, keeping my voice at a normal tone. Ramon had excellent hearing. Part of the “turning into a bear” thing. “Fucked up, but cute.”

“Is this going to be a problem, you think?”

I scoffed. “This is New Orleans. No one cares.” An unexpected but wonderful aspect of the city. New Orleans didn’t bat an eye at weird. Weird was its every day. Yesterday I’d walked past a woman smoking outside a cafe. She was seated at a table, enjoying a cocktail. She had a miniature horse, two goats, and a sheep with her. No one looked twice. Just status quo around these parts.

When I’d pointed it out to James he just shrugged. “This is a carnival city. They’re used to a certain level of pageantry.” Apparently he’d been here many times. Like I said, James fit here in a way he didn’t in Seattle. I guess he had a certain amount of pageantry to him as well.

Someone slid a string of beads around my neck. I smiled at them, my hand going automatically to the pouch I had tucked under my T-shirt. Still there. For a moment I thought I heard someone whispering in my ear, but when I turned to look, no one was paying any attention to me. I guessed I couldn’t hold a candle to the spectacle that was Frank and Chuck belting out, “I still belong. Don’t get me wrong…”

I shrugged at Ramon, taking off the recently gifted beads and putting them around his neck instead. We joined in for the last chorus, telling the world to go ahead with their own life and to leave us alone. The final notes were met with applause and I grabbed James’s elbow. “We’ll get him, you get the pianist.”

Ramon and I surged forward. He pulled Frank off the piano, Frank exhibiting the kind of liquid grace some very drunk people can manage. I grabbed Chuck. James sauntered to the piano and dropped two crisp twenties into the tip jar, leaning in to whisper something into the man’s ear. I ignored him—James would handle it—peeled the baby carrier off of Frank and attached it to myself. That accomplished, I forced the grumbling Chuck-in-cat-form into the carrier and strapped him in. He was slurring badly.

Just me and my drunk, yowling cat in a baby carrier, folks. Nothing to see here.

It looked more and more like we were going to have a double rainbow of puke in our future.

Ramon drug Frank to the bar and got him a glass of water. I turned to see if James was following and was surprised to see him leaning against the piano, the microphone in his hand. The piano man started playing a slower song, one I recognized, and the crowd swayed along. A few couples tried to make room to dance together as James opened his mouth, his smooth baritone deftly managing the first line to Sam Cooke’s, “Bring it On Home to Me.”

I stared, dumbstruck. I didn’t even know James could sing, and it turned out he had the voice of a fucking angel.

“And yet we can never get him to go to karaoke with us,” Ramon said as he joined me, one arm holding up Frank who was dutifully sipping water. “What song is that?” Ramon was good at knowing show tunes, but didn’t listen to oldies as much as me. “I’ve heard it before, I know I have. It’s on the soundtrack to something.”

“Sam Cooke,” I said. “Bring it on Home to Me.” I had a sudden, fierce desire to text Brid. I shoved my hands in my pockets, pointedly ignoring my phone. We were still friends, even though sometimes it felt like the emotional equivalent of taking off my own skin with a dull blade. But the idea of not having Bridin Blackthorn in my life hurt much worse. We would figure it out. I had to believe that, even if I couldn’t see it yet.

A woman stepped out of the crowd, trying to dance with James, who wasn’t having it. She put a hand on his chest, though she had to be a good fifteen years older than him. Or at least looked it. James was much, much older than he looked. But he appeared young, extraordinarily handsome, and dressed impeccably. He’d been getting all kinds of propositions since we’d hit the city.

James took the woman’s hand, gave her a twirl, and deftly spun her into the arms of another man in the crowd. Ramon laughed next to me, lit up with joy. We were all together. Happy. And losing Frank aside, having a pretty spectacular night.

And if I could ignore my fractured heart long enough, I might enjoy it.

We got Frank back to the house we were renting. James had picked out the rental, which meant that even a year ago it was a house I wouldn’t have been able to afford. Of course, last year I couldn’t even afford my apartment. Here we had a view of the bayou, the house lights twinkling along it in the night, giving it a magical quality. Well, until you saw one of the nutria. Those were a little startling. Kind of like beaver-rats with Cheetos for teeth.

We bundled Frank into the house, Ramon carrying him to his room. I grabbed him a glass of water, some Tylenol, and bowl from the kitchen, managing to juggle all those things up the stairs to Frank’s room. Ramon had already tucked in Frank, a snoring Chuck sprawled alongside.

James shook his head, a faint look of disgust on his features. “Our protection detail is three sheets to the wind.” He caught sight of me, eyes snagging on the bowl. “I don’t think that’s going to be big enough.”

I set the plastic bowl on the nightstand next to the glass of water. “It was the biggest I could find.” I carefully set the Tylenol next to the water. “Worst case scenario, we end up paying a cleaning fee for rainbow-puke carpet.” I grinned at James. A brief look passed over his features—so quick I almost missed it. James could be incredibly difficult to read. He took stoic to the next level. But I’d spent a lot of time in his pocket recently, and I was getting better at figuring this stuff out. “James?”

His silver eyes never left Frank as he crossed his arms against his chest. “Yes?”

“That is the worst-case scenario, isn’t it?” I had a sudden, sneaking suspicion about the rental.

Ramon’s eyebrows shot up. “What are you thinking, we rented from someone really scary? Are we in a crime boss’s house? Should we be worried about sleeping with the fishes?”

James huffed, his upper lip lifting in the faintest sneer. “Yes, because I absolutely love putting our lives in danger.”

My sneaking suspicions weren’t so much sneaking any more as they were running full bore through my mind screaming and clashing cymbals. James was a control freak. He needed to be in charge of any situation, which meant he not only gathered any information he could, but it also meant he tried to manage as many factors as possible before going into a situation. James was the kind of guy who looked up every restaurant we were thinking of going to, checked out their menu, and read any pertinent reviews…and that was just for food. For our safety?

I rubbed a hand over my face. “James, do we own this house?”

“No,” James said, waving my question away with one hand. “Of course not.”

I dropped my head back and closed my eyes. “James, do *I* own this house?”

No answer.

I looked at him. He was very carefully not looking at me. I sighed.

His face turned obstinate—brow furrowed, jaw tight. “It’s a good investment and this way I could hire local witches to put in the proper safety warding.” He frowned at Chuck. “Thankfully.”

I was uncomfortable with my sudden wealth to say the least. It was *literally* blood money. But James was right—the safety was worth it. I’d like to say we wouldn’t need it but unfortunately my recent past would suggest otherwise. I nodded. “Okay.”

“With your history and this city’s history you need—” James’s head whipped to mine, gaze searching. “Did you say okay?”

I shrugged. “It was a smart move. You’re right—we need the extra safety.” Even if I’d managed to avoid causing some sort of ruckus, I had my friends to think of. I could put up with being uncomfortable if it meant they were okay.

“No hand-wringing? No working-class guilt?” James put a hand to my forehead. “Are you feeling unwell?”

I batted his arm away. “Stop it.”

He dropped his hand.

“Just for that,” I said, sniffing. “You get first watch with Frank.”

Ramon snickered.

James’s sigh was definitely aggrieved. “If he throws up on my shoes, you’re buying me new ones.”

“Fair enough.” Then I left him to it.

I had the master bedroom. Now that I knew James had bought it, I could see his stamp everywhere. The king-sized bed, the nicely hung paintings on the tea-green walls. My sheets were some ridiculously high thread count and I could build a fort out of my decorative pillows. There was a *chandelier*. As I padded barefoot across the hardwood floors, I felt like an interloper. I always did in classy places.

After tossing my phone on the bed, I headed to the en suite bathroom, which would have eaten my old bathroom several times over. Pretty sure my old bathroom could have fit in the clawfoot tub. I stripped down, tossing my clothes into a pile on the floor. My hand hesitated over the protective pouch laying on my chest. I didn’t like to get the leather wet. Since I’d hit the city, I’d been doing a weird sort of contortionist act in the shower to keep it mostly dry. But if James had warded the house…I took off the pouch, setting it on the counter next to the sink.

I’d showered this morning, but I wasn’t used to being somewhere so muggy, and I’d taken to doing an evening rinse before I went to bed. Otherwise I just felt sticky, and not fun sticky. After I’d rinsed off and dug out a pair of pajama pants, I heard my phone buzzing where I’d left it on the bed. A brief flare of hope lit through me—maybe it was Brid?

I hopped up onto the bed, crossed my legs, and grabbed my phone. My hope shifted to disappointment when I saw my little sister’s name on the screen, then I felt like shit for feeling disappointed. I loved Haley.

I clicked open the message.

*Haley: How’s New Orleans? Have you taken it over with an army of the undead yet?*

I quickly typed a response. *Ha ha. That’s not on the docket until Thursday.* I didn’t wait for another response before sending another message. *How’s my death trap of a house?* Haley was housesitting for me with the help of one of my best friends, Brooke. I would have let Brooke house sit on her own, but she was a ghost, which kind of made it difficult.

*Good. I haven’t burned it down yet, I won fifteen bucks off the gladiators playing UNO, and I found a cursed tea pot.*

I frowned at my screen, trying to decide which of those last two things was more concerning. *I wasn’t aware UNO was a betting game.*

*It is the way I play it.*

*And the cursed tea pot?*

*Just a minor curse. Everyone is fine. Unrelated, but eyebrows* do *grow back, right?*

*You’re not funny.*

*I’m very funny. Just ask the gladiators.*

I laughed, despite myself. Of course I worried—Haley was my little sister. It didn’t matter how old she got or how capable she was, I would always worry. *I love you.*

*Love you, too. Come home soon. The statues miss you.*

*Just the statues?*

Three little dots appeared on the screen for a few seconds as Haley took her time replying. *Fine, fine, I miss you, too.*

*I’ll be home soon, promise.*

When she didn’t reply after that, I glanced at the time on my phone.It wasn’t quite eleven, which meant it was almost nine in Seattle. For a few seconds, I hesitated before I finally gave in to the demon that had been driving me all night.

I texted Brid.

Then I set my phone on the nightstand, determined not to wait for her response. That lasted all of three seconds before I snatched up the phone and set it on my chest. I didn’t want to miss her response, because I knew she would respond.

Eventually.

If she wasn’t on a date.

Fuck.

Chapter Two

Bad Scene, Everyone’s Fault

Bridin Blackthorn wondered—not for the first time—what jackass invented dating. It was everything she hated about a job interview, only you usually didn’t have to consider whether you wanted to see anyone naked during a job interview, and there was no hope of a salary when all was said and done. It was certainly more awkward all around. Usually she sized up her date and decided the benefits package wasn’t worth it sometime before they’d even ordered their drinks.

This one…she had to admit, at least to herself, was a far cry above the dates she’d been having.

Leo—and honestly, what kind of parent named their son, a *werewolf*, Leo?—Morreti was inarguably handsome. Dark hair, darker brown eyes, with warm olive skin and a chiseled jaw. The minute he opened his mouth, she was hit with a Chicago accent, the kind she usually only heard in movies. She’d let him pick out the restaurant and honestly, she was pleased with his choice. It was nice enough that she’d dressed up, but not so nice that she felt uncomfortable.

Candles flickered from each tabletop, which were capped with a crisp white tablecloth. The air was redolent with the smells of garlic, onion, and basil, amongst other things. Leo had picked out a rich red wine, pouring her half a glass after the waiter left so she could try it. The general atmosphere was cozy and romantic.

She could grudgingly admit that, as dates went, Leo was a measure above.

Leo didn’t talk over her, try to tell her what to order, or talk only about himself. He hadn’t spent the entire time staring at other women and he hadn’t, like one particularly memorable dating disaster, offer a backseat quickie to see “if she was worth it.”

At this point, the bar was so low that Leo would barely have to lift his foot to step over it.

Leo wasn’t as happy with his choice of restaurant, sadly. He stared forlornly at his pasta. His hands—which had been busy the entire time he’d been telling her a story about his sisters—dropped to the tablecloth. “What have they done to it? If they wanted to kill me, they could’ve just shot me in the alley. At least that would have been quick.” He shook his head forlornly. “No need to take it out on the food.” Mischief glinted in his eyes when he looked up at her.

Brid couldn’t help smiling. “There’s actually a really great Italian place in Issaquah. If I’d known, we could have avoided your misery.”

He leaned back in his chair, examining her, his meal momentarily forgotten. “Didn’t think you’d want us that deep in your territory, to be honest.”

Brid shot him wide, innocent eyes. “Are you implying you’re a threat?”

Though he’d smiled all evening, his first real smile slowly unfurled across his face. It catapulted him from handsome to glorious.

It did nothing for her.

“You know, I like you.”

The waiter dropped a fresh loaf of bread at the table, and she grabbed a slice of it, slathering it with butter. “You sound so surprised.”

He plucked his wine glass off the table, taking a slow sip, before leaning close and dropping his voice. They both had a representative of their pack at the other side of the restaurant, and though the room was filled with chatter and clinking silverware, they had very good ears. “I am. I’ve seen the list of suitors you’ve chased off. You’re getting a bit of a reputation, Blackthorn.”

She scoffed. “If I was a man, I’d be called ‘discerning’ and no one would question it. They’d *applaud* it.”

His smiled at her over the lip of his wine glass. “Not arguing with you there.”

She used the bread to catch some of the cream sauce on her plate. “If I’m a picky bitch, then why did you agree to meet me?”

“I’d say that maybe I like ‘picky bitches’ but to be candid, I don’t care for the term.” He finally sipped his wine. “In your position, I’d also be discerning. It’s smart.” He set down his wine and with some amount of resignation, pushed his pasta aside with his fork and cut into his steak. “Maybe I wanted to see if I made the cut.”

He looked up at her blank face and laughed. He had a charming laugh, causing several heads to turn appraisingly. “Don’t bother stalling or coming up with a polite lie. I knew two seconds after you greeted me that you weren’t interested.”

She chewed carefully, giving herself a moment. Leo’s charm probably distracted most people away from the sharp intelligence in his eyes. From the dossier compiled by her oldest brother, Bran, before this date, Leo was finishing up an MBA. High marks. Came from an old, established pack. She wasn’t quite sure why he would consider relocating away from Chicago. There was no obvious reason for it. “What makes you say that?”

He laid his hand out on the table, palm up. He had elegant fingers, the kind good for playing piano or picking pockets. After a moment’s hesitation, she put down her silverware and put her hand in his. His hand was warm, and though not callused, it wasn’t soft, either. Slowly, giving her a chance to pull away if she so chose, he turned her arm until her wrist was exposed.

He ran a thumb over her pulse-point in slow circles, his gaze slowly moving up to hers. “There’s a certain alchemy to attraction. Looks are a factor, and for me, so is intelligence, but beyond those factors, there’s a chemical layer to it. Pheromones and all of that.” He continued the slow brush with his thumb. “All those things, blended together. It’s a bit inexplicable at times, what draws us to someone else.”

His lips curled faintly at the ends as he watched his thumb. “Whatever that cocktail is, we don’t have it.” He reversed her hand, bringing the back of her wrist to his mouth. He placed a kiss there and let her hand go. “Might as well be courting a mannequin.” He raised a hand before she could protest. “It wasn’t meant to be an insult. But I do not make your breath catch, Blackthorn. I do not give you goosebumps. We have no alchemy to speak of.” He shrugged and picked up his silverware again, taking another bite.

She followed his lead, returning to her meal.

He grimaced, jabbing at his steak with a fork. “It’s never rare enough, is it?”

She paused, fork hovering over her pasta. Ingnoring his question to ask her own. “Then why go through with dinner?”

He sighed with resignation and took another slice of beef. “Perhaps I yearned for a mediocre meal but charming company?” He placed the beef delicately in his mouth. “I did say I liked you.”

She considered this and decided it was at least partially bullshit. “You’re not attracted to me either.”

“Alas.” He tipped his head theatrically heaven-ward, steepling a hand over his heart. “She speaks truth.”

This date wasn’t half as awkward as all the others. Maybe because Leo was so charming, or perhaps because he was being mostly honest. Regardless, she was enjoying not being pursued. She took several bites of fettuccini before speaking again, deciding, as she sopped up the last of her sauce with more bread, to put more of her own metaphorical cards on the table. “You have a prosperous pack. From your stories tonight, you obviously love Chicago and your family. From all accounts, you’re only a few steps away from being the head of your pack. Why are you here, Leo?”

Leo gave up on his steak, exchanging his knife and fork for his wine glass again, though he didn’t drink it. “You’re correct—I do love my family. If I stay in Chicago, I’ll probably have to kill at least one of them.” His words were so soft they barely carried over the table. “My cousin is next in line.” He stared moodily into his wine. “He’s a strong leader, but unsure at times. He…sees me as a threat.” He downed the last of the red and moved to grab the bottle to refill both their glasses.

“If you stay, there will be a fight for dominance.”

He nodded grimly. “And I know I won’t be able to turn it down. It’s not that I want to lead necessarily, but…I can’t follow. Not him. You understand?”

The sad part was, she did. It was a tricky thing, dominance. Bridin herself was very dominant, even though she wasn’t the biggest of wolves. Her brothers, by all accounts good fighters and strong men, lacked that essentially quality. If they took over, it would be disastrous—with the exception of Bran. Only Bran thought Brid was a better fit and wouldn’t hear otherwise. He preferred to advise and back her up.

If what Leo said was true, and his wolf already knew it couldn’t bow to his cousin…well. It would indeed end in bloodshed. “Marrying outside your pack will save lives.”

He nodded.

“But you’d have to leave your *home*.” That was no small thing for a wolf.

This time his nod was slow and slight. Miserable. He was miserable over it.

The waiter came and whisked away their dishes. They both ordered a dessert, all smiles until he left.

Bridin put her hand back on the table, palm up. After a moment’s hesitation, he took it with a slightly mocking smile.

“How long do you have?”

“Weeks, maybe.” He rested his chin in his free hand, the other still clasped around hers, taking comfort from her like he’d been doing it for years. “I had hoped.” He sighed. “I do like you. Would it be the worst solution?”

His hand was warm in hers, and she absently twined their fingers. “I’m sorely tempted. Dating is *awful.*”

He looked up at her through his lashes, which were almost indecently thick. “Especially when your heart is engaged elsewhere, I imagine.”

She tried to pull away, but he held firm.

He made a soothing noise. “Don’t do that.” He pulled her to him until they were both leaning over the small table, his mouth close to her ear. “Why are *you* here, Bridin Blackthorn, and not with him?”

She hesitated. Her pack had done a lot to keep her former relationship under wraps. So much disapproval heaped on a good man that it made her heart break. Telling Leo would be foolish. He was an unknown quantity. And yet, when she searched his eyes, she felt a kinship. People talked a lot about love at first sight. Brid wasn’t sure about that, but she’d experienced friendship at first sight, where you met someone and just instantly clicked. Now that she wasn’t seeing him as a date, Leo felt like that. An instant bond. “He’s not one of us.”

He pursed his lips. “I see.” He laid his freehand on top of their clasped one. “Is he a good man?”

She nodded.

“Strong?”

“Like us, no, but in his own way, yes.”

“You love him.”

She looked away, catching her brother and Leo’s escort across the restaurant, both of them watching her carefully. Leo’s escort seemed happy that the date appeared to be going well. Bran looked…concerned, though he masked it well. She hadn’t fooled him one bit.

“Then I see no reason why we can’t help each other.”

Her head snapped back to him.

The waiter came with their desserts—a piece of cheesecake with strawberries for her, a decadent chocolate box mounded with whipped cream for him, covered in chopped pecans, a single red cherry on top. They smiled at the waiter until he left, not noticing how much their smiles looked like the bared teeth of predators.

She dropped his hand and dug into her cheesecake. “A union in name only?” She shook her head. “I don’t think either of us would be happy that way for very long. I might agree to it anyway, but my brothers will stubbornly insist against it.” Her smile was wan. “I’m not to martyr myself on their account.”

Whatever his reservation of the meal so far, it didn’t extend to his dessert. He scooped a large bite of whipped cream into his mouth, practically licking the spoon. He winked when he caught her looking and she laughed.

“I don’t think it needs to go that far, actually.” He used his spoon to crack open the box, revealing chocolate mousse and a thick brownie. The dessert, Brid thought, was very like him—decadent to the point of hedonism, but in a strangely whimsical way.

He hummed as the mousse hit his tongue. “What if we declare ourselves interested? I stay with your pack for a while. We get to know each other. Not a permanent solution, but it will buy us time until we can find one.” He carefully gouged a bite of mousse and brownie with his spoon and held it up to her to taste. “No martyrs, I promise.”

She took the bite, the rich chocolate hitting her tongue. It was almost too sweet until she sipped her wine, the rich flavor cutting through the chocolate. “And you think that will work.”

“I think,” Leo said, dropping his voice again. “That we are both intelligent people, and not a little bit desperate, and between the two of us, we’ll find a solution to our mutual problem.” His mouth quirked. “And you won’t have to go on any more first dates in the meantime.”

She laughed again, the joy and relief spreading all the way to her toes. “You know what, Leo Moretti? I think you have yourself a deal.”

They decided to go on a walk after dinner, much to the delight of Leo’s companion. Bran’s face remained stoic. She had her arm tucked into Leo’s as they walked down the street, heading toward the waterfront. The chill October air brought her the scents of leaves, the smoke of someone’s fire, and underneath it all, the distinct scent of water. Their escorts trailed slowly behind them, far enough away that they had some privacy if they talked softly.

Leo dipped his mouth close to her ear. “I feel like your brother is haunting us.”

She smothered a laugh into his shoulder. “He kind of is. I don’t think he knows what to make of you, or the fact that I haven’t tossed you out on your ear.”

He hummed thoughtfully. “I do like to keep a man on his toes.” He kissed her temple before reaching up to snatch a golden leaf off a tree as they passed. “Where are we again? I don’t know Seattle neighborhoods well, I’m afraid.”

“Madrona.”

“Pretty. What’s Issaquah like?”

“Very different. Our pack has a large chunk of forested land. If you’re expecting urbane sophistication—”

He threw a warm smile her way. “I bring my own urbane sophistication with me, I’m afraid.”

Before she could respond, her pocket buzzed and she took out her phone. A text from Sam lit up her screen.

Leo didn’t try to hide his curiosity, peeking at her screen. “Is that him?”

Brid’s throat tightened. “Yes.”

“He asking about the date?” His question was careful, almost gentle.

She opened the text. “Yes, though not directly.” She went to put the phone away.

“You should answer him.”

She frowned up at Leo. “You don’t think it’s a little rude?”

He shook his head. “If this were an actual relationship, perhaps.” He paused. “Actually, would you let me answer the text?”

“Why?”

“Call it a test.” He held out his hand. “If he’s worth you, he’ll pass.”

“I don’t like playing games.”

“Really? But they’re so fun.” He took her phone with gentle fingers. “I don’t either, usually, but I’m pressed for time and need to find out what kind of person I’m dealing with.”

Brid didn’t fight for her phone, though she wasn’t sure handing it over was a good idea at all.

He started to type something out, decided against it, and hit the call button instead.

Now she really wasn’t sure. “Give it back, Leo.”

He waved her off. “Hello, this is Sam, I presume?”

She heard Sam’s voice over the phone, though he was speaking softly enough that she couldn’t make out his words.

“Leo Moretti, Bridin’s date for the evening.” He paused, smirking. “I took her to dinner—the food was questionable, but she’s quite lovely. Smells like sandalwood and oranges. So we left the table to have a quickie in the park. Though the park was charming, I found the sex lacking, though we gave it the old college try.”

Bridin smacked his arm, straining to hear Sam’s reply. She would absolutely *murder* Leo—

His tone, which had been slightly mocking, shifted to something warm and kind. “I think I understand now. I’m looking forward to meeting you, Sam.” They said their goodbyes and Leo hung up, handing her the phone back.

“Please tell me why I’m not murdering you right now. That was uncalled for and cruel—”

Leo shrugged one shoulder. “Like I said, I needed to see.” He reached up and snatched another leaf. “How a man responds to having his territory threatened—”

She punched his arm this time, a little harder than the slap. If they’d been wolves, she would have snapped her teeth at him. She might do it anyway. “I’m no one’s territory.”

“You’re not? What a pity.” He let the leaf drop and drift to the sidewalk. “Personally, I’m looking forward to being conquered. Belonging to someone else—two hearts, one body, that sort of thing.”

Brid scowled at him. She couldn’t tell if he was being sincere or mocking, but thought he might be doing a little of both.

“Whatever your delicate sensibilities on the subject, I learned a great deal.” He glanced at her. “He loves you, you know.”

She looked out over the quiet street. Sam had told her as much. She knew exactly how he felt, she just…didn’t like to think about it. Not when she had to date other people, werewolves like her. She shouldn’t ask—the answer would hurt—but she couldn’t help herself. “What makes you say that?”

“He said I was lying through my teeth, because that didn’t sound like you at all, but if it was true, you deserve more than a lackluster fuck against a tree.”

She took her arm from his, so he slid it around her instead. Leo smelled like the wild and spice—a comforting smell.

He cleared his throat. “It hurt him to say it, but he meant it. He put you first, and he knew I was talking shit. He trusts you.” He squeezed her tight. “I know many alphas that would have called you a whore and crushed their phones. He told me you should call him later.”

Brid grumbled a response. She knew Sam wouldn’t slut shame anyone, and he didn’t blame her for the position they were in. No one’s fault but she *hated* putting him through it nonetheless.

“I have to say, I’m a little jealous.”

She snorted, sliding an arm easily around his waist. “You are?”

“That man would tear out his own heart to see you happy. Two seconds on a phone and that’s clear.” He sighed. “I’d love to meet a man who believed I deserved good sex, even if it wasn’t with him.”

She looked sharply at him. “A man, huh? Is that why we don’t have chemistry?”

“I’m afraid you’re not off the hook quite so easily, Blackthorn. I’m a bit flexible in that department.”

“I see.”

“When you call him later, extend my apologies, will you?”

She sighed. “Assuming he’ll even answer his phone after the shit you just pulled.”

He snorted. “For you? He’ll answer. Every time, Blackthorn. That’s something I know for certain.”

Chapter 3

The Evening Fell Just Like a Star

I’d given up on any pretense of sleep after talking to Brid’s date. My body felt heavy with exhaustion, but it wasn’t like I could sleep after that conversation. So even though my body felt like it was shutting down, my brain was doing a fun impression of an over-caffeinated hamster in a wheel.

The thing was, I knew he was lying, and more importantly that even if he wasn’t, it technically wasn’t any of my business. If she wanted to stop calling me, and date anyone that struck her fancy, that was her right. I wasn’t normally a jealous or possessive kind of person, so in many ways the situation was screwing with my head. Knowing that if it were up to only her, we’d still be together, was the very definition of cold comfort.

Which is why though nothing Leo had said was Brid’s style, jealousy had flared white hot for a second anyway. It had dimmed, but it wasn’t gone. Because even if Leo lied, he was still there with her while I was in New Orleans dealing with gnomes, my shitty grip on my own magic, and probably cleaning up puke in a few hours.

The jealousy and frustration crested, breaking like a wave, and left, leaving me in a mudflat of misery. Have you ever smelled a mudflat when the tide was out? It was the worst.

This was the *worst.*

I decided to watch a movie on my phone while I waited. Brid would call me back if she could and…I needed to hear her. Simple as that. I also needed to keep my garbage thoughts in check. We were both going through this situation together, but I only had my own expectations to manage—Brid had an entire pack. I didn’t want to add to her burden.

I only ever wanted to help her carry it.

I was halfway through the movie when my phone rang and I quickly hit the accept button.

“I wasn’t sure you’d still be up.” Brid sounded tired, but I was ridiculously grateful that she’d called me back. Hearing her voice made everything in me relax, like my gut had been clenched in a fist until now and I hadn’t even realized it.

I cleared my throat. “Just watching a movie.”

“Which one?”

“*Blood & Chocolate*.”

She snorted a laugh. “Is that the one where they have the werewolves doing parkour or whatever?”

I grinned, leaning back against the headboard. “Are you saying you don’t parkour? Because I’ve seen you move, and you definitely parkour.”

She made a scoffing noise.

I grinned. “That’s not a no.” She laughed, and it was so good to hear, but my grin died nonetheless. “How was your date?”

“Really good.” Her voice didn’t change at all, still breezy and happy, but somehow I knew it was carefully and consciously done that way. “We had some things in common. Bran’s not sure about him, are you Bran?”

I heard her brother’s low grumble. Brid’s response might seem harsh—who tells their ex that their date was really good, right? But with Brid, conversations were often about context. She wasn’t alone, for one, and she’d let me know that by asking her brother a question. Though she adored Bran, that didn’t mean she wouldn’t keep a secret from him. We often keep secrets from those we love to protect them. Bran might not be the only person with her, either. So she had to be careful. Which meant I couldn’t take a single thing on face value here, and I needed to watch what I said.

“He had a lovely speaking voice.” I rubbed a tired hand through my hair. “Charming *and* sexy.”

“Yeah, he had positive things to say about you as well.” She sighed. “You know how these things go—dating. Everything’s like a test, you know? But I feel like we passed.”

Huh. I sifted through that. Leo had said nice things about me followed by a test…a test we passed? Or a test *I* passed? Maybe both? “I’m glad it went well.” I hated asking, but I couldn’t help myself. “There a second date in the works?”

“Mm-hmm. He’s going to come stay at the lodge for a bit. Check things out.”

I’ve had punches to the gut that hurt less. “Oh. Wow. Okay.” He was going to stay with the pack, then. Which meant the date had gone *really* well. No other suitor had met the pack like this and…fuck. My brain was practically holding up signs for me now—reminding me that this wasn’t what it looked like—but my heart? My heart was crumpling in on itself. I needed to get off the phone now, because it was real likely that Bran could hear what I was saying, and I didn’t want a single person in her pack hearing me break down.

And I was going to break down.

“I’m glad,” I said. “You deserve a nice date. Hey, I think I hear Frank. I’m on puke duty.” Which was such a lie. I made myself laugh. It sounded terrible. “I’ll tell you about it later. Call you tomorrow, okay?”

“Okay.” Her voice sounded soft and sad and that just made it worse. We said our goodbyes and I clicked the end call button. Then I stared at my phone for several long seconds as my insides caved in. I rubbed a hand over my heart. It wasn’t getting better. Maybe it never would.

I knew it was a mistake, but I opened up Google on my phone and searched for Leo Moretti. There were several hits. The first was an accountant, looked to be in his fifties. He had glasses and a side part. I didn’t think that one was it. The next hit was fifteen, so strike two. There were a surprising amount of Leo Morettis in the US.

Someone rapped at my door before they entered, not waiting for me to respond. James strode in unrolling his cuffs. “Ramon can’t sleep, so he’s taking over Frank duty. Is there anything else I can—” James stopped fussing with shirt, his eyes narrowing on me. “What’s wrong?”

I sniffed, using the back of my wrist to wipe away any moisture. Oh good, I’d started crying. “Brid had a good date.” I sniffed again. “I’m happy for her. These are tears of joy.”

James stilled. “I see.” And he probably did. One of James’s strengths was taking in the complexities of a situation with a single glimpse. Usually it was really helpful, but there were times, like now, where I wished he was a little more oblivious so I could mope in peace.

I held up my phone. “I was googling him.”

Dark eyebrows descended into a V. “That’s a terrible idea, Sam.” He strode over, hand out. “Give me your phone.”

I clasped it to me. “No.”

He sighed. “Out of the two of us, who is going to find the correct information faster? The person whose entire job it is to find things out or the sad man on the bed who still doesn’t understand Tumblr?” He snapped his fingers. “Hand it over.”

I gave him my phone. “I just don’t understand Tumblr’s interface,” I mumbled. “And you’re mean.”

“Yes, I am.” James glanced at my phone, handed it back to me, and took out his own. “Which is why you need me. If I left it to you and Ramon, you would have been murdered by the first creature you tried to hug into submission. You seem to think everything is cuddly and sweet right up until it tries to rip out your throat.”

“That’s a little unfair,” I said, hugging my knees.

James looked up from the phone. “I would state a specific incident, but there are too many.”

I sighed. “We’d probably still try to hug it *after* it tried to kill us, wouldn’t we?”

James didn’t answer, just went back to his phone. He spent several seconds clicking away before he showed me the screen. “This is the one. Leo Moretti, second in line for the Rossi clan. I’ll send you a dossier.”

I grunted. “I don’t need one. I just wanted to see him.” And now I wished I hadn’t. Leo Moretti was handsome, and looked like a grown ass man who didn’t spend his time watching shit movies with his roommates and skateboarding.

I could work out forever and never look like Leo Moretti. When I put on a suit, I still looked like I was playing dress up, even though James bought me really nice, tailored suits. Put me next to Leo and I’d look like I was twelve.

I pulled up Leo Moretti’s Instagram, knowing full well that it was a mistake. I flipped through the carefully curated, filtered version of his life and yup, it was a mistake. He wore a lot of suits and he looked good in them, damn it. It was like an extended ad for high priced cologne.

Fuck.

I showed James the screen again, even though he’d seen it. “Look at those eyelashes. If he bats them, I bet he sets off a category five swoon. Fuck.” I dropped my phone like it was poison. “Just looking at those pictures and even I would pick him over me.” I shook my head. “I don’t think I want to know anything more about him, thanks. I already know too much.”

James tucked away his phone and crossed his arms. “If he is in our territory and might be staying in it, you absolutely *do* need one.”

I flopped over onto my side. “I hate politics.”

James’s voice was ruthless, even if his face was sympathetic. Well, I mean, his version of sympathetic, which was when he wasn’t actively sneering at something or looking coldly aloof. “Politics keep you alive.”

He fidgeted for a second.

James *never* fidgeted. For a brief second, I saw an actual, human emotion on his face, though I couldn’t tell you which one. Then his usual coldly efficient mask snapped back into place.

“I—*we*—need you to stay alive.” He turned, walking quickly to the door. “I’ll email you the dossier in the morning. Get some sleep, Sam.” He turned off the lights.

Well, I guess I was getting some sleep.

Yeah, right.

I picked my phone back up, but didn’t want to turn the movie back on. *Blood & Chocolate* was about a beautiful young werewolf falling in love with a human, and that felt too much like salt in the wound. It had been stupid to even pick it in the first place. I flipped through, but nothing looked good. At some point, I fell asleep, still clutching my phone.

#

It slumbered, years spinning by in a lazy tumble, like brittle fall leaves in a gentle breeze. Mostly, it knew nothing. It didn’t dream. Nothing flitted through what passed for its consciousness.

The power was off and no one was home.

It wouldn’t have even known time had passed if it didn’t surface on occasion. Every once in a while, the cold magic passed close by. Just a hint. A tease. A tantalizing aroma from far off campfires. Just enough to make it toss restlessly in its grave before giving a sleepy blink and returning to sleep.

But then. Oh. *Oh, wait.*

Something. A flare in the distance.

The cold magic. Strong, like a distant sun.

Close.

Not quite close enough.

Under the roots and soil, the soggy stench of it all, it wailed. Inconsolable. A shattering where a heart should be. It mourned the distant sun, waiting for it to disappear like all the others.

To float away until it blinked out of existence, like all the cold magic had before.

Except…

Wait.

It wasn’t gone. It hovered there, strong and steady, a cold heart beat in the world.

The creature watched. It was so *close.*

What if…what *if* the creature could bring it closer?

No more waiting. No more dank and dark. It could lure the magic close, swallow that distant sun. Fill itself with so much power that it became its own thing.

Legs to walk. Arms to hold. Fingers to grasp. Nothing would get away again.

Nothing would *dare.*

It wasn’t sure it could do it. Beckoning, luring such power *took* power, and it barely had a thimble full.

It could become nothing in truth.

But it was better than this—anything was better than this.

Always waiting, never finding.

It gathered up every stray bit of magic, sucking it from the soil. The creature shouted, screamed, howled and snarled, the sound worming up through the mud.

By the time it hit the breeze, it was nothing more than a whisper.

But sometimes a whisper was enough. It rode the warm night air, cushioned on humid currents, until it could orbit that cold star, that magic in the distance.

And once it was there, it crooned. It beckoned. It sang a siren song, pulling the that star forward.

Bringing it closer.

Closer.

*There.*

The star was *here*, the magic heady in its nearness.

The creature feasted. Taking fistfuls of power, stuffing it into its maw, swallowing it down with greedy gulps. Licking the corners until every drop was gone. The star winked out. No more.

It didn’t matter. The creature had what it needed. The spell was finished. Complete.

And it was full after years of starving, its belly bloated, almost sickly. Fierce joy sliced through it as it dug through the soil with its hands—hands! Every inch excruciating and painful, until it clawed through the last layer of soil, birthing itself onto the warm ground.

A thing of nightmares given form.

It grinned, its teeth a ragged slash of moonlight.

The belly was gone now, the roundness ebbed away from the work of genesis. It was hungry. *Again*. So *soon.*

It searched the husk the star had left behind, but there was no magic there. For a second the creature lost control, lashing out, screeching into the night.

Despair, its oldest companion was back, and it had brought friends.

But wait. *Wait*.

In the distance. A smaller light. A flicker of magic. Different but the same, like someone had poured bottles of wine into the same bowl, heedless of flavor or vintage. A sickening blend, but it would get the job done. The creature could once again fill its rotten belly.

It stepped forward, one foot ponderously in front of the other. Every movement smoother than the last as it learned how to *be***.**

Finally how to *be*. All it needed was a little more cold magic. Then it wouldn’t be beholden to anyone else ever again.

Not even the stars themselves could stop it.

Chapter 4

When We All Fall Asleep, Where Do We Go?

When I woke up, everything hurt, as if my body was one big bruise. It felt like—I don’t even know what it felt like. Just pain, everywhere at once, little needles pricking under every millimeter of my skin. If someone had offered me death right at that moment, I might have considered it. I laid there for a moment, shivering in the heat, concentrating on breathing in and out.

Something snuffled by my head and I managed to open my eyes. Light stabbed me, my pulse skittering away as I blinked rapidly through the pain, trying to see what was making that sound. Finally the smears of green and browns came together, revealing grass, mud, trees and…a pig.

I was staring at a pig.

I didn’t remember going to bed with a pig. I didn’t remember going to sleep on the ground, either.

Brown, large, and hairy, the pig grunted as it rooted in the ground close by with its snout. Mud smeared its lower half. It wasn’t a cute pig, at least not the kind I was used to seeing at the county fair or the kind people kept as pets. This one looked like it could start some shit. Like the kind of pig you’d meet in an alley, up to no good.

Wait, no, not a pig. That wasn’t what they were called. We’d taken one of the swamp tours over in Slidell. The guide talked a lot about the local wildlife, including some of the invasive species. *Hog*. Were hogs and pigs the same thing? I didn’t even know. Either way, I was looking at a feral hog. A very *large* feral hog.

I laid there, still shivering, trying to remember what the guide had said about them. The hog was so close, I could have reached out and touched it, which I absolutely did not want to do. Some of them carried diseases. And while hogs didn’t generally go after humans, they were opportunistic eaters, and I was sprawled out like a buffet. I already felt half-dead. Wouldn’t take the hog much to finish off the job.

I breathed out slowly. Please, please, don’t let me get eaten by wild hogs. Hogs ate everything. No one would ever know what happened to me. My family—I cut off that line of thought. That mental direction would only lead to panic, and panic wasn’t helpful.

I watched the pig as I took stock of the situation. Pain still pulsed through my body, beating behind my eyelids every time I blinked. What had happened? Where *was* I? Because this was not my bed, and it certainly wasn’t my hog.

As I stared, the hooves moved closer. My body rocked as the hog nudged me in my thigh. It was enough to make me dredge up whatever resources I had left and roll away. This startled the hog and left me gasping on my back, star-fished out in wet muck. Luckily the morning air was already hot and thick—at least by my standards. The shivering was probably from shock.

I’m not a fan of muck. I’m less a fan of Louisiana muck. Everything—and I do mean everything—in Louisiana is trying to kill you. Someone told us that in the spring, caterpillars fall from the live oaks and bite people. This was not a thing in Seattle. We mostly tried to kill people with crushing living expenses. Nature generally left us well enough alone as long as you left it alone.

Which meant I wasn’t about to lay in the muck, waiting for something to bite, poison, or otherwise turn me into lunch. I levered myself up on shaking arms. I didn’t want to crawl through the muck. Another thing Louisiana has? Fire ants.

No thank you.

After several tries, I managed to push myself up onto my feet. It did not make me feel better, though it did make the hog scurry off. I saw trees. Grass. Birds. What I did not see was my house, my friends, or…I looked down. I was still in my pajama pants, a hoodie, and shoes. No shirt. No socks. Several red bumps already covered my chest and stomach. I’d been a mosquito feast.

I closed my eyes, straining my ears for any sound of civilization. Nothing. No people talking, no cars. I heard an unfamiliar bird call, but that was it. I opened my eyes, hoping by some miracle I’d catch some kind of clue, but of course the scene stayed the same.

What the absolute fuck had happened? How had I ended up in the middle of nowhere? The last thing I remembered was falling asleep, sad and alone.

One of my pockets hung heavy, and I checked it—my phone! If I’d had any energy, I would have shouted for joy. As it was, I barely managed to tap it to wake it up. It lit up, but my joy quickly flickered and died. No bars. I had no bars. I couldn’t call anyone. Maybe I could get somewhere that had service?

The idea of walking anywhere right now made me want to cry. I was so *tired*, and moving anything hurt.

Okay, what were my options?

1) Lay down and die. Not bad per se, but lacked elegance.

2) Try to walk somewhere before I lay down and die. Better, but not optimal.

3) Summon Ashley to tell someone where I was…

Ashley! I had never been so happy to be a necromancer. Surely my harbinger could help me get a message to someone. I closed my eyes to reach for my power to call for her and…there was nothing there. *Nothing*. I was like an empty bottle of soda. All my power was simply…gone. Panic filled me. I started to shiver again, my teeth clacking as adrenaline poured into my system.

*Nonononono…*

I licked my lips. Okay, calm down. It was a mistake. I’d just…missed it somehow. Right? That was a thing that could happen maybe? I closed my eyes again. All I saw was the darkness behind my eyelids. I was completely spent. Did I actually need power to call Ashley? I wasn’t sure. I tried. I pictured her, mentally calling her name. I even croaked it out of my torn-up throat. Had I been shouting? Fuck, I didn’t even know. What on earth had happened to me?

There was something so disconcerting about not being able to remember something. I had this chunk of time where anything could have happened, and my mind was gleefully filling in worse case scenarios. Stupid brain.

I kept calling for her—for anyone.

Minutes passed and I collapsed onto my knees, sobbing, begging Ashley to show up. Promising her so many waffles.

No one came.

Not even the hog.

I was lost, alone, and no one was coming to save me, because no one knew where the hell I was, not even me.

After a while, even sobbing took too much energy. I curled on the ground and waited for the ants to take me. Bon appetite, ants.

I fell back asleep for a few minutes, or more accurately, I passed out. Not for long. When I came to and checked my phone, only thirty minutes had passed. At least I’d stopped shivering.

The ants hadn’t come through, and it looked like option three was out. One sounded really tempting, but I decided to go for two. If nothing else, I wanted to go down fighting. Or at least, shambling.

I got back up and started moving. I had no idea where I was, and when I tried to look at the maps on my phone, I got nothing. So I just picked a direction and started walking.

One foot in front of the other.

Repeat.

And repeat.

My legs wobbled. But I kept going.

That’s all I had to do. Just focus on that.

It didn’t go well. I was exhausted. I kept stumbling and falling down. I wasn’t even sure how far I’d gone. Eventually I collapsed against a tree. The world kept spinning and it was making me sick. Maybe, if I stopped moving, it would be easier to find me. Someone would be looking, but while I was fairly sure I was still in Louisiana, that was a large amount of ground to tackle.

How long could I survive out here, like this? I was in no state to forage or look for water, and I didn’t know any of the local fauna anyway. And I didn’t trust the water. It was swampy, for one, and had gators in it. How did anyone survive Louisiana? Every second here felt like I was throwing a gauntlet against nature, and I wasn’t winning. Nature simply couldn’t be bothered with me yet. I was too insignificant.

Despair flooded me. I curled up in my jacket, closed my eyes, and fell asleep again.

Something was snuffling nearby. I didn’t open my eyes. “Fuck off, hog.”

The snuffling stopped as something large thudded against the ground. The tree underneath me trembled.

That was some hog. I opened my eyes.

A large bear loomed over me, his mouth open, a large, meaty paw moving toward me. With claws. Very long claws. Terror filled me and I screamed. The bear drew back, affronted.

It took my brain exactly two seconds to finally connect the bear in front of me to Ramon.

At least, I hoped it was Ramon. I didn’t think Louisiana had grizzly bears. The bear sat across from me, making grumbling noises, before it threw back its head and bellowed. I closed my eyes. That was all I had energy to do. The bear was probably Ramon, and if it wasn’t, well, it was welcome to my carcass.

I heard footsteps. Arguing. More bear grumbling. But I was already passing back out. The last thing I remember was someone lifting me up. Then the sweet embrace of darkness.

This time when I woke up, I was in a bed—my bed, or at least my New Orleans one. Beds were *great*. A fan turned lazily overhead and something snored on my pillow. When I turned to look, I found Chuck the gnome sprawled out on the pillow next to me, mouth open, producing a snore much too large for his body. My protection detail, folks. So professional.

I felt marginally better. Clean. Dry. No hogs or ants. No shaking, and the pain had receded. Didn’t have the energy to get up, though. I turned away from Chuck, and realized I had another bed buddy. Ramon sprawled across the other side of the bed on top of the sheets, wearing only his boxer briefs. The muscles in his back twitched as he mumbled in his sleep. On the other side of the bed, James sat dozing in a chair.

James looked terrible. He hadn’t shaved. I’d never seen James with stubble. I didn’t know he *had* stubble. His hair was tangled, like he’d been plowing his hands through it. His slacks were dirty, and he only had on one of those tank top undershirt things—I wasn’t sure what they were called. I’d only heard them referred to as wifebeaters and I wasn’t going to call them that.

“He thought you were dead.”

I turned my head to see Frank hovering in the doorway. He’d whispered, trying to not wake anyone else in the room. Though honestly, they must have been exhausted, because at least two people in the room had supernatural level hearing and they hadn’t so much as twitched at the sound of Frank’s voice.

“We all did.” Frank tiptoed over until he was standing next to James.

“Wha’ happened?” My words came out a little mumbled, but I managed. Go, me.

“You were just *gone*.” Frank leaned against the foot of the bed. His face was pinched and pale. “No one knew how you got out of the house. You left your pouch—the coin, too. James called June to activate Ashley, but she couldn’t find you. Your power signature had vanished*.*” Frank shifted, sitting onto the edge of the bed.

I tried to make sense of what Frank was saying. If Ashley couldn’t find me, and I couldn’t call to her…what did that mean? Had something happened to my powers? Was it permanent? What would it mean, if I wasn’t a necromancer anymore?

I should be relieved. I’d never wanted the powers to begin with. Instead I felt the chilly slide of fear as it iced my veins. Maybe I hadn’t wanted the power, and maybe it complicated things, but it was also a cudgel I used to keep my friends, my family, *safe*. If I wasn’t a threat, what would happen to Ramon? Frank? The gnomes? *Brooke*.

Holy shit, Brooke. James had helped me set it up so she could be corporeal in the house when I wasn’t around, but had she blinked out when I had? Like a faulty switch?

I grabbed Frank’s wrist. “Brooke.”

Frank nodded, pulling out his phone. “I’ll message Haley.” He quickly tapped out a message. When he turned back to me, worry still etched the features of his face. “While we wait, maybe some food. You look really bad, Sam.”

“After we hear back from Haley.”

Frank looked like he wanted to argue, but wisely didn’t.

“How did you find me?” I had really given up there, in the end. I thought I’d die out there, alone except for the hog.

“Your phone,” James croaked. His eyes were slitted open, the silver irises brilliant against bloodshot eyes. After he surveyed me for a second, he sat up, shaking off his sleep.

“You traced where I pinged last or something?” I asked.

James rubbed a hand over his face. “No, that didn’t help much. When a phone pings a tower, the radius it gives you can be about twenty miles. Which told us you likely were still fairly close by, but not enough to start looking. No, you finally stumbled into an area with coverage. Which meant you showed back up on the MyFriends tracker we use.” He scowled. “I’m getting you all chipped like dogs. I’m tired of losing you.”

“Dog chips don’t work like that,” Frank said helpfully.

“Then we’ll get the kind that *do*,” James snapped.

Never had I been so glad that James insisted we use that app. Losing Frank in the French Quarter had been obnoxious, but not actually terrifying. Losing myself had been…I shivered.

“That got us close enough that we knew you were in the Bayou Sauvage National Wildlife Refuge. Once we were there, Ramon shifted. We knew if you were still anywhere in the vicinity, he would find you.” James reached out and took my wrist, feeling for my pulse.

Bears actually had an even better sense of smell than dogs. Once they’d brought Ramon to the refuge, he probably tracked me fairly quickly.

James grimaced. “The real difficulty was trying to hide a bear in Bayou Sauvage. A lot of the areas there are open marsh lands. Frank actually figured that problem out.”

Frank’s smile was a ghost of its usual self. “We had him use one of Chuck’s glamours—the one that makes him look like a cat?”

“He didn’t look like a cat when I saw him.”

James dropped my wrist, turned the flashlight app on his phone on, and flashed it in my eyes. “The charm didn’t fit him, so he had to carry it in his mouth. He dropped it in his excitement when he found you.”

“One guy did walk by on the path and saw him, but he’d taken a lot of mushrooms and thought he was hallucinating.” Frank shoved his hands into his pockets. “Kept asking me if I could see the bear, too. So I just told him I couldn’t.”

James, done with blinding me for kicks, turned the light off and stood. “I’m going to bring you something to eat. You will not leave this bed until you’ve consumed every crumb. Then we’re going straight to June’s.” James’s voice, always on the stern or serious side, was especially clipped, like he was biting out the words.

“Do we have to go to June’s?” I asked. I liked June, but I was still really tired and a lot scared.

“Yes,” He snarled, then he slammed the door.

Ramon finally stirred. “Whassit?”

“Go back to sleep,” I said. “It’s just James being James.”

Frank took James’s abandoned seat. “You scared him, Sam. Like, really scared him. He thought you were dead. I mean, we all did, but James…he really freaked out. I’m not sure I’ve ever seen him like that.”

I tried to push myself up to sitting, but mostly I just flopped. Ramon sat up, mouth opening in a jaw-cracking yawn. He slid his hands under my arms and propped me up against the headboard with the same ease I would use to position a doll to my liking. “Hey.”

“Sorry,” he said, still yawning. “Trying to help.”

“Why does he want me to go to June’s so badly?”

Frank shifted in his chair. “Well, we’re due to meet her anyway—because of the gnomes.”

I groaned, slouching down. “Right. The negotiations.”

“But he also wants her to look at you,” Ramon said, moving so he could sit across from me. “To figure out what happened. What made your power disappear.”

They both looked concerned, and I was sure I looked the same. What he didn’t say—what none of us said—was the bigger question. What would happen if it didn’t come back?

Chapter 5

On Sleepless Roads, the Sleepless Go

James made good on his threat—he stood over me as I sat in bed and made sure I ate every bite. I knew better than to even try to argue. James was in full blown Mother Hen mode and on edge. The only reason I wasn’t freaking out was that I was probably still in shock. Or maybe just so grateful I hadn’t been left to die with the hogs.

James…had control issues, to put it mildly. Frank was right—I’d scared him, and this was his coping mechanism. He couldn’t control who took me or what they did, but he could control how big of a bowl of grits I was eating. I finally drew the line when he handed me the second banana.

“James, I honestly can’t eat anymore. Four eggs, two pieces of toast, a large bowl of cheese grits, melon slices, and a banana are my limit.” The list didn’t do it justice. It had been a lot of food. More of a Ramon-sized helping than a Sam-sized one. And I was honestly alarmed at the amount of butter involved in my meal. Personally, I loved butter. Not enough to marry it, but definitely enough to take it out to dinner. James usually watched my diet like he was the king of the food pyramid and his chosen weapon was steamed vegetables and hummus.

Not together, obviously. But like…you know what I mean.

Anyway, it was deeply disturbing that James was letting me eat a meal that probably involved at least one stick of butter, several cups of cheese, and a very healthy amount of cream. And I’d taken full advantage of it, but I could not take that second banana. I just couldn’t.

He sighed and handed it to Frank. “You eat it.”

Frank opened his mouth to argue, saw James’s glare, and meekly peeled the banana and ate it.

James took my pulse rate again, but his frown was much lighter this time, which meant while I wasn’t back to normal, I was at least improving.

I was still tired, though. “I don’t suppose you’d let me nap before—”

“No.” James dropped my wrist. “You can nap in the car. Get up, get dressed—.” He eyed me. “Do you need help getting dressed?”

“I’m a grown-ish man,” I said, throwing back the comforter. “Of course I can…” I trailed off as I swung my legs over the side, stood, and abruptly slid to the ground like an overcooked noodle. I sat there for a second in the full stream of afternoon light, my boxers the only thing between me and the hardwood floor. I had the will to get up, but neither the energy nor the ability. “James, please help me put on pants.”

Ramon and Frank left to get themselves ready while James helped me into my clothes. Normally, this was where James would shoehorn me into a suit. I might be going to see June first, but our original plan had been to meet with the gnomes. As the person the gnomes would be protecting, I needed to look like an esteemed member of the council. A necromancer you do not mess with. And not the bruised, battered, and frankly bumbling person they were actually going to deal with.

In deference to the heat and my current status as “something the cat dragged in” that meant steel gray summer weight suit pants, matching vest, a deep blue short sleeved dress shirt, with some rather nice wingtip shoes. So help me, but James’s sense of style was starting to rub off on me. Which, honestly, was probably for the best since I still dressed like I was twelve. But the fact that I was starting to feel comfortable in dress clothes kind of weirded me out.

Suitably attired, I was bundled toward the rental car with Ramon, Frank, and Chuck-as-a-baby, with James sliding in behind the wheel. I’d called shotgun and no one argued because I think they were coddling me. Everyone was dressed to suit James’s expectations, even Chuck. Have you ever seen a baby in shirtsleeves and a bowtie? Adorable. Now picture that baby with a beard cursing like a sailor’s granny.

So cute. Just precious.

“Chuck, adjust your glamour. I can see your beard.” His answer was to flip me the bird, which I ignored.

Frank gently pushed the obscene gesture aside as he tried to get Chuck into the five-point harness in the car seat we got for him. We’d placed by the window in the SUV, because safety is important and Chuck would complain less if he had a window seat. Frank was still outside the car, leaning in to strap in Chuck, but Ramon had already slid into the back bench seat.

Chuck was suddenly having none of it.

“No!” He smacked away Frank’s hands and tore off his baby glamour. “I will not show up like a big baby, all trussed up and weak. They will laugh at me!” He crossed his arms and huffed. “I will not jeopardize this mission.”

We all looked at Frank, who was king of the gnomes, at least honorarily. I’d bought him a rather lovely tiara to prove it. He looked helplessly back at us.

Frank held out the necklace with a different glamour charm on it. “A cat, then. I can go get the carrier—”

Chuck bristled, his face turned a mottled red before releasing what was, frankly, an impressive stream of profanity, even for him.

“I’m sensing that you’re unhappy,” I said, when he took a break to breathe. “With the plan as a whole.”

He glared at me.

“Which part are you unhappy with,” Ramon asked, tilting his head. “The seat? The baby thing? Because you usually like the baby thing. You think it’s funny.”

“I think he’s worried about his fragile masculinity,” Frank offered.

“Is that it?” Ramon asked. “Are you feeling fragile?” Ramon held his arms out. “Do you need a hug? Would that help?”

For a second it looked like Chuck might actually explode with rage. He vibrated with it. “My masculinity is not fragile!” He bellowed. “It is strong!” He thumped his chest. “Like me.”

We all collectively decided that now was not the time to dissect that particularly argument.

Ramon shrugged. “Hugs always make me feel better when I’m feeling fragile, but okay. It’s here if you need it.”

James turned the key, the car purring to life.

“James,” I said. “He’s not buckled.”

James just looked at me, and the look clearly telegraphed that he didn’t care one bit if the angry gnome took a header through the windshield. “He’s a menace.” He muttered the words, but he didn’t shift the car into reverse.

I didn’t play the boss card much, because it felt weird, but we really needed to get going. “Chuck, for safety reasons, you need to either be in the car seat or the pet carrier. I don’t care which.” When he turned his cherry-red face to me, I channeled my best Icy-James expression and leveled him with it. That being said, the gnomes did best with praise ladled on with a heavy hand. “Your job is to protect. The best bodyguards blend in.” I pointed at him. “You do not blend in.” I tipped my chin down so I could see Frank better. “Do gnomes value only strength, or do they also value cunning?”

Frank frowned thoughtfully. “Both? I mean, a good brawl is number one, but they appreciate cunning.”

I turned to Chuck. “The glamours? Those are cunning.*”* I dropped my voice down. “No one suspects a *baby.* The possibilities, Chuck. You can show this other tribe that you’re cunning, resourceful, and will do whatever it takes to get the job done.” I waved a hand at the car seat. “Even if that means sacrificing a bit of your pride for the mission.”

The red faded from Chuck’s face as he turned over what I said in his mind. A slow, evil smile spread across his face. “No one suspects a baby.” He snatched the glamour back from Frank. “I’ll do it.” He put the necklace over his head and climbed into the seat.

Frank mouthed, *Thank you* at me.

I smiled at him, then collapsed into the seat, ready for my nap.

June didn’t live in New Orleans, but in a small town in Mississippi about an hour away called Bay St. Louis. I slept through the ride, only coming awake when we pulled up to her house. Though June lived inland, she was close enough to the coast that her house was on stilts. She’d explained to me that she was in a flood zone and that sometimes this area was hit with surge waves during hurricanes. The thought of which, frankly, I found terrifying. When I pointed that out, she reminded me that Seattle was close to an active volcano and got earthquakes. At least you could see hurricanes coming.

Which…fair enough.

The stilts were also covered in layers of wards, and it was difficult to sneak up and break into a house on stilts. Not impossible, but it added a layer of defense. The house itself was one story and painted green. A set of wooden stairs took you from the ground to the top deck, which June had decorated with potted plans and a couple of lawn chairs.

Ramon practically jogged up the steps, but I climbed them with the speed and dexterity of an arthritic tortoise. Sleep and food had helped, but I was far from back to normal. Frank followed behind Ramon carrying Chuck, while James hovered behind me in case I didn’t make it. I wanted to be irritated about it, but honestly, I might *not* make it.

June was leaning against the frame of her sliding glass door, a cigarette in her hand. She examined me through wisps of smoke before shaking her head in disgust. “Can’t leave you alone for ten seconds. What did you do now?”

“I have absolutely no idea,” I wheezed, finally reaching the top. “But whatever it was, I don’t recommend it. Zero stars.”

“You better sit down before you fall down,” she said, motioning to one of the chairs. I collapsed into it with relief. June spent a second calling for Ashley, the harbinger that we both worked with. Three heartbeats later, a young girl popped into existence on the porch, startling Frank, who hadn’t been prepared for Ashley to pop into existence right next to him for some reason.

Ashley looked like a young girl—pale skinned, her black hair in ponytails. Today she wore a black and white plaid summer shorts with a black button up sleeveless dress shirt covered in pink and purple graffiti-style skulls. She pushed her sunglasses up onto her head, assessing me. “Huh. I thought you were dead.”

“If it’s any consolation, I *feel* dead.” Or at least well on my way.

Ashley stuck out a single finger and poked my arm. “It’s so weird. You’re there. I can see you sitting there.” She poked me harder. “But your power signature is gone.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” June said, stubbing her cigarette out in a flowerpot full of sand and other cigarette butts.

“Are you trying to grow a cigarette tree?” I asked.

She glared at me. “You must be felling terrible, because that joke was *awful.*”

I rubbed a hand over my eyes. “I’m definitely not at my best.”

“If you’ve never heard of it,” Ramon asked, leaning against the railing, “does that mean you don’t know how to fix it?”

Neither of them answered right away, which was itself an answer. June stared out at the trees, thinking. “Go through everything that happened—that you remember—from last night.”

We took turns telling the story, everyone jumping in when they had something to add. When we were done, we fell silent, everyone deep in thought.

Ashley put her hands on her hips, her mouth pursed. “I can ask around. See if Ed or anyone has heard of anything similar.” She squinted at James. “He still have that Stygian coin?”

James nodded, taking out both of my necklaces. “He had them off last night.” His tone was disapproving.

“I took a shower. Didn’t want the pouch to get wet.” No one seemed to care that I had a good reason, so I stopped arguing.

“Put the coin on him,” Ashley said. “Let’s see what happens.”

I leaned forward so that James could slip the chain over my head. The metal coin rested heavily on my chest, but otherwise, nothing happened.

June pulled out a pocket knife and stepped toward me, but Ramon intercepted her. She gently pushed him aside. “I know you usually donate, but with things as they are, I want to try his blood first.” Ramon didn’t like it, but didn’t argue.

I held out my arm, letting her slide the sharp blade against my skin, the quick bite of it opening a small cut. I pressed the coin into the blood. Still nothing. I tried calling up my power again. It was like flipping a light switch when the power was out. Lots of clicks, but no lights. I sighed and dropped the coin. James disappeared into June’s house, appearing a moment later with a small metal box in his hands.

June cleaned her blade on a handkerchief and tucked it back into her pocket with a frown. “I was hoping since you’d stored some of your own power in there…”

“Yeah, I know. Good idea. Sucks it didn’t work.” Usually the coin acted like a power reserve. In theory, I should have been able to take that power back. In practice? Apparently not anymore.

“He probably needs a little necromantic power to draw it out,” James said, opening the box. He cleaned the small cut with a wipe, applied antibacterial goo to the bandage, and popped it onto my arm. “We’ll let him rest some more and keep trying. See if it comes back on its own.” He closed up the box and handed it to Frank. “Put this back in June’s bathroom, please.”

June snorted. “Make yourself at home.”

James simply nodded, his expression abstracted.

Ashely gently punched my arm. “Glad you’re not dead.” She popped her glasses back down onto her face. “I’ll head over to the other side. See what I can find out.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Ashley opened a portal, waved, and stepped into wherever she went when she wasn’t with us. She was very close-mouthed on the subject.

James put my pouch over my head. “In the meantime, keep this on, keep it visible. Everyone will think you’re just hiding your powers. If for any reason it comes up, we’ll have to think of creative ways out of displaying your power.”

“Got it,” I said. We all decided to not talk about the bigger question that was currently biting at my mental heels—what if rest didn’t work? What if it never came back? I hadn’t been pleased with the whole “you have magical death powers” reveal at first. It had made my life hard. Still did. But not having it? I wasn’t sure about that, either. I’d grown used to the magic. I’d grown used to my new life.

And I’d made some enemies. Now I had zero power to keep them in check.

June clapped her hands, snapping me out of my funk. “Well, now that we’ve done all we can with Sam, how about we move on to why you’re supposed to be here?”

Chuck perked up. “Is it time?”

June grinned at him. “Let’s go talk to some gnomes.”

The gnomes had agreed to meet us on a neutral ground—they trusted June as far as it went, but we were unknown quantities. I sort of assumed we’d be meeting somewhere isolated—a shady overgrown lot, a wooded area, or an abandoned building.

I did not expect it to be a Waffle House.

We don’t have Waffle Houses in Seattle, but I’d quickly realized that they appeared in Mississippi with almost the same frequency as Starbucks appeared for us. The long, narrow buildings with their bright yellow signs were ubiquitous.

We pulled into the lot of the Waffle House and came to a stop. I could see through the large pane windows that the restaurant was half full, and again, it didn’t seem like the place you’d pick for a clandestine meeting.

“Are you sure we have the address right?” I asked, peering out the window.

“Yes.” June sounded confident but double checked her phone for me.

Ramon bounced in his seat. “Yeeessss.”

June pointed her phone at him. “That is too much enthusiasm for a Waffle House.”

Ramon shrugged. “I like hash browns. They have hash browns. Why wouldn’t I be excited?”

“It just seems like a strange choice,” I said, ignoring Ramon.

June reached for the door handle. “It’s hiding in plain sight. Doesn’t matter what they do or how they look—no one’s going to notice. It’s a Waffle House.”

“What does that mean?” I asked, sliding out of the car.

June just shook her head. “It’s hard to explain. Waffle Houses are almost their own universe—a little bubble of unreality. Always dinner and a show at Waffle House.” She shook her head again. “You’ll understand better once you’ve experienced it.”

We followed her in, Me, Ramon, James, Frank, and Chuck. Chuck was still in the glamour of a baby, because we were pretty sure no one would let us bring a cat into a restaurant.

We stepped into the Waffle House and were immediately hit with the smell of bacon, grease, and onions. The cashier was in the middle, with booths lining the two walls extending in both directions, except for a line of stools bolted to the floor in front of a counter area. The cashier in front of us was backed by a long griddle where two cooks were handling orders. The griddle snapped and popped, mixing in with the clatter of dishes and conversation. One of the booths close to the cashier held about four people deep into a game of Monopoly.

A man stood in front of us arguing with the cashier. He was tall and lanky, wearing a tattered shirt that he’d probably slept in—I was basing that on the fact that he was wearing the shirt over a pair of tight sleep shorts. The dividing line between the sleep shorts he was wearing and a pair of boxers was thin at best. No pants. One sock. Flip flops.

The cashier was eyeballing him. “Where your pants?”

“I got shorts.” He pointed at the shorts.

In case we’d missed them.

I didn’t think anyone had, except maybe the woman asleep at the counter next to her cup of coffee, which seemed like a defense mechanism.

The cashier seemed dubious. “Those ain’t pants. You need pants.”

The man threw out his hands. “I didn’t have time to grab no pants—my wife chased me out of the house.”

One of the men bellied up to the counter turned. “Wife chased you out?”

One Sock made an exasperated noise. “With a cast iron skillet. You can’t argue with a skillet.” He turned back to the cashier. “I just need a cup of coffee. Think about what I should do next.”

“Flowers.” One of the guys at the grill half turned. “You get your girl flowers. Then she’ll put the skillet down.”

“What’d you do to earn that skillet, Sugar?” A woman at a booth asked, squinting. “That’s what you got to figure out. Say you’re sorry. Take her out to dinner.”

“She got the skillet out,” the man at the counter said, “your hole is deep. Dinner isn’t going to do it. You best get her some jewelry.”

The cashier looked at One Sock and grimaced. “You got any money in those shorts?”

The man dug two dollars out of his sock. The cashier didn’t seem overly pleased with that development, but she just shook her head. “I don’t get paid to deal with this shit.” She pointed one long finger at the counter. “Go on, then.”

One Sock thanked her and moved over to the counter, where someone bought him a waffle and people kept offering him advice. The booth playing Monopoly called out to the cashier, and she left her station to go over to them, roll the dice, and move the metal boot six spaces. She landed on an open space, counted out her money to buy it, and then entered into a fierce negotiation with one of the other players over the property.

“And that,” June said, “is Waffle House.”

“We should probably find our booth,” I said.

Frank and Chuck peered carefully at the game. Chuck grunted. “She shouldn’t trade that property. Leaves her flank exposed.”

James appeared to be ignoring everyone, but I knew from experience that he could probably give you a detailed description of everyone in the restaurant.

“I love it here,” Ramon said reverently. “And I’m going to eat my weight in hash browns.” He nudged me. “Sam, look at all the stuff you can get on your hash browns.”

“Yes, Ramon, it’s very exciting.” I stood on my toes and searched the tables. “Anyone see our party?”

It was June that spotted them at one of the back booths. A broad, amiable looking man with a cup of coffee, a ball cap pushed back to reveal a wide forehead. Next to him, seated in two booster seats, were the most serious looking toddlers I’d ever seen.

Chuck sucked in a breath.

“That’s them,” James confirmed. He herded us all to the booth like errant ducklings. “Let’s get this over with before that man’s wife shows up with her frying pan. The way things have been going, we’d never survive it.”

Chapter Six

So Won’t You, Please, (Be My) Be My Baby?

We couldn’t all fit into the booth, so James, Ramon, and June sat across from us. I slid into the seat after Frank, baby-Chuck sitting on his lap. The toddlers stared back at us, sitting artificially high due to their booster seats, their expressions grave. It was very at odds with their appearance. One had her hair done up in two little puffballs on the sides of her head, tied with pink ribbons that matched her jumper. Her face was cherubic, with a little dimple, her brown eyes several shades darker than the reddish-brown of her skin.

The other little girl wore a matching jumper, only hers was a sunny yellow. Freckles dotted her pale nose, her eyes reminding me of an emerald in both color and hardness. Her red hair was braided in a crown around her head. Both of the toddlers were assessing us and I had the distinct impression that they found us lacking so far.

After a long, quiet moment, Pink Jumper turned to their companion. “Thank you, Beau. We can take it from here.” She waved an imperious hand to our other table. “We’ll let you know when we’re done. Feel free to order what you’d like. Our treat, of course.”

Beau tipped his hat at us good naturedly and shifted out of his seat, ambling over to sit with everyone else.

We looked back at the girls.

“People react oddly to two toddlers doing things like driving or entering a restaurant.” She shrugged. “Hence, Beau.”

“So he’s not part of your clan?” Frank asked.

Yellow Jumper looked shocked. “He’s human.” She barely glanced at us, focusing on Chuck for the first time. “You know how they are. Like children to us.” Her expression turned imploring as her attention flitted to me. “That’s why we’re guardians. You’re like babes in the woods.”

I grinned. “I’d love to argue with your assessment of me, but I can’t.” It would be too hypocritical after the last few days. And the last year. Or two. Or my whole life. I was tempted to argue that the gnomes weren’t any more mature than we were, but I kept my mouth shut.

My gnomes were like tiny, violent children on the best of days, but they didn’t need to know that. Yet.

However, Pink and Yellow Jumpers’ comments had revealed a problem and I considered catching James’ eye for a second. Only I couldn’t, because the gnomes were watching us too closely, and they’d catch it for the appeal that it was. I was supposed to be in charge; therefore I wouldn’t look to someone else for help. Which left me kind of stuck, because I *needed* help. Should I tell them that Frank was considered an honorary gnome? It seemed like something they’d react poorly to, but not telling them and accepting them into our gnomes would feel too much like we’d tricked them.

And them thinking I didn’t rely on members of my team for help was also a trick. I decided to split the difference and reveal one thing while keeping the other to myself for the moment. But before I could say anything, Frank took the decision out of my hands.

He cleared his throat. “If I may? I’d like to present my companion to you formally.”

Now Pink Jumper looked shocked. “That’s not your place.” She crossed her arms, scowling imperiously, a move very out of place in her toddler form. “We’ll wait for his second.”

I turned to Frank, my eyebrow raised.

His expression turned sheepish. “In formal settings, the lower ranking gnome makes introductions for the higher ranking one. Since I’m an honorary gnome, we felt—”

How he felt was lost in the strangled gasps of dismay and outrage from across the table. The toddlers looked like we’d slapped them. If they’d had pearls, they would be clutched.

“This meeting was a mistake,” Pink Jumper said, attempting to clamber out of her booster seat.

“I’m beginning to see why you came all this way to meet with us. No one else would have you.” The look of pity on Yellow Jumper’s face made Chuck jut his chin out stubbornly, his shoulders back. He had his pride and would not let them see how much their comments had cut him.

Thankfully, booster seats were really awkward to get out of, even for warrior gnomes, so I had a second to jump in. “As you have said, we flew a long way to be here. We’ve shown you every bit of respect in doing so. We agreed to your meeting place. The least you can do is hear us out and eat some waffles.” I softened my voice. “It is, after all, the house of waffles. Would you defile such a place?”

My approach seemed to confuse them, halting them in their movements. Their escape was further stymied by the appearance of our waitress.

“What can I get you?”

I waved a hand at the toddler gnomes. “Ladies first.”

The gnomes eased themselves back into their seats.

“Waffles,” Pink Jumper said, her voice suddenly childish, her pronunciation slightly garbled. “Egg! Please thank you!”

Yellow Jumper clapped her hands in glee. “Waffle-egg-bacon! Peas-n-hank-ewe!”

The waitress smiled indulgently at the two little girls. “Aren’t you two just the cutest!”

“They are the cutest,” I confirmed, drawing the waitress’s attention to me. I was still full from earlier, so I ordered a cup of coffee. After Frank ordered for him and Chuck, the waitress left and I barreled ahead before the gnomes could argue with me.

“Look, I’ll be honest with you. I haven’t been a council member very long. Hell, I haven’t been a necromancer very long.” Their eyebrows winged up in unison. “Long story. Anyway, I inherited my home and my faithful warrior gnomes. The last necromancer…” How to explain Douglas? Unhinged? A psychopath? “Had a specific way of doing things that I don’t agree with, and it was only recently that we realized that he’d neglected our clan of gnomes.”

I paused to let the waitress fill my coffee, before she quick-timed it back to her monopoly game. “I’m trying to right what my predecessor wronged. I’m trying to show my gnomes the respect they deserve. They’ve saved my life many times.” And probably endangered it just as many, but they didn’t need to know that.

“I am *honored* to be held so highly by our gnomes,” Frank’s voice held quiet pride and it wasn’t feigned. He may have had the gnomes thrust upon him, but he managed their chaos well. Frank had every right to be proud of himself and I liked that he extended that to the gnomes.

Frank adjusted Chuck on his lap. “We know—they know—that their clan is…unusual. We’re trying our best to fix it. But it’s not their fault and they shouldn’t be held accountable. They entered into a sacred trust with Douglas and he broke it.”

I took over. “You don’t have to agree to anything. We’re not trying to play on your pity. All I’m asking is that you hear us out.” Okay, I was trying to play on their pity a *little*.

The two gnome toddlers turned to each other and proceeded to have an entire conversation without speaking a single word. It was eerie.

Finally they reached some sort of agreement, turning to us just in time for their food to be placed in front of them by the waitress.

After that was settled, Yellow Jumper reached across the table, grabbing the syrup so she could systematically drown her waffle. “We will hear you out.” She placed a hand on her chest. “I am Merry Death.” She nodded at her companion. “It is my honor to present Mercy.”

That couldn’t be it. I knew too many gnomes to believe that was all there was to her name. “Mercy?” I kept my tone polite.

“Short for Merciless Blade,” the toddler informed me as she made quick work of cutting up her egg before applying Tabasco to it with a flourish. “You have until we finish our meal to convince us. I suggest you start talking.”

\*\*\*

Brid loved running in her animal form. Her canid shape—a charming mix of fae hound and wolf—moved with a grace and economy her human form would never master. Legs stretching out, eating up miles with an easy lope. The chill of the morning had slid into a clear, bright day. Blue sky, green grass, the crisp sound of leaves underfoot. A far-off bird trilled. Brid gloried in the sensory experience of the forest. The musk of squirrels, raccoons, the faint traces of field mice, and the mouth-watering scent of deer.

It made her heart light, her feet fly.

As long as she ignored the rhythm of Bran’s feet as he ran beside her. The minute they stopped running, they were going to argue. This was the first moment they’d been able to get away from the pack house, to find some privacy, meaning he’d been stewing over her choice since last night. Bran was calm, steady. A great advisor, really—near perfect. But like any other person in her family, he could be a hair unreasonable when it came to his baby sister.

He was going to growl. A lot, probably.

She decided to put another mile between her and the lodge. The Blackthorn pack house sat on a huge parcel of land, the majority of which they left wild. They would need to go deep into it to allow them both to shout properly. Because make no mistake, she was going to shout back. She may be Bran’s little sister, but she was also the head of the pack. With Bran, she could afford some leniency if he threw a fit. She knew without a doubt he wasn’t actually questioning her authority.

Someone else throwing a fit? That might turn into fists being thrown. Brid was a patient ruler. To a point. Sometimes a wolf needed a nip to their hind quarters to remind them who was boss.

When she decided they’d gone far enough, Brid slowed, shifting from wolf to human between one breath and the next. This was the gift of being the hybrid she was. No lengthy, painful shifting process for her or her siblings. Just magic, plain and simple.

Back in human form, she stretched her arms above her head, smiling happily as she dug her toes into the long grass. Of course, the downside of being human again was that she no longer had a fur coat to keep her warm. She hoped her brother yelled quickly.

Bran shifted a second later, mimicking her stretches. “Make me see the sense of this, Bridin. Why bring a stranger onto our lands? Amongst our people?”

She crossed her arms, more to keep in her body heat than as a defensive stance. “He’s a suitor.”

Bran snorted. “There have been a lot of suitors. You didn’t invite any of them back. You didn’t invite them for a second date.” Bran’s eyes flashed for a second. “Does he have something on you? On us? Did he pressure you—”

Now it was her turn to snort. “Really? Does that sound like me? At all?”

He rubbed a hand through his brutally shorn hair, a growl in his voice. “No. It doesn’t. If he tried to blackmail you, you’d drag him into an alley and kick his ass.” He crossed his arms, jutting his chin out. “So what is it then? Did his pretty face turn your head?”

She grinned at him. “Did you just call Leo pretty?”

Dark brows arrowed down. “That’s not the point—”

“Oh, yes it is.” Her grin widened. “You haven’t noticed anyone in a good long while, brother.”

“And I’m not noticing Leo!” Bran shouted. “Stop changing the subject.” His head canted to the side; the movement distinctly canine. “Is that why you invited him here? Trying to fix me up?”

“No,” Brid said, stepping forward to place a hand on his arm. “I wouldn’t do that.”

A sigh burst from him. “No, you wouldn’t.” He ducked down to look at her. “You wouldn’t do any of this, Brid. That’s the problem.” His voice gentled, all growl gone. “And you may have fooled the pack, but not me. Not Sean, Sayer or Rourke, either.”

She hadn’t been trying to fool her brothers, though. “Does the pack know?”

He shook his head. “About Sam? No. Suspect?” He tipped his head back and forth. “Probably some of them. Suspecting isn’t the same as knowing, though.”

She shivered, the cold starting to seep in. “It’s been really hard.”

His mouth pinched in concern. “If you need me to get the pack to back off, take a time off dating, I’ll do it.”

“No, this is better, I think.” She quickly explained, sketching out her plan.

Bran listened, giving her his full attention. Brid loved this about her oldest brother—no one listened like Bran did. It was a skill that few bothered to truly learn. “Do you trust him?” He asked when she’d finished.

She scrunched up her nose. “Yes?” She shivered again, tightening her arms again for warmth. “I think he needs us as much as we do him. By all means, keep researching him, but for now, the plan stays on course.”

Bran rubbed a hand over his chin. “We putting him in a guest cabin?”

There were a few cabins in the woods close to the main lodge for people visiting, or when one of them needed a break from the main lodge. It was difficult to have any sort of privacy living as a group.

“No,” Brid said, shaking her head. “Put him in the main lodge, his room close to mine.”

Bran laughed. “Absolutely not.”

Her grin returned. “Next to you, then.”

“You’re a menace,” he growled.

“Yup,” Brid chirped. “Are you done growling now? Because I’m cold.”

Bran nudged her with his shoulder. “When do I ever really growl at you?”

“When you think I need it.” She went up on her toes and kissed his cheek. “And I love that you do.”

He eyed her warily. “What does that mean?”

“For a wolf, you’re not very growly. Stern, yes. Quiet. Stoic, even. But you only lose your temper and growl at people who have pissed you off tremendously, or the handful of people you love deeply.” She grinned, clapping her hands together. “I do both.”

He sighed. “That you do. Enough growling for now. Let’s get back to the pack house before we freeze. Then we’ll put your plan into action.” He shook his head. “This is going to cause some ripples, you know.”

“I know.”

He dipped his chin in a sharp nod. “Good. Pack needs a little reminder now and then. That you’re in charge. Put Moretti in the family wing and let the tongues waggle.” His slow grin would have been at home on any wolf’s face. “Anyone steps out of line, we’ll be there.”

Brid was suddenly, sharply filled with love for her brothers. Because she hadn’t doubted—even for a second—that they wouldn’t back her up. “Thank you.” Then she pivoted, pushing forward through the grass, breaking out in a run. “Beat you home!”

She shifted on the next breath, not waiting for him to respond.

But she could hear him, the steady beat of his bounding paws, pacing her all the way home.

Chapter 7

I’m Not Crying

(It’s Just Been Raining, On My Face)

“I can’t believe they said no.” Frank slumped dejectedly in his seat, leaning heavily against Chuck’s car seat. The gnome’s chin was held high, his face set in stone, but even I could tell he was crushed.

“The laughing was a little much,” I said. Both of the gnomes had laughed so hard at our offer that for a second I’d though their drinks were going to come out their noses.

Ramon snorted. “Look, I love us, but even *I* can believe they said no.”

Frank glared at him, his face mulish. “What are you talking about?”

Ramon pointed at me. “Broken necromancer.” James. “Fussy, occasionally terrifying pukis.”

“Terrifyingly good at my job,” James murmured as he turned the car onto June’s road.

Ramon pointed at Frank. “Human gnome.” He swirled his hand to Chuck. “You.”

Chuck pointed his chin even higher. I think he was at his limit of insult today. If Ramon pushed him any further, he’d need to be careful opening closets in our house for the next six months. Maybe I should remind him of the level of hazing I got when I first moved in.

Finally, Ramon turned the finger on himself last. “And me.”

I leaned harder into my seat. This morning’s excursion had exhausted me. “What’s wrong with you?”

Ramon grimaced, turning his face to the window. “I let someone walk you out of our house. I’m a fucking *bear*, Sammy. I have better senses than anyone in this car.” He rubbed a hand over his face, smothering a growl. “They made it right past me. You almost died.” The look he gave me held true anguish and my heart crunched into a leaden ball. “What good is all of this if I can’t help? If I can’t protect you?”

“You found me when I was lost,” I murmured. “You carried me out of the forest. You *did* save me. All of you.” I gave him a wan imitation of a smile. “I wouldn’t be here if you all hadn’t come looking for me.”

“Whatever this is,” James said, his words crisp and biting, “it also snuck past me.” Silver eyes met Ramon’s in the review mirror. “We share the blame equally.”

June, who’d been quiet this whole time, finally chimed in. “I think you should skip the self-flagellation and instead use this experience as a marker.”

“What does *that* mean?” Ramon twisted further in his seat to look at her.

“It means that whatever did this walked past wards, a highly trained and dedicated house spirit, as well as a were creature. Whatever it is, it’s crazy powerful or very lucky.”

James pulled in front of June’s house, putting the car in park. “Or it didn’t walk past us at all, but lured Sam out some other way.”

“Either way,” June said, her tone serious, “it’s scary. Whatever this is, I don’t like it.” She unclipped her seatbelt. “What now?”

I gave her the same tired smile I gave Ramon. “We go home.”

“Back to New Orleans it is.” Ramon steepled his fingers. “Can we stop and get Sonic on the way?” Ramon had been working his way through their extensive shake menu.

June looked at him and laughed. “You just ate at Waffle House.”

Ramon shrugged.

“I don’t care if we stop,” I said, “but I didn’t mean New Orleans.”

James turned off the car. “Seattle—are you sure?”

My arms were doing impressions of lead weights, I was so tired. “My necromancer training is obviously on hiatus.” June’s smile was tinged with sadness and none of us mentioned that the hiatus might be permanent. We were all pretending hard that my magic would come back. “The gnomes turned us down. There’s no reason to stay.” And every reason to go. An image of Brid floated up into my mind, giving me a sort of bittersweet comfort.

James nodded sharply. “I’ll book us on the next flight.”

The car door clanged shut as June got out, ambling over to my side. James hit the button, rolling my window down for her. She put out her hand. “You’re all right, no matter what Ashley says.” Her eyes twinkled.

I shook her hand. “You can come up you know. At least to visit. See your family.” I let go of her hand. “I have it on good authority that the local necromancers would welcome you, should you want to move closer to your sister.”

June looked at her house. “I’ll think on it, Sam. People need me here, but…” She sighed, digging a pack of cigarettes out of her pocket. “I do miss my sister and my niece.”

“Offer’s open,” I told her gently.

She waved at the rest of the car. “Good seeing y’all.” June turned the wave into a shoulder pat for me. “I’ll tell you whatever Ashley finds out.” She squeezed my shoulder. “And keep me in the loop, okay?”

“I will.”

“It will come back, Sam.”

I didn’t argue with her. What could I say? Instead, I waved her off, all of us sitting quietly in the car as we made sure she got into her house okay. As soon as she did, I rolled up my window and closed my eyes.

I fell asleep before we left June’s driveway.

I didn’t wake up until James parked in front of my New Orleans house an hour later. My brain felt thick and useless. Groggy, I stumbled into the house, collapsing onto the couch because I couldn’t be bothered going all the way to my room.

I didn’t wake again until dinner time, when Ramon nudged me awake for food. I felt marginally better at that point. James had buckled under Ramon’s begging and got take out—po’boys for everyone else, Greek for me. I can’t eat most traditional New Orleans food and though po’boys were pretty versatile, most places don’t make vegetarian ones. That was okay—the Greek place James had found was equally delicious.

James spread the takeout boxes out onto the dining room table, handing out cloth napkins to all of us as soon as he was done. We ate quietly at first, the only noise the rustling of paper as po’boys were unwrapped. Subdued. Practically melancholic. Chuck didn’t even get excited over his root beer. I had a feeling that, if he’d been alone, he would have cried into it.

Frank broke the silence first. “I feel like we failed.” He stared forlornly at the sliced of tomato that had slipped from his po’boy. “Completely failed.”

I tore off a piece of pita bread. “That seems a bit harsh. If I was grading us, I’d say a solid C-. A for effort, but D in follow through.”

Ramon unwrapped his second sandwich, this one fried catfish. I think the last one had been shrimp. “I was always an A student. Can’t say I care for this experience.”

James glowered at his po’boy. They were messy to eat, but I would put twenty dollars on James looking absolutely immaculate when he was done. Frank already had sauce smeared on his chin and Ramon had temporarily lost a shrimp to his lap, regaining it by invoking the five second rule. “I booked us an early flight in the morning. We’ll put this all behind us soon enough.”

“It’s not a total loss,” I said. “I learned some things and we got to see New Orleans. Ramon got to eat a nutria.” James had found him a quiet, dark area to shift so he could paw one out of the water and try it.

“Do not recommend,” Ramon grumbled. “Tastes like rat.”

“Please don’t go into anymore detail than that,” Frank begged. “You know, again.”

I pointed my pita at him. “It’s not any weirder than you eating any other animal.”

“The animals I eat aren’t still…wiggling.” Frank shuddered.

James’s grin was practically feral. “You should try it sometime.”

“Ew, no.” Frank shoved away the last of his fries.

Dinner ended shortly after that, James keeping a careful eye on me, making sure I ate everything. He didn’t even pretend not to watch. After we cleaned up our dinner mess—James neatly folding up his wrapper, the rest of us sweeping up the debris from our own meals—I headed up to my room to pack.

I shuffled wearily into my bedroom. I would miss it, but I was also ready to be back in my own bed. I headed over to the dresser. You know how hotels always have dressers and you think, “Who really unpacks their suitcases and uses these?” James, that’s who. He’d unpacked my bag the second we got to the house. My clothes neatly folded and lined up in the drawers like little soldiers. Like so many things about James, it was both slightly unsettling and oddly endearing at the same time. It did make it much easier to find what I needed.

I had just pulled out my suitcase and thrown it on the bed when James knocked on the door frame.

“I’m doing some laundry so we don’t have to pack dirty things.”

James was such a cat sometimes. “We’re perfectly capable of doing our own laundry, James. You don’t have to do it.”

He stared at me, one eyebrow winging up like a bird shooting for the heavens.

I huffed. “I shrunk *one sweater. One time*.”

He held up two fingers.

“Fine,” I grumbled. “Twice.” In my defense, how was I supposed to know some things had to be washed on certain cycles or handwashed? My entire wardrobe had been jeans and T-shirts before James. I could do laundry, just, you know, not fancy laundry.

“Frank managed to wash an entire load with a red glitter pen.” James crossed his arms.

I gathered up my dirty clothes and handed them over. “What about Ramon?”

“Ramon knows I’m better at getting out blood and mending tears. As such, he’s smart enough to hand over his clothing without complaint.” He took the clothes from me.

“And that extra work doesn’t make you lump him in with me and Frank?”

This time both dark brows dove down. “His issues are natural consequences to him being a shapeshifter. He can’t help it and I don’t hold it against him. *Your* issues stem from a general incompetence in the area of adult life skills. I have high hopes that both you and Frank will grow out of it.”

I scoffed. “I can adult.”

James sighed. “Despite current vernacular, adult is not meant to be a verb.”

“I can adult,” I said, “but I cannot diagram a sentence.”

James visibly wilted.

I smiled at him. “My mom got us a lot of Mad Libs as a kid—that’s the only reason I know what a verb is.”

James tilted his head, suddenly curious. “Mad Libs?”

“I’ll buy you some for the plane.” Sometimes airports had them in the little shops. James would enjoy teaching us grammar and I would enjoy James being silly. James desperately needed more silly in his life.

Even though James had all of my laundry clutched to him, he hadn’t left yet, which was unlike him. James didn’t linger. “Yes?”

“Have you checked?”

I didn’t have to ask what he was referring to. I closed my eyes, mentally feeling around for my power. If my magic had been a cartoon desert, a tumbleweed would have rolled by. I shook my head, opening my eyes. “Nothing.”

James’s face was carefully neutral, but I could see the hint of worry in his eyes. “We’ll check again tomorrow.”

I unzipped my luggage, the sound of the zipper echoing in the room. “You’re going to watch me sleep again, aren’t you?”

The corner of James’s mouth twitched.

I deflated. “You’re all sleeping in here, aren’t you?”

“You better believe it.” And with that, James left me to my packing.

#

The meal had gone by too quickly. It stood over the empty vessel and mourned. Not for the vessel, but for the hungry pit in its own stomach.

It had such *hunger.*

Angry, the creature lashed out, slamming phantom limbs into the vessel. Limbs that grew less phantom with every stolen morsel.

The vessel rocked but didn’t move. Frustration mounted.

It had glutted itself on the cold star, it knew that now. But this one…this one had been only a few scant bites. A few bites and it was no more.

This would never do.

The creature felt the first fluttering of panic. What if it couldn’t find another star? What if there was no more cold magic?

But no, it could feel it. The first meal, its signature faint. A merest whisper of power—not even that. A whisper of a whisper. Distant, but close by.

There must be more, just maybe not *here*.

It was starting to learn things, knowledge swallowed along with the cold magic, like seasoning. With each stolen morsel, more of it came to be.

More *self.*

With more self, its understanding of the world grew.

What the creature needed to do was think. To plan.

*Yes.* A plan.

If the food wasn’t *here* then it needed to go *there.* Wherever *there* was or might be.

It needed to move on the winds.

Not drift, but glide.

Float with purpose.

Hunt like it was meant to hunt.

But hunting wouldn’t be enough.

The snack had taught it that. It needed to gather. *Stash.* Find food and keep it somewhere convenient. Somewhere the creature could go when it was hungry. If it had many snacks, it could nibble—a little from each one. Not consume it until there was nothing left. Make the food *last*.

Words floated in the ether, the creature plucking them out like jeweled fruit. *Sustainable.* That was it. The way it was eating wasn’t *sustainable*. So it would create a stash. A hoard.

Yes. That was it. As the plan formed, the creatures’ frustration ebbed away.

It would build its hoard. Gather the tiny morsels together. All the while watching. Following. Waiting until the time the star glowed again in the distance.

Then it would go. The creature would follow that star, follow it until it could gulp up that cold magic. It could fill its empty belly. Grow fat on the cold magic.

Oh yes. That’s what it would do.

The creature was learning.

And it was learning fast.

It wouldn’t be hungry forever.

Chapter 9

Jealousy, Turning Saints Into the Sea

James cobbled an outfit together for Uncle Papa Nick…nope, Ramon was right. Pick one and stick with it. Together it sounded wrong on many, many levels. I was used to uncle. But there was a delicious edge of irony to calling him papa, because my biological father had led his second wife to believe I was Nick’s and not his. I would only ever have one dad as far as I was concerned, and that was Haden LaCroix. He had been a generous guy, though, and wouldn’t care about sharing a bit of his mantle with Nick. He’d want us to be happy—my mom to be happy.

Papa Nick it was, then.

While James cobbled together an outfit for *Papa* Nick out of Douglas’s old suits and some of his own clothing, I grabbed my necromancy go-bag, which used to be Douglas’s. It was an old-fashioned black leather doctor’s bag. James and I had modified the items inside because, well, Douglas carried around some nasty shit.

I also freshened up, throwing on a clean suit. Now that I was back in the northwest and temperatures were much cooler, I had more options. I ended up going with a black suit with a gunmetal gray shirt. We needed to look as professional as possible to hide the fact that we’d been reduced to a dog and pony show version of our usual selves. Ramon was similarly turned out, and by the time we piled into the car, we at least looked the part we were playing.

Ramon sat in the back with Brooke, who was having a great time petting the leather seats. I expected James to smack her hands away from one of his precious babies—he could tell me Douglas’s cars were mine all he wanted, but they really belonged to James. I didn’t appreciate them like he did.

Ramon leaned forward. “What year is this?”

“1970—one of the first Audi 100’s imported to the US.” James finished putting on his driving gloves and clutched the wheel possessively. “Not the most expensive car in our collection, but it has character. It will say what we need it to say.”

“And what’s that?” I asked.

It was Brooke that answered. “It says we don’t give a shit what they think, but in like a *classy* way.”

James flashed her a feline grin. “Exactly.”

James drove with the controlled elegance of a professional race car driver, much unlike my old neighbor, Mrs. Winalski, who drove like a bat out of hell that was hooked on caffeine pills. It meant that by the time we pulled up to the Den, the pack’s group residence in Issaquah, I didn’t need to kiss the ground or throw up into the bushes.

Which lasted all of two minutes before the pack appeared to greet us—then I *did* want to throw up in the bushes. There were a few people unknown to me in the small group that met us, but for a second time froze and all I could see was Brid, the fading light making her pixie short red hair look darker, her eyes bright as she smiled at me.

And Leo.

Whose hand rested on the small of her back. Very comfortably.

Hence the wanting to vomit.

I’d really hoped that his Instagram had been one so carefully curated that it made him look more handsome than he actually appeared in real life.

Nope.

If anything, the pictures hadn’t done him justice. He looked like he was about to jet off to fucking Milan or something. He smiled at us and there was a hint of a dimple. He was just so…*charming.*

That wasn’t the worst part.

I wasn’t as good as the werewolves at reading body language. Normally, I made up for that by shifting into my other sight, or whatever it was—I didn’t have a proper name for it—to check out someone’s soul. At least, that’s what I thought it was. Whatever made us, *us*. But I was afraid to even try that right now, because I was pretty sure it wouldn’t work.

Even with my limited abilities, there was something obvious about Leo besides his stupid handsome face and ridiculous physique. Whatever makes an alpha? That potential or essential quality than Brannoc had when he was alive, that Brid shared, that I sometimes caught glimpses of in Bran?

Leo had it.

Leo had it in *abundance.*

That nebulous sense of authority. I was fairly certain that I had the opposite of whatever that thing was. A nebulous sense of novice. A whiff of the dilettante. That’s what I had.

Brid’s brothers were all in attendance, flanking immediately behind them. Sayer, Roarke, and Sean gave me sympathetic faces since the rest of the pack wouldn’t be able to see. I expected Bran to look stoic, as that was his go-to expression. Instead, he seemed…faintly irritated.

Huh. I guess not everyone was Team Leo.

I assumed Leo would step forward first, but he held back and let Brid take the lead, which made me hate him a little more because it was absolutely the right move. Damn it.

“Samhain LaCroix, on behalf of the Blackthorn pack, welcome.” She held out a hand, which I shook, and tried not to think about how good that fleeting touch felt or how much I wanted to yank her into the bushes for a proper hello, but hey, this was official business and all that.

“We are honored to help, *taoiseach.”* My voice came out thicker than usual, causing me to clear my throat. James slid in smoothly like it was intentional and not at all because I was choking on my feelings.

“We are glad to be of service to another member of the council and the Blackthorn pack.” He didn’t offer a hand, but dipped his head in a sort of suave bow move that only James could pull off. “You of course know our associates, Ramon and Brooke.”

Brid offered her hand to Ramon with a smile, who of course used it to pull her forward so he could hug her. Ramon did not give two fucks about being professional, I guess. But then, his credentials weren’t in question and who was going to argue with a bear? He kissed her cheek. “It’s good to see you.”

When he stepped away, Brooke moved into his place, hugging her. Brid blinked at me in surprise.

I did my best approximation of a mysterious tight-lipped smile. Brooke could easily hug people inside my house, where my spell for her resided. It was harder outside of the home. Brid would know it for the causal flex of power that it was.

Leo watched Brooke, his brow furrowed. He tapped a knuckle against his mouth, before spreading the hand out, his mouth open, like he was going to say something. The hesitation only lasted a second, then the charming mask slid back into place, but for a moment, I’d spotted the real Leo. Oh, the charming one was part of him, I think, but it would be a mistake to discount what I’d seen. That flash of intelligence. We’d done something to intrigue him.

“I’m afraid I’m at a disadvantage here,” Leo said with a chuckle. “Introduce me, darling?” He slid an arm around Brid.

I very carefully kept my hands relaxed and loose at my sides, my breathing even. We were downwind, so the pack wouldn’t be able to smell my distress unless they got closer.

Brid smiled up at him, patting his chest with one hand. “Leo, this is Brooke.”

He held out a hand and Brooke shook it, her face serious. Leo held her hand a second too long, his nostrils flaring.

Brid smirked. “You’re not missing it. She doesn’t have a scent.”

Understanding dawned on Brooke, her face lighting up. “I’m a ghost!” She wiggled her fingers at him. “Very spooky. Much boo.”

Leo peered at her. “I’ve never seen a ghost so…”

“Alive?” Brooke laughed as his expression became chagrined.

“Sorry if I have offended you, Brooke.” His glanced at me, and I caught that assessing gaze again. “I must admit, I haven’t met many necromancers. None of them could have produced a shade of this caliber.” He shook his head. “If she’d had a scent, I never would have guessed she was anything but what she seems.”

Brooke’s eyebrow winged up. “And what do I seem?”

“A beautiful and forgiving person who is obviously a friend to Brid.” He squeezed Brid to him, but he looked at me, not Brooke. “And I count Brid’s friends as my own.”

Brooke clasped her hands together, her mouth pursed. “That’s a very good answer.” She flicked her fingers in his direction. “Very well, I accept you.”

I saw her movements out of the corner of my eye because I was staring at Leo. He should look smug as shit. He figuratively—though sometimes it felt like literally—had my heart in his hands and he knew it. But that wasn’t what I saw in his face.

Though his words and actions could all be interpreted as him backing up Brid and doing the political two-step, his face told me that he meant his words. Leo was on our side.

I still wanted to punch him, though. And by the slow grin that unfurled on his face, he knew that, too.

Ramon stepped up behind me, so close I could feel him at my back. My best friend, literally backing me. Whelp, better get this nonsense on the road.

A few other werewolves—at least, I assumed they were werewolves—stood behind Brid’s family. I turned my attention on them before I started comparing myself to Leo. You know, more than I already had.

One was a woman of medium build, dressed in one of those suit skirt outfits. Because of my time spent with James, I could tell it was a pretty nice outfit—not cheap. She was glaring daggers at a younger man, his expression bored. He wasn’t dressed as fancy, though his jeans and pullover were clean and neat looking. He only stood out because he was around people mostly dressed up.

“How may I help?” My words acted like a starter pistol on the other wolves.

“An injustice has been done,” the woman said, her chin hitching up. Her mouth pinched, her posture ram-rod straight. “Our taoiseach thought you could help.”

The young man snorted. “Injustice my ass. You just don’t like the outcome.”

The woman turned on him, fists at her side. “You’re a thief!”

He rolled his eyes, arms crossed. “Fucking hell, Dani, let it go.”

“I will not.” Dani gritted the words through clenched teeth. “You preyed on our dear grandma, Justin, taking advantage of her twilight years—”

Justin pointed a finger at her. “It’s shit like *that* ‘twilight years’ bullshit that made Gran change her will. You treated her like a freaking child, Dani.” He snorted again. “Twilight years, my ass. Gran was hale and hardy to the end. She just didn’t like you.”

Dani snarled. “You *ass.”*

“We’ve been having differing of opinion,” Brid said dryly. Dani and Justin continued to argue as Brid stepped away, pulling me with her, my entourage following us. She gestured to her brothers, who stayed to keep the siblings’ argument from escalating into a full-on brawl. Leo sauntered behind her, his hands in his pockets as he whistled a cheerful tune.

We walked a fair bit of distance before Brid started to talk, her voice low so it wouldn’t carry. I didn’t think the siblings would hear it no matter what—they were in their own world.

“They’ve been like this since the funeral,” Brid grumbled.

“Do you think there was anything untoward with the will?” James asked, his expression thoughtful.

Brid tipped her head back and forth as she considered the question. “I don’t think so? I didn’t know Marion Lasky very well. She was well into her nineties and didn’t come to pack stuff very often. I visited her at home, but I was paying more attention to how she was doing than what her plans were, which was a mistake.” She wrinkled her nose at the admission.

Leo clucked at her. “You’ve been a bit busy, darling.”

Brid gave him an unamused look. “Leo.”

He grinned. “Yes, darling?”

“Cut it out.”

The amusement drained from him quickly, leaving him serious as he examined me. “I don’t think so, darling.”

As much as each “darling” was a sharp knife to the gut, I strangely agreed with Leo. “If I can’t take it,” I said, rubbing a weary hand over my face, “I should get the fuck out of the kitchen.” I dropped my hand. “Why am I here, Brid? This is a pack squabble. Read the will, talk to her lawyer, knock sense into some heads and be done.”

“I did read the will and talked to the lawyer,” Brid said, irritated. “From everything I know, it’s exactly as it seems—Marion favored Justin.”

Leo flicked a glance at Brid, seeking permission before saying his piece. “As for the knocking heads, the pack balance is still a trifle delicate since Brid took over. She’s new, young, and unmated.”

“Brannoc ruled on his own,” Ramon pointed out.

“Not at first,” Brid said. “He was established when he lost my mother, and powerful.” She shrugged. “By the time it was just him, he held the pack in such a firm grip that people rarely challenged him. I’m not there yet.”

“A partner would go a long way to backing them off.” Leo frowned at her in sympathy. “Which chafes, I’m sure.” He turned his attention back to me. “With the power structure so unsettled, Brid has to be careful what waves she makes. Neither Dani nor Justin are alone. Dani especially has been quite vocal, complaining to other members of the pack. If Brid steps in and gives her decision, the siblings and their cohorts will focus their frustration on *her*.”

“That’s not fair,” Brooke said. “She would be doing her job.”

Leo held his hands out in a *that’s just the way it is* gesture.

I was finally getting why I was here. “But if I wade in as an outside party, raise Marion’s ghost, then their frustration transfers to me, so it won’t upset the pack.” The anger directed my way also wouldn’t be as strong, because I was just conveying Marion’s final word on the matter.

Or it would be if I could actually raise Marion’s ghost. Well, shit.

I glanced at James, hoping he’d come up with something. His expression was smoothed into his public mask. Which meant he had nothing and didn’t want anyone to know. I would have to improvise.

I nodded sharply at Brid. “Okay. Let’s get this over with.” I moved around them, walking with authority toward the arguing wolves. I had *no freaking clue* what I was going to do, but I had to do something. James strode behind me, exuding his own brand of calm authority. James should have been the necromancer. I would have made a much better lackey. Stupid genetics.

James handed me the doctor’s bag, and I stopped ten feet away from the wolves. I decided to ignore their arguing for now—I was council, I was mighty, and they were beneath me. Not that I actually *believed* that.

I set down the bag, took off my jacket, and handed it to James. After I rolled up my sleeves, I opened the bag. There were a lot of things in the bag, but I quickly pulled out what I needed. Just the basics—my ritual dagger, or athame, and a bag of neon green sand for the circle. I didn’t actually need that much sand—I wasn’t planning on anything that would necessitate a large circle.

Once I had the circle, I stepped inside it, holding my knife in front of me, projecting *I am totally mystical and shit* as hard as I could. I closed my eyes and reached for my power. Nothing. Just that weird empty feeling. Of course it had only been, what, two days? I tried to focus on that and not panic. My power could come back. It might just need more time.

But I still had a ghost to raise.

I sliced a shallow cut into my arm, clenching my hand into a fist and letting the blood drip down into the grass. “Marion Lasky.” I put every ounce of authority I absolutely did not have into her name. Nothing happened. I knew nothing was going to happen, but I was still surprised.

The crowd stared back at me, expectant. Except for Brid and her siblings. They all looked slightly confused, but quickly covered it.

Okay. Time to wing it.

The silence drew out, the air filled with the sound of the October breeze through the trees. It would be full dark soon, a few sleepy sounding birds singing to the dying light.

I cocked my head pretending to listen to something as I stood there slowly bleeding into the grass.

“What do you hear?” James asked, and I have to give him credit—he acted like I did this kind of thing all the time and it was totally normal.

I opened my eyes, my expression stony as I stared at Dani and Justin. “She won’t come.”

“What?” Dani spluttered, eyes wide. Justin just laughed.

With an air of nonchalance, I pulled my handkerchief out of my back pocket and started cleaning my knife. Only when that was done did I answer their question with a shrug. “She thinks you should grow up and sort it out yourselves. I happen to agree.”

“You can’t raise her?” Dani growled.

“Won’t,” I said, “not can’t.” Oooh, was that a whopper of a lie. “You burn your dead—mostly so people like me don’t bring them back as zombies. And while I can and have done that before—.” I snorted when I saw Dani’s skeptical expression. Apparently she hadn’t heard about me bringing back Brid’s mother and some of the other wolves when Brannoc was murdered. She must be really out of the loop. “Ask your pack if you don’t believe me. I don’t owe you an explanation.”

I broke the circle with the toe of my shoe and stepped out. “As for her ghost, I could force her to answer if I thought it important enough to disturb her rest.” I curled my lip. “I don’t force ghosts to appear for petty squabbles.”

“It’s *rude*,” Brooke said with a sniff.

I handed my athame off to James. “What Brooke said.” I pressed my handkerchief to my arm to stop the bleeding. I stepped closer to Dani and Justin, channeling my best haughty James energy. My voice came out quiet, but cold. In my experience, people paid more attention when you did that instead of yelling. “You’ve wasted my time, and worse, you wasted your *taoiseach’s* time.”

I glared at Dani. “The lawyer has said the will stands. Get over it.” Justin laughed, so I turned to him next. “I don’t know fully what’s going on here, but I know families are complicated. If you want to find a path forward, something more diplomatic than screaming at each other, I suggest you ask your *taoiseach* nicely to do some mediation. As an outsider I shouldn’t have to tell you how capable your leader is.” I sank a lot of disdain into that last bit.

Time to wrap up the performance. “I’m council, with all that implies. Don’t like my answer? I don’t care. You’re welcome to petition the council and challenge for my spot.” A nasty grin spread across my face. “I’d have a good, long chat with your pack members first. Hear what you’re going up against.” They both shifted uncomfortably and I laughed. “That’s what I thought.”

I tossed the handkerchief to James as Ramon came over to bandage my arm from the kit in my go-bag.

Bran cleared his throat. “What do we say to the council member that helped you today, children?”

Dani and Justin obediently mumbled their thank you’s before they were herded away by Brid’s brothers with promises of dinner as Sean smoothed ruffled feathers with charming patter.

Only Brid and Leo remained. Brid hesitated for a second, glancing at Leo. Then she threw her hands up in the air. “Okay, what on earth was that, Sam?”

“That,” I said, suddenly exhausted by my long ass day. “Was grade-A bullshittery at its finest. I lost my powers, Brid. That was the best I could do.”

James made a grouchy noise. Leo’s eyebrows went up. Ramon finished off bandaging my arm. Brooke simply watched the drama unfold.

“You *what?”* Brid yelped.

I sighed. “It’s a long story.”

Leo stepped forward, wrapping an arm around me. “Then you better stay for dinner. That okay, darling?”

Brid growled.

Leo grinned, lazily drawing me forward. “What can I say, I charm her.”

Damn it, he even smelled good, the jerk. “Keep that crap up, she’s going to eat your face,” I said, begrudgingly following his lead. After all, the pack employed some excellent cooks and I was starving.

“She can try,” Leo said mildly.

And with that we quietly made our way into the Den.

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.

Chapter 12

And Hey, You, Don't You Think it's Kinda Cute  
That I Died Right Inside Your Arms Tonight?

I had flopped onto Brid’s bed as soon as I’d entered the room, before scooting back until my back rested against her wall. It was partially ingrained habit, mostly deep exhaustion. The last few days had been a lot. Dealing so impersonally with Brid and sitting through that dinner had taken the last of my reserve. I closed my eyes and tried to ignore the strangely bittersweet feeling of sitting on Brid’s bed like I had when we’d been together.

I heard the soft pad of feet as Brid followed suit, the dip of the mattress as she climbed up. Her hands on my wrists as she pulled my arms out, making space so she could lean against my chest. It wasn’t totally comfortable because I was still battered and sore, but I didn’t care. Brid arranged my arms so they were around her before settling in, making me smile.

“It’s like that, huh?” I asked, not opening my eyes.

“It is.” Brid lay her hand over my heart. “What did Leo have to say to you?”

I cracked an eye at her. “Interesting fellow you’ve found there. He basically told me he’s on our side. Then he told me how we should handle dinner.” I rubbed my hand down her shoulder, making a slow loop to her elbow and back. “I hate to admit it, but I like him.”

“Me, too,” Brid said. “He’s going to be a good friend, I think.”

I rested my cheek in her hair, taking advantage of this brief spell where I could hold my favorite person. From the smell of her hair, I could tell she was still using the shampoo my mom had made for her. That made me strangely happy. “Good. You could use more friends.”

Brid nestled closer. “Tell me about New Orleans.”

I summarized quickly, but didn’t leave anything out. By the time I was done, the hand over my heart clasped my shirt tight in fist. “I almost lost you.”

I didn’t answer that, because what could I say? I tightened my arms around her, which I guess was an answer in its own right.

“It’s too bad you can’t summon,” Brid mused. “I bet Douglas would have some ideas about what happened to you.”

I leaned back so I could look at her. “Did I hear you right? Your suggestion to my dilemma is to summon the man I murdered not once, but *twice*.” I made a scoffing noise. “Even if I could summon, what makes you think he would help?”

“Because Douglas would be incapable of *not* lording his knowledge over you. What better way to prove that he’s brilliant than showing you once again that he knows something you don’t.”

“Huh.” She was right. That wasn’t surprising—Brid was smart. She was right a lot. But it was an interesting idea. I thought about it some more. It was a *really* good idea. Douglas was a terrible, awful person, but I couldn’t dispute that he had amassed a truly staggering amount of information in his abnormally long life. Mostly through murder and torture, but still.

“I can’t summon,” I said slowly, “but Papa Nick can.”

Now it was Brid’s turn to lean back so she could stare at me. “Papa Nick?”

I told her about our discussion earlier and Nick’s date with my mom.

Brid frowned, her brows furrowed. “I’m missing so much right now. I absolutely hate that I’m not there.” She locked eyes with me. “That you’re not here.”

I rubbed my thumbs along her chin, cradling her face. “I know. But what are we going to do? All the reasons we broke up are still there.”

“That doesn’t make it anymore tolerable,” Brid said.

Since I didn’t have an argument to that, I kissed her. It seemed like a much better use of our time, anyway. Based on her enthusiastic response, I would say Brid agreed.

I would have been perfectly happy to stay in Brid’s room and make out for the next eon or so, but after a few minutes Leo knocked softly on the door. Our time was up. After a few stilted goodbyes and other leave taking formalities, my team piled into the car and went home. I was finally, *finally*, going to get to go back to sleep.

The crew took the idea of Nick summoning Douglas for me with varying degrees of acceptance.

“Would you even trust anything Douglas told you?” Ramon asked.

Brooke pointed to Ramon. “What he said.”

James watched the road, his expression troubled.

“Like anything else involving Douglas, I would take everything with a grain of salt and do follow up research.” Blindly following anything Douglas said, especially to me, was a recipe for a disaster of *Sharknado* levels. “James?”

James stole a look at me, worry in his eyes. “Since we currently have nothing, I can’t see how it would hurt. Even if he won’t answer, we’ll be no worse off.” He slowed, stopping at a four-way stop. “I should be there. If he tries to mislead you, I’ll be more likely to catch it.”

My memory offered up an image of James, how he’d looked the second time I’d killed Douglas. Like his heart, his very being, was shattering into glitter-sized shards. “Won’t that be difficult for you?” My voice was as gentle as I could make it. It was a ridiculous question, because of course it would be hard for him. But James would know that I was really asking, “Are you sure you can handle this?”

James swallowed hard. “It needs to be done.”

“For the record,” Ramon grumbled. “I still don’t like it.”

“Your opinion is noted,” I said, only then noticing how quiet Brooke was. Which was when I belatedly remembered that it would be just as difficult for her, for much, much different reasons. “Brooke?”

It was late now, darkness having fully enveloped our part of the world, making the car seem cozy and safe. Brooke stared out the window, flashes of streetlights illuminating her solemn face. “It’s okay, Sam. I…” She sighed and leaned against Ramon, who put an arm around her. “I don’t want to be there, though. I don’t want to see him.”

“Understandable,” I said.

“We won’t let him anywhere near you.” Ramon squeezed her to him.

There was steel in James’ voice when he chimed in. “It would be unwise to say that he can’t hurt you now, because even dead he remains dangerous, but know that he would have to go through all of us first.” Brooke didn’t say anything right away, making James’ face twist into a slight snarl. “*All of us.*”

Brooke gave him a watery smile. “Thanks, James.” She leaned her head on Ramon’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about me, Sam. Well, I mean, you can *worry*, because of course you worry about your friends, but don’t let that stop you. We need to figure this out. I don’t want to join a book club with the man or anything, but turning to him for information makes sense.”

I snorted a laugh. “Can you imagine a book club with Douglas?”

“What kind of books do you think he’d pick?” Ramon asked.

I thought about the books I’d found in the house when I moved in. “Nonfiction, most of it terrifying, and classic literature.” Douglas had been a fan of Dickens, Dante, and rather surprisingly, Gabriel Garcia Márquez. Lots of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Douglas had liked beautifully written sad stories. “His book club would be a real bummer.”

“We would go for the snacks,” Ramon said. “Because James would cater it, but we’d never read the book.”

James laughed.

The car went dead silent.

James glanced at us. “What?”

“You *laughed*,” I said. “You never laugh.”

James shrugged a shoulder, flipping the turn signal on. “Maybe you’ve never been funny before now.”

Ramon snorted. “Please. I’m hilarious.”

James’ lips twitched in a smile.

I may be broken right now, but it suddenly occurred to me that the rest of my team was slowly healing. Brooke, Ramon, and James had all gone through a lot of shit the last year. But seeing them now, healthy, happy more than sad, *together.* Things didn’t get much better than that.

Maybe, just maybe, things would turn out okay.

#

“You want me to do *what?*” Nick hadn’t spit out his coffee, but he definitely seemed like he regretted drinking it.

We’d decided that the best way to get Nick to agree to do this was to invite him over for coffee and ambush him with the idea. Harder to say no if he could see me making puppy dog eyes. Plus, Ramon stole his car keys. I hadn’t counted on my mom coming with him. She looked good this morning—happy, or at least she had been until I mentioned Douglas—with her hair in one long braid over her shoulder, a cream-colored sweater jacket-y thing thrown over her dress. The sleeves were rolled up revealing hands tan from gardening. Nick had a cardigan thrown over his T-shirt and jeans. Since he was practically glowing—again until I’d mentioned Douglas—I assumed the date went well.

With the exception of James, we were all sitting at the kitchen table—me, my mom, Nick, and Ramon. Frank was off doing Frank things. I wasn’t sure what Brooke was up to, but she’d made herself scarce this morning.

I shoved the plate of pastries James had artfully arranged closer to Nick. There was a pot of tea on the table, along with cream, sugar, and lemon wedges, because even though we hadn’t been expecting my mother, James had provided for her anyway. I had a feeling if Haley hadn’t been in school, she would have been here as well.

My mom settled her teaspoon on the saucer next to her cup and placed a calming hand on Nick’s arm. She was very comfortable touching Nick, which I tried really hard not to think about. Instead, I focused on his reaction. He relaxed, shooting a soft smile at my mom. Which made me relax, because it was clear he worshipped my mother from that look and that was as it should be.

Didn’t mean he wasn’t tense when he turned back to me.

“We want you to summon Douglas,” I repeated. “To find out if he knows anything about what happened to me.”

“We’re hoping that he might be able to suggest something to reverse the effects,” James murmured over his own cup of tea. “We can search his notebooks and grimoires, but that would take longer than we have.” James leaned against the counter, frowning at the floor. “It would be better if Sam wasn’t powerless for the next council meeting.”

My mom dug through her bag, dragging a jar of salve out of the depths. “That reminds me—I brought you more salve. Nick said you had a lot of scratches.”

Nick gripped his mug. “But you’ll be there?” His gaze flicked between me and James, the question for both of us.

“Yes,” James assured him. “As will Ramon.”

“I don’t know if I can rip the head off a ghost,” Ramon said thoughtfully, his chin in his hands. “But I’m willing to try it. For science.”

“The scientific community thanks you for your efforts,” I murmured.

Nick held out his mug to James. “May I have another cup of coffee, then? I’m going to need it.”

We argued about where to do the summoning. The basement seemed like the natural choice, since it was set up for such things. None of us thought summoning Douglas in his seat of power seemed like a good idea, so we compromised and decided to summon him in the yard next to the halfpipe I’d built for Ramon.

The morning was chilly and gray, the blustery kind fall is known for. Even though we were past peak fall leaves, reds, oranges, and yellows popped brightly against the evergreen backdrop. It was chilly enough that I was glad I’d thrown on a hoodie. Nick, however, had handed his sweater to my mom for safekeeping. I guess he didn’t want to bleed on it.

As I sipped my coffee and watched Nick draw his circle out of gray sand, I noticed how quiet the yard was. Our house sat far back from the road. Between that and the dense trees surrounding the house, we were given a rare gift of privacy, something I’m positive Douglas did on purpose. Usually, as long as no strangers were about, the yard was pretty active. Gnomes running drills with the gladiators from the marble pediment, statues roaming about the place, Taco chasing squirrels in a little chupacabric blur, that sort of thing.

Today, nothing moved. Word had probably gotten out about what we were doing and no one wanted to draw the attention of their old master, even when he was dead.

Done with his circle, Nick paused to take a deep breath, his face tilted up at the sun. He let the breath out, opened his eyes, and traded the bag of sand for the athame James had been holding. Because Douglas was Douglas and this had been his home and we had only the barest of understandings as to what he’d done to the place when he’d owned it, we’d decided that Nick should do two circles—one to contain Douglas so he couldn’t gallivant about the place, and another, smaller circle inside for Nick.

We were hoping the extra layer of protection would keep Douglas from attacking Nick. I wasn’t sure ghosts could murder anyone, but Douglas had attacked me with ghosts before to teach me a lesson and it hadn’t exactly tickled. None of us wanted to gamble with Nick’s life, so he did the extra circle even though it would be a bigger draw on his power.

Nick shook himself, shaking out his arms and leg before rolling his neck and shoulders. “Okay.” He gusted another big breath out. “Okay. I can do this.” Nick held out his arm parallel to the ground. Without further ado, he traced the point of the athame along the inner part of his arm, blood welling behind the blade as he moved. “Douglas Montgomery, I summon thee. Peacefully, respectfully, to answer our questions.”

We had decided to ask nicely and hope that would curb anything nasty coming from Douglas’s direction. It was a long shot, for sure, but it did sound nicer than my original suggestion of, “let’s not start some shit.”

A chill wind blew around us, making me huddle further into my hoodie. No one made a sound, the only noise was the far-off caw of a crow. Seconds ticked by.

“We should have gone with, ‘let’s not start some shit’,” Ramon grumbled.

“Right?” I shook my head. “No one listens to me.”

“To be fair,” Ramon said thoughtfully, “many of our ideas are hairbrained and sketchy as hell.”

“And they will continue to be so until that stops working for us.”

Ramon crossed his arms. “If it ain’t broke, we’re not fixin’ shit.”

“Do I need to gag the two of you?” James asked quietly.

We didn’t respond, but I held out a fist for Ramon to bump. He tapped his fist against mine before, his attention, like mine, on my uncle.

Nick pumped his hand, urging more blood out of the wound. I watched the blood hit the grass, hoping I would feel something. *Anything*. For a second I thought I felt a chill slide across my skin, but I couldn’t tell if it was real, if I’d actually felt the magic, or if it was my hopeful brain tricking me with the fall wind.

Nick scowled at nothing in particular. “Douglas Montgomery!” He cracked the name like a whip, his voice carrying out over the quiet yard. “I summon thee. We have questions for you.”

“Who says I want to answer them?”

We all startled at the response, even though we’d been waiting for it. Nick whipped around to face the ghost who had suddenly appeared behind him.

Douglas Montgomery was as he’d been in life, scary as fuck in an undefinable way. It wasn’t something he achieved through bodily intimidation—No haughty looks or making himself look big. He didn’t wear leather jackets, kickass boots, tattoos or anything else people sometimes employed to appear tough. Douglas wouldn’t be out of place at an swanky cocktail party, or anywhere else where people with tailored suits were the norm.

His suit was gray, the shirt white. Dark hair neatly styled, face clean shaven. Neither handsome nor homely. By all respects except for two, he was an average looking man. The first was his voice. Douglas had the polished, rolling voice of a trained speaker, the kind you’d expect to hear coming out of a smooth-talking preacher that was more interested in your wallet than your god. A persuasive, authoritative voice.

The second was his eyes. Brown eyes were usually described as warm. There was no warmth in Douglas Montgomery’s eyes. Power, yes. But no warmth. It was like locking eyes with an alien intelligence that had surpassed things like “feelings” eons before. More “evil entity” than “Spock” from Star Trek.

“I can command,” Nick’s voice was soft, with a layer of steel underneath.

Douglas’s grin was slow, a revealing of predatory menace. “Can you now?”

“I held no candle to your power in life,” Nick admitted easily. “But in death, well.” Then it was Nick’s turn to smile, and his wasn’t particularly warm, either. “But then, you don’t have your power anymore, do you?” He laughed. “My nephew took it.”

Douglas’s grin slipped, his focus shooting to me. His eyes narrowed. Nick might as well have disappeared for all the notice he was paying to him. Douglas strode to the very edge of the outer circle until we were almost nose to nose.

It took a lot not to step back.

“Yes, yes he did,” Douglas hissed. “Though he doesn’t seem to have it now. What have you done, Samhain LaCroix, to lose my power like it was so much change in your pocket?”

Chapter 13

Well I Ain’t Evil,

I’m Just Good Lookin’

Douglas stared at me from the barrier of the circle and I hoped like hell that Nick had built it properly. I felt a bit like I’d been dangled in one of those big shark cages, directly into a frenzy of great white sharks. Only the water had been heavily chummed and the cage was made out of paperclips.

I shrugged, my hands out in front of me, a classic, “who knows?” gesture. “If I could answer that question, we wouldn’t have summoned you.” I buried my hands in the pockets of my jeans. “It’s not like we felt like a chat and thought, ‘what the hell, let’s see what Douglas is up to these days.’”

He scowled at me for a second before his expression cleared. “You need my help.”

I hummed thoughtfully for a second. “More like we need your expertise.” Before he could think too much on that, I told him what had happened. I half expected him to cut me off, tell me to shut up, or at the very least mock me, but not only had Brid been correct about him happily lording over me that he was brilliant, I’d forgotten something James had told me once.

Douglas loved knowledge, or at least knowing things. He couldn’t resist a challenge. I had just gifted him a doozy of a challenge. As I talked, his gaze softened, his arms crossed, his mouth pinched. He was thinking, and I suddenly realized it looked so familiar because James stood the same way when he was really puzzling over something.

“No pouch, no stygian coin,” he said when I’d finished, speaking softly to himself. “Warded house….” His head snapped up to James. “Does he usually sleep walk?”

James shook his head.

Douglas peered at me for a long moment.

His face relaxed suddenly, a corner of his lip twitching up. His version of a smile, I guess. It was creepy. Maybe it wouldn’t be on someone else’s face, but it was on his.

James came alert. “You know what it is.”

“I can make an educated guess.” He turned that strange not-smile on me. “But why should I?”

“I could compel you,” Nick said. I’d been so focused on Douglas I’d momentarily forgotten about him.

Douglas smirked. “You’re welcome to try, but let’s face it—you’re not the powerhouse here. Containing me isn’t quite the same as calling your everyday specter, is it, Hatfield?”

Nick didn’t say anything, but from the strain on his face, I was pretty sure Douglas was right.

From the muted glee in Douglas’s face, I was pretty sure that normally I *could* have compelled him to answer. Normally.

Nick couldn’t hold him forever, so I needed to move this show along. “What do you want, Douglas?” I asked bluntly.

He whipped his attention back to me, his eyes twinkling. No good ever came of that twinkle. “A favor.”

“*No*.” James’ response cracked like a pistol shot.

I sighed. “I’m open to ideas, James.” I hoped he heard what I wasn’t saying. We didn’t have *time* to figure this out on our own. I wasn’t sure we could, honestly. There was no guaranteeing the information was in any of Douglas’s notebooks.

From the closed expression on James’s face, he knew it, too. His nostrils flared and he looked away. “We have conditions.”

Douglas brightened further. I would have thought he’d see James’s response as a betrayal, his former *pukis* helping me make a deal. But as they started to argue back and forth, it was clear that he enjoyed arguing with James. Bargaining. I wasn’t sure what the afterlife was like for Douglas—or anyone, really—but I think he’d been bored.

After a few minutes of rapid-fire back and forth, James summarized the conditions. “You will give Samhain Corvus LaCroix all of the information you have about the situation he is in and his condition as you understand it. In return he will owe you one favor—”

“At a time of my choosing,” Douglas interrupted.

James scowled, but apparently he couldn’t think of how the addition would matter, so he kept going. “At the time of your choosing. Said favor will not require Sam to kill anyone against his will, nor will it require the giving of his own life, or physical assault of any kind. It will not require anything Sam cannot give, and has an expiration date of one year.”

“Ten years,” Douglas countered.

I held up a hand, stopping James from arguing. “Five years.” That’s where we would have likely ended up. I didn’t want a favor to Douglas hanging over my head for five years, but then I didn’t want it over my head for one, either.

“Five years.” The words came out of James grudgingly. “Are both parties agreed?”

“Agreed,” Douglas said easily.

“Agreed,” I said, with a sigh. I already regretted it, but again, couldn’t see a way around it. “Now tell me what happened.”

“A ghoul,” Douglas said, his expression triumphant.

No one said anything. I looked around the group. My mom looked perplexed. Nick seemed worried, or about to pass out from the strain, it could go either way. I couldn’t see Ramon, because he was behind me, but I heard him snort. James was frowning at the ground like the grass had messed up the color coding on his planner.

I had heard the word “ghoul” before, but I wasn’t sure what it meant in real life context.

“Don’t ghouls eat flesh?” Ramon asked.

I turned my head to look at him.

He shrugged. “They’re from Middle Eastern folklore, I think.”

“America doesn’t have ghouls.” Nick’s voice was gravelly, like he’d just woken up.

“We did,” James said slowly. “But I thought they were extinct? If I recall, they also ate flesh, as Ramon’s question stated.”

“The greater American Ghoul was a flesh eater, yes. Mostly carrion. General nuisance around cemeteries and crypts. Incredibly stupid and as far as I know, at least functionally extinct.” Douglas tucked his arms behind his back, appearing to be every bit the lecturing professor. “They were strong and fast, but easily hunted and killed off a long time ago.”

Douglas was warming to his subject now, rocking back on his heels and tipping his head up to the sky. “But the *lesser* American Ghoul never went extinct. We banished it.” He dropped his gaze to me. “By we, I mean necromancers.”

“Banished it?” I couldn’t help but ask.

“To the underworld,” Douglas said. “Or at least a pocket of it.”

“How could they banish a living creature to the underworld?” My mother asked, her voice clipped.

“Due to a quirk of their own biology.” Douglas waved a hand at me. “Lesser American Ghouls adapted a unique food source. Necromantic energy. Death magic.” He turned to me. “Haven’t you ever wondered why there are so few of us, Sam?”

I hadn’t, to be honest. I’d just sort of accepted that we were rare and been grateful for it. The world didn’t need *more* of Douglas. My answer must have shown on my face because Douglas kept going, his tone faintly mocking.

“We were almost wiped out on this continent by that particular kind of ghoul.”

“I’ve never heard of this,” Nick said. Which made me feel better about my own ignorance.

“Once a problem is no longer a problem, people tend to forget about it,” Douglas murmured. “Besides, I don’t exactly think the necromancers that were left wanted anyone to know about the ghoul. People unconnected to us likely didn’t care or know what it was feeding off of. Not their problem. So the necromancers buried the knowledge.”

“If they knew, they might be able to summon one back,” James said. He must have sensed my next question, because he glanced at me. “If you could summon a ghoul and control it, you could easily get rid of your competition.”

Douglas nodded. “I only knew about it because I found a note in an old diary, something from my aunt’s old library.” He appeared troubled at the mention of his aunt. “I think she’d been considering summoning one, or trying to figure out how to go about it. No one had managed as far as she knew.”

“Someone managed,” Ramon said.

“Or at least managed *enough,”* Douglas said. When he saw our blank faces, he sighed, holding his hands out about two feet apart. “Imagine this—someone attempts a ritual to summon a ghoul from the underworld. They get most of the way through it, but something happens. Perhaps they screwed up the incantation, lacked the power, didn’t have the right sacrifice, who knows.”

He pressed his hands together like he was praying. “They failed to actually pull the ghoul through to the point of manifestation, yes, but they didn’t fail *completely*.” He shook his praying hands. “Here the ghoul sits, pressed between the two worlds, neither here nor there. Buried potential. A seed, if you will.”

“Seeds can sit dormant for a long time,” My mom said, interested despite her hatred of Douglas, “until the conditions are right. Sunlight. Rain. Soil.”

“In this case,” Douglas said. “Sam.” He held up those hands. “Here it is, waiting, waiting, *waiting* for the magical drought conditions to end. The whole time starving, and then the equivalent of a monsoon walks by. It would be too hard to resist.” Douglas drew his fingers apart, making his hands resemble a flower in bloom. “Suddenly, basic conditions are met, the ritual is now complete.”

I opened my mouth to argue that I couldn’t just accidentally complete a ritual, but I had before. In fact, I’d done so in killing Douglas. My jaw snapped shut.

James was still in his thoughtful pose, though he was focused on Douglas’s hands. “How?” The simple question confused me, but not Douglas.

“Magical lure.” Douglas dropped his hands. “Things will go to great lengths to survive. Sam must have looked like a beacon, stuffed full of magic of not one but *three* powerful necromancers.”

“Three?” I asked.

“Technically my Aunt’s power was in there. Who knows how many necromancers she killed and drained, so possibly more than three.”

“You’re a magical turducken,” Ramon murmured.

I elbowed him.

Douglas ignored us both. “Think about it—what would you do if you were starving and a sign lights up in the distance proclaiming an all-you-can-eat buffet?”

Ramon caught on first. “The ghoul DoorDashed his ass?” Ramon slung an arm around my shoulder. “You were almost Grubhubbed to death.”

I raised my middle finger and held it in front of his face, but otherwise ignored him.

James huffed. “I never thought of a lure.”

“What else would get past your wards?” The only time Douglas ever had a human expression on his face was when he was talking to James. Right now it held the mixture of fond respect you might see between a teacher and a beloved pupil, when the pupil finally saw something the teacher thought was obvious.

Douglas flicked his fingers toward me. “It couldn’t get in, so it drew Sam out. Without his protection bag, he would have been lit up like the Vegas Strip.”

“The problem now is, how do I get my powers back?” I really wasn’t excited about the answer, because Douglas seemed real happy about it. Before he could spell my doom, though, Nick chimed in, sounding very, very tired.

“That’s not the problem,” Nick said. “Or at least, not the only problem. We now have a ghoul on the loose, no idea where it is, or who it will eat next.” Under the layer of exhaustion in Nick’s voice was a well of worry. “That’s a small menu, Sam. An *extremely* small menu, and you’re related to most of them.”

My heart squeezed in a bout of pure terror. I only knew four necromancers. Nick. June…and my two baby half-sisters. I didn’t want a ghoul eating *any* of them.

“Ramon, can you call June?” He patted my shoulder and moved away from the group, taking his phone out. My next question was for the whole group. “Could a ghoul get up here? It’s a long way from New Orleans to here.”

“Ghouls are fast, but they’re not *that* fast,” James said. “Unless it managed to sneak into the cargo hold of something, I don’t see how it would travel quickly, and ghouls just aren’t that smart.”

I had a brief, shiny moment of relief, which Douglas immediately shattered.

“Unless it utilizes the shadow roads.”

I knew I wouldn’t like the answer, but again, I had to ask. “What are the shadow roads?”

“Paths between the underworld and this one.” Douglas tipped his head. “It’s how harbingers and the like get around.”

James straightened. “We need to warn them.”

“Because?” Someday I would not be the most ignorant person in the room. Today was not that day.

“They eat death magic, Sam,” James’s tone was gentle. “What do you think powers Ashley? Or Ed?”

“This is all great,” Nick said through gritted teeth, “but we’re almost out of time and we won’t be able to do anyone any good if you don’t tell Sam how to get his powers back.”

Douglas clapped his hands together. “Yes, yes of course.” He looked at James. “The Bathory ritual.”

James blanched. “Are you certain?”

Douglas gave a slow nod, that gleeful expression back on his face.

James grimaced. “He’s going to hate that.”

“I’m going to hate *what*?” I couldn’t keep a slightly hysterical note out of my voice. If the ritual made both James *and* Douglas make those faces…

I was absolutely going to hate it.

Chapter Fourteen

If You Want Blood, You Got It

I watched as James dumped another large plastic bucket of blood into the metal tub. It splashed up, sending red droplets onto the floor and onto James. Having apparently been prepared for this, James was wearing coveralls, like the kind mechanics wore…if the mechanics had a side gig as an ax murderer or a butcher.

This was far from the first bucket and James looked like an extra from *Carrie*. Sadly, he fit the decor. The basement used to be Douglas’s lair, and even though I’d destroyed some of the objects, it still had the air of a sinister laboratory/torture chamber. Normally it smelled heavily of incense, but right now, mostly blood.

“You were right,” I said. “I don’t like it.”

James set the bucket down, dug a white handkerchief out of his pocket, and mopped at the sweat on his brow. He’d been hauling five-gallon buckets of blood down the stairs and into the basement, which was sweaty work. Ramon came in after him, whistling, a bucket in each hand. I’d offered to carry buckets, which had made Ramon laugh his ass off. He pointed out that they were both much stronger than me—I would likely spill if I tried to help. That’s what they said, anyway. In reality, I thought James was afraid that I would take one look at the blood and bolt for the hills. The basement only had one exit and they could block it.

They weren’t wrong. It was a lot of blood. So I shivered in my thin robe and watched them fill the metal tub, feeling very much like a sacrificial lamb myself.

In the process of wiping his brow, James had smeared blood across his cheekbone.

“This is the most disheveled I’ve ever seen you,” I said, clutching my robe tighter. James was always so immaculate; the sight was jarring.

James glowered at me. “Do *you* want to do this?”

I shook my head. “I do not. Besides, you won’t let me.”

“Don’t let Sam talk shit,” Ramon said, setting down his buckets. “The messy look works for you. You’re like that dude in the movie you made us watch. Where the guy gets out of the water.”

James frowned for a second before his expression cleared. “Are you referring to Mr. Darcy in *Pride & Prejudice*?”

Ramon picked up the first bucket without blinking an eye, dumping it into the metal tub. “That’s the one. You’re like him. All buttoned up, saying borderline offensive shit—”

“Or not so borderline—” I murmured, trying to ignore the way the blood was making me queasy. There was just *so much of it*.

Ramon dropped the empty bucket and grabbed the next one. “And for some reason, that stuffy thing is kind of hot? Like, you get why all the ladies are after him.”

“Pretty sure they were after his money, dude.” I was trying to breathe through my mouth. The basement didn’t have much airflow and the tub was almost full.

Ramon shook his head, as if dismissing that. “Mr. Darcy would’ve been a snack, even without his wealth and title. So anyway, then you see the guy as a mess, getting out of the pond, swimming in his clothes because I guess people did that then for some reason, and it signifies his inner self.” He dumped the second bucket of blood into the tub. “And you see him unravel, and how the hot-mess part of him has a good soul, you know?”

“Honestly, I think you lost me.”

Ramon ignored me, setting down the bucket with a hollow *thunk*. “Anyway, that’s James. He’s Mr. Darcy.”

James was staring at him, bewildered. “I honestly can’t tell if I should be flattered or offended.”

“Both,” Ramon and I said in unison.

“Then thank you,” James said slowly. “And go to hell.”

Ramon grinned.

I was staring at the blood. “Okay, why isn’t it, you know, lumpy?”

“Clotted,” Ramon said. “The word you’re looking for is ‘clotted.’”

James unzipped the top half of his jumpsuit, revealing a black T-shirt. “We want the blood as fresh as possible. Since Sam frowns on some of the bigger sacrifices—”

“Humans,” I said. “I frown on you killing humans.”

James didn’t blink, just pulled his arms out from his jumpsuit. “I had to slaughter livestock.”

I was trying *really* hard not to think about the goats, sheep, deer, or possibly cattle that James had killed for me. He wouldn’t tell me precisely for this reason—it ate me up inside. All those big eyes, and velvet noses…

James scowled at me. “Nothing is wasted. The meat is being split between the dwarves, Taco, and the rest of us carnivores.” Seeing my obvious misery, James sighed, throwing his head back like he was begging for patience. “I made sure to get mature, free-range animals, Sam. That’s the best I can do.”

“I know,” I said. “I appreciate it, I really do. I just also hate it.” The blood had stopped rippling, the surface smooth as glass. “I can both appreciate you and hate the situation at the same time. So why isn’t the blood clotting?”

“I prepared it,” James said. “This isn’t my first blood ritual.”

“People usually say ‘rodeo’ in that kind of sentence,” Ramon said. “And it’s a lot less creepy.”

“I’ve been to more blood rituals than rodeos,” James said, dropping down to examine the floor. “As such, my level of experience there is much higher, so it would make more sense for me to say, ‘this isn’t my first blood ritual’ than it would be to say ‘rodeo.’”

Ramon froze.

James looked up. “What now?”

“I’m trying to imagine you at a rodeo,” Ramon said. “It’s exquisite.”

“So dirty,” I said thoughtfully. “Would he put down a hanky before he sat on the bleachers?”

“Why was he even *at* a rodeo?” Ramon’s eyes glittered, the idea obviously bringing him joy.

“Possessed rodeo clowns,” James said. He used his handkerchief to wipe up the spots of blood. “And buying magic contraband.” He held out his hand. “Chalk, please.”

“We’re going to need more information than that,” Ramon said, grabbing some chalk off a shelf and handing it to James

James smirked, but didn’t say anything, just started drawing.

Knowing full well that James wasn’t going to talk, Ramon went to the shelf and started grabbing the candles James would need.

As I watched, James drew intricate symbols and circles, leaving spaces for the candles. “Have you ever done this blood ritual?”

James hesitated. “Once. A very long time ago. They’re not done every day. As you might suspect, gathering this much blood at a time draws attention to you after a while. Just ask Lady Bathory.”

“Who’s that?” Ramon asked.

“She was a lady that was accused of bathing in the blood of young women,” I said.

“A Hungarian countess.” James didn’t look up from his drawing. He’d moved to the other side of the tub to finish the elaborate design. “Some historians think she tortured and murdered hundreds of young women. Other think the evidence is shaky and that she was falsely accused so that her relatives could take ahold of her accounts, and so the Hapsburgs wouldn’t have to pay back the money they owed her.” He sat back and examined his work. “By all accounts, she was an awful person. Whether or not she slaughtered hundreds is in debate.”

He stood, dusting off his coveralls. “Regardless, she is a cautionary tale.”

“Don’t draw attention to yourself by going on a murder spree,” I said.

“And don’t owe money to the Hapsburgs,” Ramon added.

James handed the chalk to Ramon and started placing the candles. As soon as that was done, he straightened. “It’s time.”

I shivered in my—admittedly very fine—silk robe. James had been sneaking better clothing into my closet for months. It was so fine, in fact that I didn’t want to drop it onto the ground. I wanted to run screaming from the room instead. Because of the robe’s fine quality. Definitely not because of the tub full of blood.

“I can throw you in, if that would help,” Ramon said, “but that would mess up the chalk.”

“You can’t put the blood back into the animals, Sam.” James grimaced. “Well, you could *after* the ritual, but they will still be dead, so you might as well get on with it.”

I shrugged out of the robe, handed it to Ramon, and tried really hard not to think about what I was doing. I didn’t have a stitch on under the silk, so I was now completely naked except for my stygian coin, which I’d borrowed back from Brooke. James had decided we were going to do a two-fer and feed my powers and the coin at the same time.

Careful to avoid smearing the chalk, I stepped gingerly into the tub. I expected it to be cold. It should have been cold. Whatever James had done to it had kept the blood at body temp, which made it physically less uncomfortable, but somehow made it worse on every other level.

I sat down into the tub before I could talk myself out of it. The smell was worse. I closed my eyes and tried really hard not to throw up. Sitting in a bath of blood was mind-numbingly awful. Sitting in a bath of blood *and* vomit would be worse. “Okay,” I said, trying to breathe through my mouth. “Now what?”

James lit the candles. “Keep your eyes closed. Try to relax and open up that part of you that sees the dead.”

I tried to do as he said, but I was really distracted by, well, everything.

James sighed. “*Focus.”*

“I’m trying! But this is really gross and I hate it!” I sounded petulant, which was good because that was exactly how I was feeling. “I have blood in places it should not go, James.”

“The sooner you focus, the sooner we get you out.” Ramon sounded annoyingly calm.

I cracked an eye at him. “Why isn’t this freaking you out?”

Ramon shrugged. “I eat meat, and as a shifter, I’m around blood a lot.”

“I’m around blood a lot.” I felt I should point this out.

“Yeah, but you’re you. Now focus and I promise you’ll get to take a nice, hot shower.”

I grumbled at him, but closed my eyes again and did my best to focus. James started speaking then, his voice low, using words I didn’t even try to recognize. It wasn’t English, but whatever it was, he was fluent in it. He spoke smoothly, no hesitation.

With every word, the temperature of the blood bath ticked up. My skin felt tight. It was like the blood had tiny hands with razor claws and it was trying to dig its way into my skin.

Trying to shred me into pieces.

I started screaming, thrashing from the pain. A mistake. Blood poured into my mouth. I gagged, vomiting it back up into the tub.

James kept talking, his voice growing louder.

I’m pretty sure Ramon was laughing.

A wind picked up in the basement, ruffling my hair as I vomited. The pain grew so intense, I was blacking out.

Fuck, I was going to drown in a pool of animal blood. I fought against it, trying to stay conscious.

James was yelling the words now, the wind whipping them past me as I tried to stay awake, to stay above the blood.

James yelled a final word, just as Ramon stepped forward. I saw a flash of silver, then felt a sharp pain in my shoulder.

Ramon had *fucking stabbed me*.

My blood hit the surface of the pool. Pain struck, a lightning flare of agony through my entire body, and I went rigid.

Then the next second, it was gone. The wind was gone. The room was quiet except for me retching over the side of the blood-tub.

A long line of spit connected my face to the floor. I hope James didn’t need the chalk symbols anymore, because they were ruined. I spit. “You fucking stabbed—”

That was all I got out, before cold pain shot through my body. My spine bowed again, whacking against the back of the tub. More blood splashed onto the floor. I screamed, but no sound came out.

Just pain.

Not white hot. White *cold.* It was like being flayed alive by shards of ice.

I blacked out.

When I woke up, Ramon stood behind me, his hands in my armpits, holding me above the blood. My skin was hot. Power. So much *power.* I was swamped with it.

Ramon loomed over me. “Should his eyes be glowing blue like that?”

“It will go away in a minute,” James said evenly.

“What the actual fuck,” I slurred.

“I think you’re back to being a necromantic turducken,” Ramon said. “There are apparently some side effects to the Bathory Ritual.”

“He was already balking,” James said, still using that calm voice. “If I had told him, he wouldn’t have done it.” He hesitated. “I didn’t think it would be quite this bad, however.”

“I’m going to kill you both,” I slurred.

“Sure you will, Boo. You go right on and murder us, as soon as you can lift your head on your own.” Ramon started laughing quietly, shaking me in the process.

“I’ll raise an army of the undead to do it. I can, now. I know I can.” Even I knew I wasn’t making much sense. But my mouth tasted like blood, my body ached, and I was pissed. My magic started helpfully finding all the dead. Whispering to me where they were, how *happy* the dead would be to do what I asked.

I coughed, spitting up more blood.

Whatever James or Ramon was going to say in response was lost as there was a popping sound, the air to the side of the room suddenly swirling with mist. A handful of sparrows flew out, followed by a stumbling Ashley.

“Sam! There you are! June’s—” She stopped, her teeth clicking shut. “What…what did I just stumble into?”

“Bathory ritual,” James said, wiping his hands on his handkerchief. It didn’t seem to do much good. He was going to have to take a shower, too.

“Huh,” Ashley said. “I’d forgot about that. Never actually seen it used. Did it work?” She peered at me as I gagged.

I spit again, but like James’ handkerchief, it didn’t do any good. “I’m going to raise an army of the dead and rip all of you to pieces.” Or at least, I tried to say it. I’m not sure how garbled it was what with the slurring and whatnot.

“Yes,” James said.

“Good,” Ashley said, straightening. “Because I can’t find June.” She waved a hand at me. “Hose him off and pour some coffee down his throat. I need him functional.”

Ramon pulled me out of the tub, James wrapping me in a towel.

I was having a hard time tracking what they were saying. The dead just kept whispering. *Wanting* me to use all the power boiling inside me. Some rational part of me was horrified to realize that I was still babbling about murdering everyone with my army of the dead.

“Yes, yes,” Ramon said, picking me up like I was a baby, the towel wrapped around me. “Armies of the dead. We know.”

“Let me get another towel,” James said. “I’ll wipe him down. We don’t need him dripping all over the floors.”

“I will roast you both on a spit,” I garbled. “And feed you to the hungry ghosts—”

“How long is he going to be like this?” Ramon asked, ignoring me.

“The magic will level off soon,” James said. “I think. He reacted a little more strongly to the blood than I thought he would.”

“Is that a necromancer thing, or a Sam thing?” Ramon asked.

“Stop ignoring me!” I heard a hissing sound and realized it was me. “I will feed you to the crows!”

“A Sam thing, I think.” James used the towel to dry my face and hair. “I wonder what kind of witches he has in his family tree.”

“Besides Haley and Tia, you mean?”

I was growling now.

Ramon shook me a little. “Cut that out.”

“From the level of his reaction,” James said, moving to Ramon’s other side to get my legs. “I think there might be a blood witch in there somewhere.”

“That’s cool and all,” Ashley said. “But if we can move this along?”

“My apologies,” James said. “Didn’t you call June earlier?”

“I tried. No answer. I left a message.” Ramon jerked. “Ow. Sam, did you just bite me?”

“I think we need to get this blood off him,” James said. “Don’t worry about the floors. Run him up to the shower.”

The next thing I knew, I was bouncing along in Ramon’s arms as he ran up the stairs, completely ignoring me as I told him I was going to eat his soul.

Chapter 15

Blinded By the Light

The shadow road dipped between hills and into valleys that didn’t exist in the other world. It had a geography all its own, one Creature was getting to know well. It slid so easily, so quickly from place to place, like it had been built for this world. Though it seemed empty to Creature’s sight, it suspected that the shadow roads were empty in the way that a desert was empty.

Deserts were full of life, it just appeared differently than in other places.

The deep velvet darkness of the sky was already as familiar as Creature’s own heartbeat. A steady pound that shuddered and skipped at the suddenly violent flash of light in the sky.

Out there.

In the distance.

A flare so bright it blinded.

The cold star.

The cold star!

Creature almost dropped its food onto the ground, onto the rough path that flowed in this between place. It caught the limp body before it hit. Wouldn’t do to drop it again. Creature was starting to learn how fragile the food could be. With as much care as it could muster, Creature set the food down gently onto the path.

It had to do better. This was all it had to eat until it found more.

Creature had been worried, but now this! The cold star blazing away in the distance.

Beckoning, calling to Creature. Far away, yes, light years away…

But not *gone*.

Not…vanished, swallowed up like Creature had feared.

Creature understood fear. It was cold, too, but not *good*, not like the magic.

Cold magic made the hunger sleep. Cold magic gave sustenance.

Fear didn’t feed, it ate.

Fear flowed down the throat like frigid water from high mountain streams, and for all that it filled the belly, it was a lie.

Fear filled by eating everything it touched, bite by little bite until it was all that was left.

A belly full of fear was a good way to starve.

Creature didn’t want to starve.

Creature wanted to *feed.* To *live.*

And the cold star brought life.

It burned in the distance. A beacon. A shooting line of brilliance in the warm dark of the world.

Creature’s hunger whined low. *Ours*, it said.

*Yes*, Creature crooned back. *Ours.*

Creature just needed to get closer.

With gentle arms, Creature picked up the food, resettling the awkward shape over its shoulder. The food breathed steadily in and out. Quiet. Gentle. Not screaming.

Creature was glad. Screaming was so *loud*.

But the food slept, easily like a child. Creature would find a burrow, a cave, somewhere to nest. Somewhere close to the star. It would wait until the time was right and snatch the star right out of the heavens.

Then it would never be hungry again.

Chapter 16

But Hidden in His Coat Is a Red Right Hand

It felt like my skin was crawling with power. My bones *ached* with it.

All sensory input had gone haywire. My eyes weren’t working right. Images and movements were disjointed. Like bad stop motion.

Voices came and went.

“Is this normal for him, then? The threats and the foaming at the mouth? Because Brid, darling, I really get what you see in him.”

“Shut up, Leo.” Brid’s tone was eerily calm, which meant she was freaked out. On some level, I knew that.

But I didn’t *know* it.

That didn’t make sense.

Somewhere in the distance I could hear myself saying stuff. *Vile* stuff.

“Do you think he really knows how to skin you alive using only a butterknife?” Leo sounded curious.

I blinked hard, trying to get my vision to work right again. My whole body shook.

“He does not,” James said. “He’s a vegetarian.”

“The only thing he can skin is a potato,” Ramon said. “How long is he going to be like this?”

“We need to put something between his teeth. He’s going to bite off his tongue.” I recognized Bran’s voice, but it took me a second.

I guess the gang was all here.

Someone shoved something into my mouth. I bit down and tasted iron.

“For fuck’s sake, Sean, he didn’t mean your arm!” Brid’s voice was sharp.

“Eh, I’ll heal,” Sean said. “He’s not going to grow back a tongue. Being human must feel so limiting.”

I bit down harder. Blood filled my mouth. I should gag. The blood wasn’t mine—and as soon as I thought that, a small voice inside said, *isn’t it ours now?*

It was.

It was ours now.

That voice cackled. *And what do we do with blood?*

We summon. That’s what we did with blood. And this place held so many ghosts.

Faintly I heard Leo says, “Wasn’t blood kind of the problem in the first place?”

James swore and Sean’s arm was torn from my mouth, but it was too late.

I had power, *oh I had power*. And now, now I had blood. There was only one thing left. “Come to me.” My voice sounded like a hiss.

Power pulsed outward like someone had thrown a boulder into a pond. The ground shook. Ramon swore quietly under his breath, but I heard him.

It made me smile.

“Never seen Sam smile like that,” Sean said.

“I don’t think Sam’s all home right now,” Ramon said. “Leo, hold on tight. I don’t care what he does. James, can you move a little faster?”

“Do *you* want to try to draw a circle while the ground is moving?” James growled. “No? Then shut up.”

Energy flowed out of me. So much *power*.

But my skin still crawled with it. My bones vibrated like struck bells. Muscles cramped in my back. Through all the rumbling, yelling, and noise, I heard myself, a constant, vile litany.

“…Hordes of the undead will strip the flesh from the bones of the living. Society will fall, crushed beneath my boot. Rivers of blood—”

Someone shoved something in my mouth again. A sock, from the taste. I tried to spit it out, but strong hands clasped my face, and I couldn’t move my jaw.

James’ face swam in front of mine as he checked my pupils. “He needs to siphon off more power.”

Sean barked a laugh, a hysterical tinge to the sound. “You want *more* of them?”

“No,” James said. “I want him back in control.”

The world slid by again. Arms held me tight. Grass tickled my feet. I kicked.

“Ow!” Ramon growled. “Cut it out, Sam.”

“Here, give him to me,” Leo said.

“Why should I do that?” Ramon snapped.

“Because he’s hurting you.”

“I’ll heal.”

Leo sighed. “Yes, but he’ll feel bad. He doesn’t know me well. He won’t feel as bad if he hurts me.”

I was transferred over to another set of arms, like a sack of potatoes. Leo held my back to his chest, his grip firm. I kicked, but he didn’t seem to care. I tried to slam the back of my skull into his face, but he dodged it somehow. He clamped my head against his chest so I couldn’t move.

“Everyone inside the circle,” James said. “Just in case he gets homicidal.”

“Do you mean *more* homicidal?” Sean asked.

James’ face swam in front of mine again. “I’m going to remove the sock, Sam. I want you to call for Ed.” His voice held no give. It demanded obedience.

He removed the sock.

I spat at him. He was not a *god*. I was.

James’s upper lip lifted in a snarl. His silver eyes burned. “Armies of the dead won’t touch me, Samhain Corvus LaCroix. Want to fight me, child?”

“*I am a god!*”

“You are *nothing*,” James snarled again. “A child. A speck. You want to come at me, Samhain? Bring me something better. Bring me a *real* god.”

I wasn’t sure if he said Ed’s name or not, or if that was just the first god-like creature I thought of. It didn’t matter. My brain was on fire. I literally saw red.

I screamed for Ed, punching the air with my power.

There’s a sharp sound, like a sonic boom.

My ears rang. My vision cleared.

For several heart beats, there was silence.

Then the world rushed back at me, full tilt.

Ed stood outside our circle. His jackal head glared at us. He wore nothing but a pair of boxers with little kisses all over them.

Leo let out a low whistle, but it wasn’t like a catcall whistle. It was the kind that said, *holy shit.*

“That’s…a lot of ghosts,” Ramon said.

“And dead things,” Leo’s voice rumbled against my back. “A whole mess of dead things.”

Behind Ed, circling back through the yard, were hundreds of ghosts. I couldn’t count them all. The yard was torn up, the grass and dirt already resealing itself like nothing had happened. That must have happened when all the zombies crawled out of the ground.

“James,” Bran said quietly. “Were those all from Douglas?”

James made a flat noise, but didn’t answer. The yard was full of reanimated bodies. Birds. Possums. Raccoons. Goats. Coyotes. Deer. Cows. Humans. The ground at their feet was wavy in some places, almost like it was flowing.

The yard was so full, it looked like we were having a concert. A really shitty concert.

Ed growled and I jerked my head back to him.

Ed was *pissed.* “This better be good.” He crossed his arms over his chest. How had I never noticed how ripped Ed was? I mean, I’d noticed, but I guess I hadn’t really ever thought about those muscles being a possible threat to me. Pretty sure he could tear off my head.

Like, *literally*.

“Hey, Ed.” My voice wobbled. I was shivering in Leo’s arms. James stood in front of me, but Brid, Sean, Bran, and Ramon were off to the side.

“*Hey, Ed?*” He snarled. “I was on a date, Sam. It was going *well.”* He stepped right up to the edge of the circle. “*Very well*. Then you yank me *here*? In the middle of your undead jamboree?” He paused, his eyes narrowing. “Is that part of the river? Hades preserve us, he pulled part of the river through.” His head whipped back toward us. “*What did you do?*” His voice rang through the air like a tomb door slamming shut, all thundering stone and purpose.

I looked at James.

James sighed. “We performed a Bathory Ritual. It went…” He steepled his hands. “Poorly.”

“It did work,” Ramon offered. “It just also caused Sam to go haywire.”

“S-s-sorry, Ed.” My teeth were chattering.

“We needed to drain the power quickly. You were the only upper level summoning I could think of that wouldn’t instantly eat him alive.” James crossed his arms. “Or at least would be less likely to eat him alive.”

“Is it safe to set him down yet,” Leo said, his voice vibrating against my back. “I’m generally a cuddler, but he still kind of smells like blood, and that’s making this weird.”

“Oh yeah,” Sean said. “That’s what’s making this weird.”

“I’m not sure I can stand,” I chattered.

Brid stepped forward, sliding her arms around me. “I’ve got him.”

I wrapped my arms around her neck. It felt good. Leo hovered for a second until Brid had me firmly in her grip, then decided to put his arms around us both. “Now, isn’t this fun?”

I looked up at him. “I can still taste Sean. So no, this isn’t fun.”

“I bet I’m delicious,” Sean said, his chest out. “Don’t I look delicious?”

Bran scowled at him. “I’ll show you delicious.”

Leo snorted a laugh.

Ed was tapping his foot. “Send it all back, Sam, and maybe, *maybe*, I won’t rend you limb from limb.” He jerked a finger at all of us. “No one saw any of this. You don’t speak of it.” He pointed at the wavy ground. “Especially that part. I’ll *know.*”

“Okay,” I chattered. “Okay.” Power still sung through me, but it wasn’t painful anymore. No strange voices in my head. No desire to kill everyone and make drums out of their skin.

It was a bit of a letdown, actually.

I started with the zombies. Opening the ground back up. Sending them back to sleep with my thanks. Then the ghosts, popping out of existence. Some went easily. Some fought, wanting another taste of power.

They could fight all they wanted. They stood no chance against me.

Finally, it was just Ed.

“Sorry,” I said. I went to open up a portal, but he held out a hand, stopping me. “No. Who knows where you’ll send me. Just release me, Sam.”

“Go with my blessing.” I leaned heavily on Brid. I might have been full of magic, but I couldn’t seem to get my body to do everything it should be doing.

Ed turned around, opened his own portal, and stepped through. The next second, the portal winked out of existence.

The yard was empty once more.

No one spoke.

“I think,” I said, resting my cheek on Brid’s hair. “That I’d really like to brush my teeth now.”

“I think,” Brid said, mimicking my tone, “That would be a really good idea.”

After I brushed my teeth, twice, gargled a vat of mouthwash, and had a more thorough shower, I rejoined everyone in the living room.

And stepped right into an argument. Bran and Leo were squared off in the middle of the room. Brid sat on the couch with Ramon and Sean. James was setting out snacks on the coffee table, ignoring the argument. While I’d been showering, we’d gathered more people—Brooke was helping James by bringing in drinks. Frank sat on the floor next to the coffee table. Brid’s other two brothers, Sayer and Roarke, stood by the window, enjoying the show.

“They don’t need to be reminded what he is.” Bran’s usually stoic expression had morphed into a scowl. His arms were crossed, his jaw tight. He looked ready to throw down.

Leo leaned over him, using his small advantage in height. “Now, see, I think that’s your mistake right there. I think they do need to be reminded *exactly* what he is.”

Bran shook his head. “They’re already scared of him. People lash out at the things they’re afraid of.”

Leo rolled his eyes. “Maybe, but it’s worth the payoff. The pack is intimidating. The pack *plus* him?” He threw his arms wide. “If they fear and respect him, then he’s a deterrent. A big ol’ weapon we probably won’t have to use.”

“Am I the big ol’ weapon?” I asked.

“No,” Bran said, at the exact same moment Leo said, “Yes.”

“Well, glad that’s clear, then.” I stole a small cheese sandwich from one of the trays James had set out. “What happened to Ashley?”

“She went to check on June again while you were foaming at the mouth,” Ramon said, grabbing his own sandwich, this one with roast beef. James must be really out of sorts if he was letting us eat in the living room. The *crumbs.*

I didn’t even get the thought out before James shoved a small plate into my hands.

“No need to be feral,” he muttered.

“You’re supposed to summon her once you’re coherent,” Brooke said. “Should we wait until Leo and Bran either fight or make out?” She clasped her hands and pressed them to her mouth.. “I know which one I’m voting for.”

Leo blinked hard and then laughed.

The tips of Bran’s ears turned red as he looked away. “I wouldn’t insult James by brawling in his nice living room.”

We’d made enough progress with James that at least he didn’t argue that it wasn’t his living room anymore.

“We have literally brawled through this entire household,” Sean pointed out. When Leo opened his mouth, Brid put a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll tell you later.”

She peered at me. “Are you feeling better?”

I shrugged, shoving the last of my sandwich into my mouth. “I’m coherent again. Power is back. No complaints.” I grabbed another sandwich. “Sorry for biting you, Sean.”

He didn’t look up from loading up his own plate. “What’s a few bites between friends?”

“So, why are you arguing about my weapon status?”

“I think I should spread the highlights reel of what we walked in to today to the entire pack,” Leo said. “Bran disagrees.”

Bran snorted.

I shrugged, taking a bite of my second sandwich. I was starving. I guess I had puked up my breakfast earlier. Amongst other things. “I summoned some ghosts. Raised some dead things. Pissed off Ed. I’ve done all this before.”

“Sam,” Leo said, looking at me fondly, “You raised a *lot* of dead things. You summoned so many spirits I couldn’t count them all. You punched a hole into another plane.”

I started to argue, but he held up a hand. “From what I’ve been told, yes, you’ve done those things before, but not all at once like that, not on that scale. And you didn’t just call Ed and wait for him to respond, you *yanked him through* without his consent.”

I froze mid-chew. Shit. Ed was going to be really pissed about that. Maybe I could send him a fruit basket? How does one apologize for yanking another being through to another dimension in their underpants?

Leo pushed up the sleeves of his sweater. He was just wearing a plain black V-neck sweater and gunmetal grey trousers, but somehow he looked classy as hell. Some people just give off the vibe, I guess.

“I’ve never heard of a necromancer doing anything to the scale or power you did today,” Leo continued.

I suddenly didn’t feel quite so hungry anymore.

Ramon threw a grape at me, nailing me in the chest. It bounced off and hit Frank.

“Hey,” I said. “What was that for?”

“Do *not* throw food in here,” James warned.

“You were making a face. I didn’t like it.” He threw another grape on me. “You’re not a freak, and I’ll keep throwing grapes at you until you understand that.”

He threw another one. Leo snatched it out of the air and popped it into his mouth. He threw an arm around me. “Sam, every single person in this room could be considered a freak.” He pointed to Brid. “Queen of the werewolves.” He pointed to Sean, Sayer, and Roarke. “Werewolf, werewolf, werewolf, and on top of that, they’re hybrids.” He moved his finger to Bran. “He organizes his sock drawer by color and season.”

Bran scowled.

Leo grinned, pointing to the rest of the group. “He turns into a bear. She’s a ghost. He’s an honorary gnome. I still don’t know what James is, but I know it’s weird.” He crouched a little and caught my eyes. “Do you think less of them for it?”

I frowned. “Of course not.”

“Great,” He said, “because they feel the same way about you.” He squeezed me tight with one arm and planted a big kiss on my temple. “You’re a glorious, terrifying freak. A master of the undead. A scary motherfucker.” He gave me a little shake. “Not a single person in this room loves you any less just because you do some spooky shit. Just like you don’t love them any less when they do spooky shit, right?”

“Of course not,” I said. “My friends are awesome.”

“Then stop downplaying your hand,” Leo said. “*Be* a necromancer. If the rules don’t work for you, make new ones.”

I stared up at him, a little in awe. “Who are you?”

“I missed my calling as a motivational speaker.” Leo grinned.

“Most of them don’t use terms like ‘motherfucker,’” Bran said.

Leo’s eyes practically twinkled. “Don’t you think more of them should?”

Once we had all of that settled, I summoned Ashley. She repeated all the information for me now that I wasn’t threatening to drown the world in blood. She couldn’t find June. She wasn’t in her house, and her power signature was gone, just like mine had been.

“It doesn’t take a huge leap of logic to assume the ghoul got her.” James leaned against one of the walls, a can of sparkling water in his hand. I’d noticed that he often hovered on the outskirts of our gatherings, staying off to the side, not settling in and getting comfortable. Unlike Frank, who was sprawled out like a starfish on the floor.

I thought back over everything we’d discussed about the ghoul. “As I see it, there are two possibilities. She was drained like I was and left somewhere, but just hasn’t made it home yet, or the ghoul it using the shadow roads like Douglas said and took her with him.”

Ashley seemed drawn, her expression pinched. “There’s a third option.”

“If she was dead,” I said softly, “you would know, right?”

Ashley didn’t answer, but she didn’t look relieved by my suggestion.

“If the ghoul is using the shadow roads, can’t Ashley go look for her there?” Frank asked from his spot on the floor.

Ashley gave him a faint smile. “I can find them on this plane because their power signature stands out. A spark of death amongst life. How would they stand out in the shadow realm?”

“Needle in a haystack,” Roarke said.

Sayer snorted. “More like a needle in a pack of other needles, in a factory that made needles.”

Roarke side-eyed him. “That may make more logical sense, but it hardly trips off the tongue, does it?”

Sayer shrugged. “I’ll stick with logic.”

“Of course you would,” Roarke said, but there was no bite in it.

I ignored them, turning over the problem in my head. There wasn’t a ton we could do for June where we were, especially if we were trying to keep the ghoul quiet. “Ramon, did you call June’s family?”

He nodded. “When I couldn’t get ahold of her, I checked in with them to see if they’d heard from her. Haven’t for a few days.”

“We should ask the gnomes,” Frank said.

My eyebrows shot up. “The gnomes are the opposite of quiet, and probably drunk. Plus, they’re up here with us.”

“Not our gnomes,” Frank said patiently. “June’s gnomes, or at least the ones she introduced us to. They know the area, know June, and I bet they can keep their mouths shut.”

“That’s…” Huh. Merry and Mercy did have an aura of quiet menace and competence about them. “That’s actually a good idea. Ashley, can you contact the gnomes?”

She nodded, then disappeared, wasting no time.

“Brid, can you call Haley? Get all of them up to speed.” I looked at James. “Do we need to have them stay here for a bit?”

James considered it before shaking his head. “I warded that place myself and it’s Tia’s stronghold. As long as Nick is wary, they should be okay there.” He tapped his fingers along his bicep. “I should go over and adjust their wards, though. Add a layer to make sure the ghoul can’t lure Nick out like it did with you.”

“Thanks,” I said. “That’s a good idea.” I dug into my pocket for my phone. “Everyone else keep eating sandwiches—I’ve got my own call to make.”

“Your sisters?” Ramon asked.

“Someone needs to warn their mom.” My stomach sank, even though I liked my little half sisters and their mom was really nice. She’d been kind enough to let me see them a few times since I found out they existed. Of course, she also thought I was Nick’s son and not her husband’s. I also knew she hadn’t told him that she’d met me. And we all carefully avoided the topic of her daughters being like me when we could.

Except she knew. She hadn’t told her husband Kevin, I was positive, but she knew. Because my mom had made the girls their own pouches. And sometimes my stepmom would ask me questions about the “imaginary friends” my little sisters had. I’d been content to let her ease into it. She hadn’t been a dick to me or my family—that was on Kevin. As long as she was coming to me for advice, I would be happy to help out anyway I could.

But I was going to have to rip the band-aid off today. I couldn’t let her hang out in that little valley of ignorance any longer. Not when the girls were in danger. As kind and sweet as she was, she wouldn’t thank me for putting them in danger, either.

I excused myself from the room and pulled up her contact info in my phone. I took a deep breath and hit the call button, hoping like hell she picked up.

Chapter 17

Listen, Do You Want to Know a Secret?

Elaine Hatfield had a voice that matched her—a kind of open sunniness that some people were just born with. No one in my family, but, you know, normal people. Form the small interactions that we’d had, I thought she was the kind of person people called “nice” when what they really meant was “kind.” People could be nice and still be absolute shits. Kind went all the way through.

Elaine was technically my stepmother, though she thought she was my aunt. I’d never corrected her on this—what would be the point? As it was, she let me see my half-sisters, Lilly and Sara, on occasion and I didn’t want to rock that boat. As far as I knew, she’d never told Kevin about meeting me. I’m not sure how she kept the kids from saying anything. Sara was four now, and it was difficult to keep four-year-old’s from saying whatever their little minds coughed up.

Lilly might have been only six, and I should have worried about her saying something, but I didn’t. Lilly was a necromancer, like me, like Sara, and even at her young age, was used to keeping secrets.

“Sam!” Elaine said warmly. Elaine did everything warmly, I suspected. “How lovely to hear from you!”

“Hey, Elaine.” Where her voice was warm, mine was a forced calm. I couldn’t keep the serious tone out, but I’d managed to keep the fear and worry to myself. I thought so, anyway. “I wish this was a pleasant social call.”

“Oh? Is everything okay?” Her concern was honest and real and I wondered, not for the first time, what the fuck my father had done to marry not one, but two women he clearly did not deserve.

I cleared my throat. I realized I had no idea how to answer her question. We’d never really come out and talked about what her daughters were, though we’d skirted around it a bit. She knew they were different somehow, and knew I was different in the same way, but…how did you tell a regular, normal person leading a regular, normal life that her girls could see ghosts? That they could raise the dead? That such things existed? How could you convince them that you’re not lying, delusional, or unwell?

The answer came to me and it wasn’t an easy or good one.

I had to show her. In person. Which meant I had to convince her to bring the girls over here.

“Okay, I know you don’t know me well, but I’m hoping, well, I’m hoping that you’ll trust me a little here. We’re family…sort of. Not that family means you should trust people to always do right by you, because some families are just fucked—sorry, I mean, uh—” shit, I was babbling.

“Sam.” She waited to see if I was going to start babbling again, and when I didn’t, continued. “It’s okay. I know things are…unorthodox on the Hatfield side.”

I had no idea if she meant the way that side of the family had nothing to do with each other or if she was talking about whatever it was that made us different, but it didn’t matter.

“But we *are* family,” she said firmly, with more steel in her voice than I’d ever heard. She sighed. “I feel bad about the way I’ve been doing things. It doesn’t seem right. The girls should know you better—they adore you, and Haley, but—”

But her husband was a big dick. I didn’t say, that, though. “I get it. I don’t want you to rock the boat, okay? It’s not important to me. Haley and I love seeing the girls, too.” I took a deep breath. “There’s something going on with the Hatfield side of things.” That wasn’t a lie, though it was misleading. I would apologize when she got over here. When she couldn’t just hang up on me. “It’s…well, it’s the kind of thing that’s hard to say over the phone. Could you bring the girls over?”

“Sure,” she said. “Let me look at my calendar. This week is a little hectic—”

“No, I mean now. Like, *now* now.”

She was quiet on the other end of the line.

“I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important. Please believe me. But the kids are in danger. I promise you I will explain everything when you get here.”

She remained silent several seconds. “Is this—Sam, is this the kind of thing I can’t tell Kevin about?”

“This is exactly the kind of thing you can’t tell Kevin about,” I said. “Especially since Nick Hatfield is here. We don’t have to tell the girls who he is, but—”

“Okay,” Elaine said quietly. Then more firmly, “okay.” There was another moment of silence before she continued. “I’ll bring the girls over on the next ferry. I’ll tell Kevin…something. I don’t know.”

“Whatever excuse you come up with, make sure it covers a couple of days. A sick friend or something.”

“Days?” She sounded very skeptical now and I didn’t blame her one bit.

“Look, I know how fu—how sketchy this sounds.” Don’t ask me why, but I tried not to swear around Elaine. She was just one of those people, I guess. “I do. So just—come over and hear me out. Pack like you’re going to stay a few days. If you don’t think what I have to say is worth it, I get it. You can go home. No harm, no foul. Just…please. Please know that I wouldn’t ask if it weren’t important.”

The silence was much longer this time, but eventually, she answered. “Okay, Sam. I’ll text you and let you know which ferry we’re on.”

I decided if we were going to rip the veil off Elaine’s eyes, we might as well go whole-hog. Let’s see if she could deny what I had to say after she met the gnomes. “Come to the house. And Elaine, thank you. For trusting me enough to come out, thank you.”

“You’ve never asked me for anything, Sam. You’ve always been good to me and the girls despite, well, despite everything. You’ve earned some good will, I think.” She blew out a breath. “Is there…if it’s dangerous, is there anything I should do now, before we get there?”

“If the girls still have the pouches I gave them,” I said carefully, making sure there was weight to my words. “Make them wear them.”

She agreed and we said our goodbyes. Now I just had to hope she would get here in time, that I hadn’t called her too late. We had no idea how fast the creature was moving. At least we had some idea *what* the creature was now.

It would have to be enough.

As soon as Elaine let me know what ferry she was going to be on, I texted Nick. My mom chose to stay home—she thought it would be enough for Elaine to handle as it was—but Haley came over. She wanted to see Sara and Lilly. I thought about dressing up a little; living with James had convinced me that clothes had power. Elaine would be more likely to listen to me if I was dressed nice. However, the more I thought about it, the more I thought that she needed to see me as both non-threatening and familiar.

By the time Elaine’s minivan pulled up, James had set out more snacks—kids were like locusts and werewolves were worse—and everyone was there. Elaine got the girls out of their car seats, both of them running over as soon as their feet hit the ground. They were racing pell-mell toward me and Haley, their eyes wide, screeching our names, when they both suddenly veered off course.

The screeching changed tones and message to a single name as they careened into James.

I will be honest here—when James first started tagging along with Haley to watch the girls, I was in it for the laughs. James with small children? With their sticky hands, chatter, and constant mess? It would be like watching a slow-motion car crash. I wanted to see James unsettled. Rattled. A capable man brought low by rugrats.

That was…not what happened. The girls *adored* James. Stranger still, James adored the girls.

He caught them both easily, hoisting them up on his hips, his expression intent as they both talked over each other. Lilly had one small hand on his cheek as she told him about the windy ferry ride while Sara had her arms looped around his neck. The way James listened, giving them all of his attention, you would have thought they were dignitaries.

Elaine sauntered up, bemused.

I hugged her hello, followed by my sister, Haley. Everyone else had stayed inside for now except Brid, who greeted Elaine warmly.

“That’s so cute,” Elaine whispered, still watching the girls and James. “They just adore your roommate.”

“I would have never guessed,” Brid said, trying not to laugh. “That James would do well with any kind of small, sticky creature.”

“Same,” I said. “I would have thought James and small children would have been a disaster of Titanic proportions.” Elaine seemed confused, so I explained. “James is very fussy.”

Haley rolled her eyes. “You don’t give James enough credit.”

“It’s not about credit. James is almost ridiculously capable. He would have handled it, but I expected grumbling. He complains nonstop about dealing with our stuff.” I pointed out.

“Because you’re adults, technically,” Haley said. “Most of you anyway. So he expects more. But he expects children to be a mess.”

“I just didn’t think he’d like it,” I said.

Haley dug her hands into the pockets of her jeans. “I think they adore him because he gives them all of his attention. He doesn’t treat them like babies, he treats them like people. And he enjoys it because, contrary to your beliefs, James actually likes children.” She rocked on her heels thoughtfully. “I think he misses taking care of them. From before Douglas got his hands on him.”

James dutifully examined a pretty rock from one of Sara’s pockets, while Lilly told him a joke that, as far as I could tell, didn’t have a punchline. He didn’t laugh, but he listened.

“There has to be something he’s not good at,” I said.

Haley tilted her head to the side. “Diplomacy?”

“No,” Brid said. “He’s good at that when he actually cares to do it.”

“I’m sure there’s something,” I said.

James brought the girls over to us. “Welcome, Elaine. We’ve got refreshments in the house, but it’s also full of people right now.” He glanced at me as Haley came over to take Sara from him.

I wasn’t sure if we were doing this out here or with everyone present.

Leo came sauntering out of the house, a scowling Bran on his heels. Leo strode over to us, a mug in his hands, his smile wide. He held a hand out to Elaine. “Leo Moretti.”

Elaine returned his grin, which I was beginning to realize was one of Leo’s superpowers. He had tremendous presence, for all that he took great care to keep it genial. If he smiled, you felt compelled to smile back. I wondered what it looked like when Leo got scary. He was a werewolf, and a prospective pack leader at that, so he had to have a scary mode.

“Elaine Hatfield.” She gestured to the girls. “These are my daughters, Lilly and Sara.”

Leo greeted the girls. Sara greeted them shyly while Lilly’s eyes slitted like she was sizing him up.

Leo handed the mug to Elaine. “I took the liberty of bringing you a hot cider. Thought you might be out here for a few minutes, and James makes an excellent cider, in my humble opinion.”

Bran snorted at the word “humble” and Leo ignored him.

“Oh, how thoughtful.” Elaine took the mug, still friendly but didn’t take a sip of it. I was starting to see the strain around her eyes. She was waiting for me to drop the ball.

“I also took the liberty of putting a shot of whiskey in it because…” He glanced at me. “Because you’re probably going to need it.”

Before Elaine could ask what he meant, Lilly piped up. “Your light’s different.” She tilted her face up to James. “Is he okay?”

Elaine frowned, opening her mouth to probably chastise Lilly for being rude, but James shot her a look that, surprisingly, made her wait.

“Can you explain, Lilly?” James asked gently.

When Lilly frowned, Leo ducked his head, trying to put himself on eye level with the little girl in James’s arms. “Have you seen someone like me before, Lilly? Are the colors familiar?”

She tightened her grip on James, not out of fear, but for comfort. “The man. At the gas station.”

Elaine’s eyebrows dipped, but she didn’t say anything.

“Does the man scare you?” Leo asked gently.

Lilly thought about it and shook her head.

Leo gave her a small smile. “You should always be careful around people with my light, okay? It doesn’t mean we’re bad, but it doesn’t mean we’re good, either. But we’re very strong and not all of us are careful about how we use that strength. Do you understand?”

Lilly nodded, her eyes serious. “Brid and Haley have different lights, too, but they’re safe.” She looked up at James again. “And James.”

“That’s right,” said James, his voice a little gruff.

“What do my lights tell you, Lilly?” I asked.

Lilly stole a glance at her mother, which made Elaine’s brow furrow even deeper.

Kids can be amazingly sensitive to their surroundings. They pick up on your feelings, what you’re throwing out into the universe. Even if Elaine had never said “don’t talk about your powers” Lilly had still understood the message. Elaine might not even know she was doing it. Lilly was a sweetheart and loved her mother—she would do what she could to make her happy.

“You probably don’t talk about it, right?” I asked gently.

Lilly tore her gaze away from her mom and focused it back on me. She shook her head.

“But I bet I can tell you what you see,” I said. “My lights look a lot like yours, right? Not the same.” I had Douglas’s powers swirling around inside me, which made me a little different than your average necromancer. “But close. And yours look like Sara’s.”

Another guilty glance at her mother before Lilly nodded slowly. “How do you know?” She asked me in a little voice.

“Because me, and you and Sara, we’re the same.” I took out my phone, texting Nick to tell him to come out. “I’m going to bring out another person, okay?” I pointed to my front door. “He’s going to come out in a minute and you’re going to tell me what color his lights are, okay?”

Elaine clutched her mug. “Sam?”

“I promise I’ll clear everything up in a minute,” I told her. “I don’t mean to be super mysterious or anything, but some of what I have to tell you…it’s going to be difficult to believe.” Understatement of the year.

The door opened revealing Nick. He’d taken care with his appearance, too. Cozy sweater, new jeans. He’d trimmed his beard. Elaine sucked in a breath.

Lilly straightened in James’s arms. “He’s like us!” Her eyes were bright, her smile revealing small, white teeth. “I never see people like us!”

There were so few of us that it made sense that it was a novelty for her. I generally thought the less I saw of other necromancers, the better. Present company and June excluded, of course.

Nick came over to us, hands in his back pockets, trying to appear non-threatening. When Elaine didn’t run for the hills, he introduced himself to her.

“What did she mean, Sam,” Elaine, asked. “When she said he’s like you? Is it because…because he looks like Kevin?” She looked at Lilly. “Is that what you mean, sweetheart? That he looks like your dad?”

Lilly shook her head immediately. “His lights don’t look like daddy at all. His face does, but not inside. Inside he’s different.”

“That’s right,” Nick said, his expression both amused and sad at the same time. “My insides are very different from your father.”

“Do you know what that means?” I asked her. “Those lights?”

Lilly reached out and touched Nick’s forearm, right where it disappeared into the sweater. Her smile was a little nervous. “That he…” Another one of those guilty glances at her mother.

“It’s okay, sweetheart,” Elaine said softly. “You can answer their questions if you want.”

Lilly still hesitated another second before blurting in one of those overly loud kid whispers, “that he can see the shadow people, too?”

Nick nodded. “I can see the shadow people, too. As can Sam. We can talk to them. We can do more, too, but not before we learn some safety about that, okay?’

The last thing anyone needed was a six-year-old raising her own undead army.

Elaine clutched her rapidly cooling cider. “What does this all mean? What are your trying to say?”

“It means,” Nick said, obviously keeping his tone gentle, “that we—Sam, myself, your daughters, are necromancers. We can summon the dead. Talk to ghosts.”

Elaine looked at me, unsure.

I gave her a sad smile. “I like to call in zombie wrangling.” Before she could start arguing, I held up a hand. I’d thought about this—I didn’t want to scare Elaine. So I needed to do something that would show her what I could do without sending her screaming for the hills. Which means I needed the least spooky ghost I knew. “Take out your phone and look up a name for me?” I gave her Brooke’s full name, leaning over to see the articles filling the screen. Death notices, news headlines about her murder, photos of a smiling teenage Brooke. My friend who would never get older or fully grow up, ever, and I felt a slice of anger directed at Douglas.

“I remember seeing her on the news,” Elaine said. “Poor girl.”

I nodded. “Yes.” I tipped my chin up. “Brooke?” I sent a pulse of power out, calling her to me without force. I tried to never command Brooke to do anything. She would hate that.

Brooke appeared a few feet away, a bounce in her step, her blonde ponytail swinging. “Hey, Sam, you rang?” She lit up when she saw the group. “Yay, guests! Wait, should I have been sneaky?”

I shook my head. “No, we needed you to appear exactly as is.”

All of the color had drained from Elaine’s face and her grip on her mug tightened so hard I thought she might shatter it. Lilly and Sara didn’t look scared at all.

I smiled at Lilly. I couldn’t remember if they’d met her or not. “Lilly, Sara, this is my friend Brooke. Do you know what Brooke is?”

Sara spoke for the first time tonight. “Shadow friend.”

“Right, Shadow friend.” I clapped my hands together like we were about to do something exciting. “We’re going to play a little game, okay? I want you two to close your eyes. Nick and I will do it, too. Brooke is going to move around and we’re going to point to where she is.” James and Ashley had made me do that a lot when I was first learning. “It’s really important that you don’t peek. Got it?”

They both nodded, happy to be playing a game. We all closed our eyes. Brooke was a ghost, which meant when she moved, she could be totally silent when she wanted. It didn’t matter how quiet she was. I could have found Brooke blind folded in a hurricane. I pointed to the left. Then she jumped in front of me, and I pointed there. We did that for at least a minute. Jump, move, point, until I heard a curse, a thump, and a rustling sound.

I opened my eyes. Elaine had fainted, dropping her mug. Leo had caught her. He gave me a rueful look. “I stepped behind her as soon as the color left her face. Pity about the whiskey.”

I turned around to check on the girls. Nick, like me, had opened his eyes, but theirs were still shut tight, little hands pointing directly at Brooke.

“Is the game over?” Lilly asked, eyes screwed shut. “Did I win?”

“You both win,” I said, eyes locking with Nick. We both knew full well that you didn’t really “win” with necromancy. You more “endured.”

“Yay!” Sara clapped her hands.

Lilly pursed her lips, a very adult expression. “That was an easy game. Do we get a prize? We should still get a prize, even though it was easy.” She caught sight of Leo, who was now cradling Elaine to his chest. “What happened to Mommy? Is Mommy okay?”

“Your mother is fine,” James soothed. “Just had a bit of a shock. The prize is a cookie. Let’s go get our prizes, shall we?”

We all followed James because as usual he was right—we could all, every single one of us, use a cookie, but *especially* Elaine.

Chapter 18

Movin’ Right Along

We put Elaine on James’s bed. The living room was full of people and we didn’t want her to feel like a spectacle when she woke up. And out of all of our rooms, I didn’t have to worry that James’s would be clean, his bed nicely made, or that there would be any weird, unidentifiable smells.

Look, in my defense, I didn’t know that the gnomes had been eating pizza under my bed until the leftovers got funky, and it was only that one time.

But there was no way in hell the gnomes would set foot into James’s room.

Leo settled Elaine into place. Nick and I decided to wait with her, since we’d both need to answer her questions, but I had Haley entertain the girls downstairs. We’d thought at first to keep them with us so Elaine could see them right away when she came too, but the girls were bored and wanted their promised cookies. Brid stayed with me as well, which made Leo stay, which made Bran stay…and I drew the line at any more people after that. The room was already at max capacity, and we were out of chairs. As it is, Nick and I had to roll in desk chairs from other rooms. Brid had the overstuffed-easy chair with Bran sitting at her feet. Leo stayed standing.

James came in with a new cup of cider, a plate with a few snickerdoodle cookies on it in his other hand. “I thought she would probably need a cookie, too.”

Well, I guess *now* we were at max capacity. I couldn’t exactly kick James out of his own room.

“Should we do something?” I asked. “Smelling salts or anything like that?” I settled into my chair, thinking. “Do we even have smelling salts?”

“Of course we do,” James said, settling the plate and mug on the nightstand. James’s room was surprisingly bright and cozy. The patchwork quilt on the soft bed was a rainbow of colors, and the walls were an expertly rendered rendition of Van Gogh’s *Starry, Starry Night*. It wasn’t a room that I would have immediately pegged as belonging to my immaculately turned-out roommate, though I couldn’t tell you what I had expected.

Whatever the bedroom equivalent of a fine china tea service was, I guess.

But I’d slowly started to realize, this was part of James, too. His bright, cozy heart if you will.

“You left her shoes on,” James said. “She’s getting dirt all over my bed. Really, Sam.” He started untying her shoes.

Of course, just because he had a cozy heart didn’t mean he wasn’t still James.

“Sorry,” I said. “I guess we were more worried about her health and emotional state.”

He scoffed. “You can’t do both? Multitasking, Sam. Multitasking.”

Brid smothered a laugh.

“I would hold off on the smelling salts and let her rest a few minutes,” Nick said. “She’s had a shock.”

Leo leaned against the wall, his face thoughtful. “I can’t remember a time I didn’t know. That other things were out there, I mean.”

“That’s because you are one of the other things,” I said.

“He’s some*thing*, alright,” Bran muttered.

Leo’s grin was decidedly feline. “That I am, darling, and don’t you forget.”

“You don’t have a humble bone in your body, do you?” Bran asked, exasperated.

“No,” Leo said, his head cocked to the side. “Why should I?”

Bran opened his mouth, paused, and closed it with a click.

“Ha!” Leo pointed at him, his face lit with glee. “You can’t think of a good response to that, can you? Because you secretly agree with me.” He preened. “You think I’m foxy. Hot stuff. A perfect ten.” He smoothed a hand down his chest and tipped his head up. “An Adonis, if you will.”

“Shut up,” Bran said, crossing his arms and looking poutier than I’d ever seen him. “That’s my response.”

Leo winked at him, and gave him an air kiss.

Bran grumbled, sinking lower against Brid’s chair, the tops of his ears pink.

Leo took pity and left Bran alone.

It grew silent as we watched Elaine sleep.

“I can remember,” I said. “Finding out that there was more out there.” With a shock, I realized it hadn’t even been that long since I found out. There were pants that I owned that I’d had longer than that. My voice was quiet as I kept talking. “It’s a shock to the system, for sure, and I didn’t even have kids to worry about. Just me and my friends.”

More silence as we all thought about that, each of us lost in our own little worlds.

It was Leo who broke the silence. “Do you think it’s going to weird her out a little, waking up to a room full of people starting at her?”

“Are you offering to leave?” Bran asked.

“No,” Leo said. “Just wondering.”

Shortly after that, Elaine’s eyelids fluttered. She came awake slowly, a slight frown between her brows, her mouth firming. She saw me. “Sam? What happened?”

Without a word, James stepped forward and gently took her wrist, feeling for her pulse. “Sam told you that he can see ghosts and you passed out.”

Elaine’s frown deepened. “I didn’t dream that?”

“No,” Brid said gently, a sad little smile on her face. “You didn’t dream it.”

James dropped her wrist, apparently content with his findings.

“Are you ready to sit up?” Nick asked. “James brought you a cookie and another cider.”

“I put bourbon in it,” James said. “It’s medicinal.”

That made Elaine smile a little, looking more like her usual self. “As long as its medicinal.” She held out a hand to Nick. “Help me up? I could definitely use a drink.”

Surprise made Nick startle, but he quickly stifled it, sitting up straighter and offering Elaine help into a sitting position.

“I have questions,” Elaine said, as she settled herself on the bed.

“Of course you do. We’ll answer them as best we can,” Nick said.

James handed her the cookie plate, which she set in her lap, and the cider, which she immediately sipped. She nibbled a bit of her cookie and examined us in turn. Her gaze settled on Leo. “You. Lilly said your lights are different. What does that mean?”

Leo glanced at me, his eyebrows up.

I guess it would make more sense if I answered part of this question. “Necromancers have…” oh, how to put this?

“Dominion over the dead,” James answered. “Spirits.”

Not how I would have said it, but that was good, I supposed. “We have more power over the spirits of the dead, but we also have influence over the spirits of the living, too. Part of that means we can see souls, if you want to call them that.” I tipped my head to Nick. “Which means when I look at Nick, I can shift my sight and see that he’s a necromancer, too. Our spirits don’t look altogether human.”

Elaine sipped her cider, thinking. Her eyes shot to Leo.

Leo’s smile was slightly mocking. “I’m not altogether human, either, ma’am.”

“Ma’am.” Elaine’s nose wrinkled. “No. Elaine, please.”

His voice had an odd gravity to it when he replied. “Elaine it is. Thank you.”

Her lips parted like she had a follow-up question, but she pinched them closed.

Leo dug his hands in his pockets, leaning forward. “You want to know what that means, don’t you Elaine?”

She hesitated, then nodded. “Is that okay? Is that a rude question?”

Leo grimaced before he waggled his hand back and forth. “A bit. Not with us.” He looked at me. “We’re family, after a fashion.” I’m not sure what he saw in my face, but a hint of a smile appeared on his lips. He rested his fingertips on the middle of his chest. “I have the honor of being a werewolf, currently on loan from the Windy City pack.”

Elaine paused, her mug almost to her lips. Her eyes darted to mine to see if he was joking. She swallowed hard when I nodded. Her hand had a tremble to it as she set her cider back down on the nightstand.

I tapped my chest. “Necromancer.”

Nick mimicked me. “Necromancer.”

Bran followed him. “Hybrid. My mother was a werewolf, my father a fey hound.”

“…a fey hound?” Elaine asked weakly.

“Fairy hound,” Brid explained. “Sort of like a magical wild dog.” She tapped her own chest. “Hybrid.”

Elaine looked at James. “Your eyes aren’t contacts, are they?”

James shook his head.

“I always thought they were contacts. No one has silver eyes,” she murmured. “Werewolf?” And then she laughed a little at herself.

James shook his head again. Then very slowly, he shifted to smoke, the gray air boiling down until he was in his cat form. His clothes became black and white fur, but his eyes were still silver. He sat primly and meowed at Elaine.

“A werecat?” Elaine asked, her eyebrows raised.

“No,” I said. “James is something…else.”

He shifted to smoke again, this time boiling up until he was in his dragon form. Black scales lined his back, his belly a pearly white. He leapt up onto the bed next to Elaine and folded his wings.

She reached out tentatively, her fingers tracing along the back of his head along his spine. “It’s probably bad manners, to pet someone like this, but when am I going to see a dragon again?” She choked out a little laugh. “I’m probably hallucinating all of this.” She dropped her hand.

“Did I fall and hit my head?” Elaine sighed. “That would be the rational response. To think I was imagining all of this but…” The eyes she turned on me held remorse.

“But you’ve been seeing the girls do odd things before now, and you’ve been ignoring it.” There wasn’t any censure in Nick’s words, only reassurance. “Which is a totally normal response. What else should you have done?”

“Question it,” Elaine said grimly. “I should have questioned it.” She scratched the little dragon under the chin. “So, not a werecat. What else is there?” Her shoulders slumped. “I should have read more fantasy books.”

James shifted again, this time back to his human form. His expression was grave as he handed Elaine her cider. “I’m a pukis—a house spirit—and I serve the house of LaCroix. They are my hoard, and I take care of what is mine.” They both held the cup as he stared into her eyes. “We are very real, Elaine Hatfield, and we are trusting you with information worth our lives.”

It was part promise and part threat and Elaine knew it.

She nodded at him. “Okay, so now what? What’s changed that made you feel revealing everything was necessary to me?” She clasped her mug with both hands. “It must have been something big, if you’re taking this kind of risk.”

I took turns with Nick and James, giving her the basic version of events. She was done with her cider by the time we were done, and looked at her empty mug longingly. Leo stepped forward, a flask his hand. I have no idea where he got it, but he tipped a hearty pour into Elaine’s mug.

“So what now?” Elaine asked, her face pale.

“You have two options,” Nick said. “You can stay here at Sam’s, or come stay with me and Tia.”

Elaine’s head snapped up at that. “Tia’s?”

Nick nodded.

“I’ve warded both places,” James said.

“And you’d have other protections in place,” I said. “No matter what.”

“My pack will have people watching the house,” Brid said.

Elaine studied her mug. “Is Tia…”

“My mom is a powerful witch,” I told her. “Between her, Haley and Nick, and the pack, you should be well covered, whatever you choose.”

Elaine smiled at me. “I don’t even know what a witch means, not really. But what I meant to ask was, is Tia going to be okay with us staying at her place?”

Nick reached out and touched Elaine’s knee. “Who do you think gave us the idea?”

“She doesn’t even know me,” Elaine whispered, her eyes filling with tears. “Except that I…” She shook her head.

I wasn’t sure what she was getting out, but luckily Nick did.

“You came way after the marriage had died. Tia doesn’t blame you for that. She’s not mad at you and never felt like you were taking her place or anything of the sort.” He pulled his hand back. “We’ve talked about it, trust me.” He gave her a sad smile. “At length. Regardless of the past, the way we both see it? Your girls are—” He hesitated briefly. “Related to Sam. And whatever Sam has, Haley has always shared.”

“Like I said earlier,” Leo said, all of his earlier charm and joking gone, revealing serious Leo. “We’re all family, after a fashion.”

“And family protects,” Bran added, sitting straighter.

Elaine examined all of us, her face thoughtful. “Then if it’s okay with everyone, I think we’ll stay at Nick’s. We’ll be more out of the way there. Maybe that will help.” She gave Nick a tight smile. “The girls should get to know you, anyway. Maybe…maybe you could teach them a few things. Things they’ll need to know.” Her voice quieted. “I think Tia and I are overdue a few conversations anyway.”

She swallowed hard. “I’ll just have to lie to Kevin for a few more days.” She scrunched her nose. “I hate lying.”

I shrugged a shoulder. “Honesty is a luxury that none of us can afford anymore. Not if we’re to stay safe.”

Elaine straightened up, her chin stubborn. “I’ll have to get used to it, then. I won’t do anything to let my babies come to harm, not if I can help it.”

I stood up, offering her a hand. “Speaking of which, let’s go see them. Haley’s probably filled them with sugar by now. We can let them run around a bit, chase the gnomes or Taco before we send them over to my mom’s.”

Elaine frowned at me. “Gnomes? Taco?”

“Here,” Leo said, handing her the flask. “Just in case. I have a feeling you’re going to need it.”

Chapter 19

You Call it Crime

(We Call it Smart Family Business)

We spent forty-eight hours in what can only be described as high alert. Elaine and the girls stayed with my mom, which probably sounded weird to most people, but of course, this was my mom we’re talking about. Yesterday Nick sent me a photo of them laughing over tea. They were bonding, which was good.

While we of course didn’t want anything to happen, the waiting was terrible. I was worried that if we saw no sign of the ghoul, Elaine would decide to take the girls home. Or even if she didn’t, too long away and her husband might kick up a fuss. I didn’t want to have to deal with Kevin. None of us did.

I always wondered—should I feel bad about that? Not having any interest in the contributor of one half of my gene pool? I didn’t consider him my dad—that was Haiden LaCroix. He had read to me at night, cleaned my scraped knees, and gave me Hailey.

He had loved my mom as she should be loved.

Kevin…Kevin sucked.

So much for feeling bad about it, I guess.

Brid and Leo checked in frequently, letting me know that the pack members they put on the house to watch it hadn’t seen anything. They did tell me that my mom had been generous with cookies and hot chocolate because the weather had remained crisp, and it wasn’t like we wanted to be sneaky about our surveillance. I didn’t care if the ghoul knew we were watching my mom’s house.

My mom insisted they take turns coming in at meal times so she could feed them, because of course she did.

I was worried that Elaine and the girls were going to get antsy and stop worrying about their safety. Maybe do something silly like go somewhere without a protection detail.

I should have been worrying about me.

Not that I was going anywhere alone. But I’d had to do some council business, which involved some obnoxious ghosts haunting a real estate listing. Houses in the Seattle area were still selling insanely fast and at stupid prices, so for a house in a prime location in a good school district to sit for two months was unheard of. The real estate agent happened to be a vampire, so she was aware of the ghosts and irritated with them screwing up her sale. I’d met up with Kell, the council’s resident vampire, to deal with them.

An hour of negotiation later, and the poltergeists decided to move on. I’d taken Ramon with me as well as Sean. James had decided to go check the wards at my mom’s house, and he was worried that Ramon wouldn’t be enough to watch my back. I was very comfortable with paranoia if it would keep me from being eaten again, so I didn’t argue.

The last thing I remembered was rehashing the poltergeist issue with Kell to figure out if there were any ways we could have handled that better and then…nothing.

When I woke up, I was handcuffed to a bed.

But, like, not in a sexy way. In a murder-y kind of way. Which, sadly, was not a new experience for me.

Just *once* I’d like to be handcuffed in a sexy way instead of something kidnapping related. Was that too much to ask?

A girl was hovering over me. She was a few years younger than me, short and curvy, with thick hair pulled back from pale skin.

She also had hands completely bathed in fire.

“So it’s like that, huh?” I was honestly tired of being kidnapped and intimidated. Also, as far as terrifying presence goes, it was difficult to beat Douglas. Or Ed when he was really pissed off.

Ed had actually raised the bar a respectable amount, come to think of it.

“It’s like that,” she said, a slight accent to her voice that I couldn’t quite place. She tilted her head. “Though usually the people on your end are more freaked out. It’s kind of refreshing, the lack of screaming.”

Another face peaked over her shoulder, his hair bleached, though his eyebrows were dark against the white of his skin, any remnant of a summer tan fading. His pleasant face was impassive, like he was watching the weather channel, as he patted one of the dozen or so pockets on his vest. “No begging, either. That can get real annoying. Nice. Stupid on his part, but nice.” His accent was similar but much thicker, making me think east coast. The only accents from the east coast that I knew offhand was Boston and New York, and that was mostly from TV. He didn’t quite sound like that, though.

“Sorry,” I said. “But this is sadly a regular occurrence for me. After a while, it loses its edge of terror.”

“We’re thinking of getting him a punch card.” Sean’s voice came from some part of the room. I couldn’t see him—the hovering faces were blocking out most of the room—but hearing him was reassuring. At least he was okay enough to make a joke.

“Ten kidnappings and the eleventh ransom is free.” Ramon this time. Relief rushed through me.

“Kell?” I asked.

“Present.” His tone was dry and a little irritated. “Annoyed that we got jumped by half the Scooby Gang, but present.”

“I want to be Velma!” A third head popped into view, and where the other two weren’t hideous by any means, this man might be one of the most handsome men I’d ever seen. Tan skin, dark hair, whiskey eyes, his grin a bright flash that was, frankly, saucy.

“I think you’re more of a Daphne,” I said.

He eyed me. “Because she was the pretty one?” He sniffed. “Fine, I accept. But inside? I’m all Velma.”

The girl snorted. “Inside, you’re all Scrappy Doo.”

His head whipped back like she’d struck him. “You take that back this *instant*, young lady.”

She scowled at him, the flames in her hand flaring. “Don’t you ‘young lady’ me.”

The blond guy pinched the bridge of his nose. “Can we stay on track, here? We’re supposed to be interrogating someone, not bickering.”

“I can do both,” the pretty one said. “Because I’m a Velma *and* a Daphne. I’m sure if my precious dumpling would consider things for a few minutes, she would apologize for such hurtful words. Scrappy Doo. How dare, dumpling. How *dare.*”

The girl sighed and brought her flame closer to my face. “Look, this could go on all day. I’m glad you’re not screaming and all that, so I’m hoping that you’ll continue to be cooperative and answer our questions.”

I stopped myself from shrugging—it wouldn’t work in my position. “You do know you could have just asked before you, I don’t know, kidnapped me and handcuffed me to a bed?”

The girl pointed a finger at me, the fire dancing along her finger. “We have to treat you like a dangerous suspect, thank you very much.”

“What do you think Sammy did?” Ramon asked. “Because there’s like a fifty, maybe sixty percent chance he didn’t do it.”

“Thanks, Ramon.” If I ever got out of these handcuffs, I was going to give him a wedgie.

“We’re looking for June,” the girl said. “And you were the last person to see her.” She examined me with a critical eye. “You’re supposed to be a spooky necromancer, too. You don’t *look* very spooky, but then, appearances are deceiving and all that.”

Ah. Okay. Things were becoming slightly less murky. “We’ve been trying to call June. I wanted to warn her about something, but we haven’t been able to get ahold of her.”

“June doesn’t always answer her phone,” Ramon offered. “Especially if she’s binge-watching something. We were kind of hoping it was something like that.”

“Instead of what?” This came from the bleached hair guy.

I hesitated. We didn’t exactly want the whole “ghoul” thing to get around. But I needed to tell them something, or I was going to spend the rest of my short life handcuffed to this bed. I didn’t make the mistake of thinking for one second that, just because they were young and seemingly non-threatening, this group wouldn’t kill me and dump the body in a handy sewer. They were too nonchalant about what they were doing. They also had the air of a seasoned unit.

“Less thinking,” The pretty one said. “More talking. I have things to do. Like any good Velma, I’m *busy.* Doing *things*, mysterious and otherwise.”

“First, I need you to answer one of my questions,” I said.

The girl snorted. “I can’t believe you’re making demands. Then again, you’re Council, so what did I expect.”

“It’s a safety issue,” I admitted. “What’s your connection to June?”

The girl pursed her lips, her gaze on me diamond-hard. She didn’t check with her compatriots before she finally responded. They both seemed content to let her take the lead, even though she appeared younger than them. Then again, age amongst the magical world was deceptive. Just look at James.

She sighed, snapping the fire away from her hands. It guttered out and vanished like it had never been there. “She’s a friend of ours.” The sentence was grudgingly uttered. “And an even bigger friend of our boss.”

“You don’t want to fuck with our boss,” the pretty one said cheerfully. “He would end you. No one would ever find your corpse. Your loved ones would have nothing to mourn while he slept like a baby on sheets worth more than your car.”

“How do you know your boss’s sheets are worth more than Sammy’s car?” Ramon asked.

“It’s a saying,” pretty-boy said. “People say it.”

“No one says that,” the blond pointed out.

“I just did.”

The fire-girl made a strangled screaming noise.

As a saying, it didn’t do much for me, and as assurances went, it was worse. Then again, I wasn’t really in the position to bargain. “What I’m going to tell you can’t go further.”

Ava was already shaking her head. “We have to tell the boss.”

Now it was my turn to sigh. “Fine. But make sure he knows that this information, if it gets out, will be dangerous for June, okay?”

They all nodded.

That was the best I was going to get. “Something is going after necromancers. A ghoul. We were trying to warn June.” I gave them an extremely edited version of the story. Once that was done, the blond one stepped away to make a phone call.

About ten minutes later he came back, and I was finally allowed to sit up. The cuffs came off after the girl gave me a stern warning that she could, at any time, set me on fire. An effective threat for sure, coming from her.

I finally got to take in the room, which was your basic generic motel room. The kind with a bland, yet somehow hideous bedspread about thirty years out of date and the “art” bolted to the wall.

Ramon and Sean were both in chairs. They’d been placed back-to-back. They weren’t cuffed, but were instead completely encased in what seemed to be some kind of thick vine. As I watched, Ramon flexed, the vines moving with him, keeping a firm grip, but not snapping.

Kell was in the remaining chair, bound in chains, a small, dark-haired man with sun-tanned skin and large brown eyes hovering over him in a menacing fashion. As I watched, he bared his teeth at Kell. They were sharp in a way that told me he was something human-adjacent.

Or he’d paid a dentist a lot of money to get a mouth full of nightmare teeth.

The question of how the team had known to question us was made clear as well. Seated on the small table, a card game in front of them, sat Merry Death and Merciless Blade, the two gnomes that had rejected us in Mississippi.

“I would say it’s nice to see you again,” I said, rubbing my wrists. “But it’s not.”

Merry didn’t even look up. “We like June. If she leaves, a different necromancer might move in. We don’t want that.”

“Besides,” Mercy said, tossing down a card. “We owe her.” She turned her head my way, her lip curling up. “Your security is terrible.”

“Usually it’s really good,” I said. We’d just been cocky in the knowledge that I had two shapeshifters and a vampire with me. “You just caught us at the right moment, I guess.”

Mercy scoffed, her brown eyes full of derision. “If there was a moment, then the security wasn’t any good.”

“I will admit,” Kell said, his attention never leaving the man in front of him. “That we made an inexcusable tactical error.” His voice held the easy grace I expected from Kell. Like we were on a pleasant social call sipping lemonade instead of kidnapped in a seedy motel. “I didn’t see the threat in a group of young people, two of which had toddlers on their hips. Glamours and magic, the simplest of tricks, and I fell for it. I’m too old to do something so stupid.”

“We didn’t even need Bianca,” the girl said smugly. “Just walked right up.”

“Shouldn’t have worked,” the blond said.

“It was simple,” the pretty man said with a one-shoulder shrug. “Simple is always best.”

The menacing man smiled at Kell. “If you so much as twitch, I get to eat you. It’s been a long time since I’ve had vampire.”

I stopped rubbing my wrists, suddenly irritated. I channeled my inner James, letting my voice go cold and haughty. It was an impression I was getting better at. “We’ve been very forthcoming, despite everything. I’d like some answers. Now.” I waved a hand at them. “Who are you?”

The girl turned to the blond and he nodded.

She folded her arms, her face stern. “If we let you three out, will you cooperate?”

“You project a lot of authority for someone so short,” Sean grumbled. I was pretty sure he was annoyed that they’d gotten the drop on him so easily.

“Runt of the litter energy,” Ramon said as he flexed against the vines. “You got to watch out for the little ones. They’ve survived despite being tiny. That takes a certain amount of cunning and aggressiveness.”

“Can confirm,” Merry said.

“We promise to be good,” Kell said. “I’ll even order some food for your kelpie here. I’m assuming this fine establishment doesn’t have room service?”

Sean recoiled. “You have a *kelpie* with you? What kind of banana-pants people team up with kelpies?”

Sean’s reaction was completely justified. Kelpies were sort of aquatic murder ponies. You avoided kelpies. You didn’t recruit them.

Kell’s eyes narrowed. “Yes, what kind of people?” The question was absently said, more thinking out loud than actually expecting an answer. “You’re one of Alistair’s teams.”

The name sounded vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t quite place it. Seeing my confusion, Kell huffed. “East Coast one-man council.”

My eyebrows winged up. “He controls his area by himself?” The *how* went unspoken between us.

Kell’s expression was droll. “By employing kelpies and the Drove.”

Drove…drove. Nope, I had nothing. I glanced at Ramon. His expression was equally blank.

Sean swore. “He teamed up with the hares?” He shook his head. “Bananas. You’re all bananas.”

“Hares?” I was picturing a gang of wigs, which didn’t seem right at all.

“Like the rabbit,” Sean said, “but with considerably more knives.”

“The drove does like their blades,” the girl mused.

“Yes, very stabby.” The pretty guy tossed a key to the kelpie. “Stop teasing the vampire and undo his chains. I’m hungry and he promised food.”

The girl brightened. “Can we get more teriyaki? Ooooh, and maybe some Thai I wouldn’t say no to a pizza, either.”

The blond gave her what could only be described as a besotted look. “I promise we’ll feed you.” He tapped the vines holding Sean and Ramon in place, murmuring something. The vines dropped away, folding in on themselves, seeming to grow in reverse. Within a few seconds, they were nothing but a handful of seeds that the man tucked into one of the many pockets on his vest. “I’m Lock.” He pointed to the girl. “Ava, and the ridiculously handsome one is Ezra. The cannibalistic one is Fitz.”

Fitz scowled at him. “It’s not cannibalism. I’m not a vampire.”

“You say that like you wouldn’t eat another kelpie,” Ezra said, leaning against the wall.

Fitz hesitated, holding the key over the lock. “Maybe. I mean, not one I *liked*, obviously.”

“Well, obviously,” Ava said under her breath.

Fitz unlocked Kell’s chains. He stood up, shaking them off. “Sam, I apologize for every time I’ve called your group annoying, obnoxious, or vexing. Current circumstances inform me that it could have been worse.”

“You’ve never called us annoying,” Ramon said. “Or any of those other things.”

“In my head,” Kell murmured. “Many, many times.”

Ava pointed at Kell. “Less chatting, more food. We need to plan, and I can’t plan when I’m hungry.”

“Plan?” I asked.

“Well, we’re going to stay and help you, obviously.” This was from Ezra. He shook his head slowly. “It’s clear you need help. Supervision, really. Like babes in the woods.”

“I’d like to see him with James,” Ramon said. “They’ll murder each other. Or make out. It could go either way.”

I was betting on murder, especially since they’d kidnapped us. How long had we been missing and off the radar? James was probably going nuts. That was a good point, actually. “You kidnapped us, and now you want us to team up?”

“Are you still on that?” Ezra asked. “That was like ten minutes ago.”

“I like to bring up old shit,” I said dryly. “Minor things, like the felony that just happened.”

Ava put her hands on her hips. “Really. Ezra’s right. That was like, ten minutes ago, and it was just a teeny *tiny* felony. Don’t be such a baby.”

“James,” Ramon said slowly. “Is going to eat them alive.”

Personally, I couldn’t wait.

Chapter 20

Your Changeling Song Takes Shape  
in Shadowtime

Lily Hatfield was enjoying her time at Aunty Tia’s house. There were always cookies as long as she ate most of her lunch. She got to play with Haley every day, and though she missed her daddy, it was in a familiar way. Daddy worked a lot.

It did help that Uncle Nick reminded her a lot of daddy, except he was around more and talked to her about the shadow people. He was shy, like her sister Sarah was shy, but Lily could tell he liked them around. He was a good hugger, too. He treated every hug like it was special, which made her giggle.

What she really missed about home—besides her toys—was her shadow people. There weren’t any at Aunty Tia’s. There had been a *bunch* at Sam’s! She’d never seen so many shadow people. When she asked Uncle Nick, he told her that he’d worked with Tia to put up magic fences that kept the shadow people out.

She thought it was weird that he wanted to keep them out, but he’d explained that shadow people were just like regular people and not all of them were nice.

But *hers* were nice, and if they were here right now, she’d have someone to play dolls with. Her mommy was putting Sarah down for a nap. Haley had homework. Aunty Tia was working and Uncle Nick was helping her.

That left the werewolves. She peeked her head out the back gate. One of Brid’s brothers was pretending to read a book on the front porch. One of the quiet brothers--the one with a weird name. Sayer.

She liked Sayer. He didn’t talk to her like she was a baby.

He carefully dogeared his page. “What do you need, little one?”

“Do you know how to play dolls?”

He nodded solemnly. “I am an expert doll player.”

That made her smile.

“But you have to tell Haley you’re going to be out front. I can’t keep an eye out if I’m in the backyard.”

Lily pelted into the house, shouting into the kitchen where Haley sat studying her laptop screen. “*HeyHaleyI’mgoingoutfrontwithSayerokaybye*.”

Haley looked up, popped her earbud out and said, “What?”

But Lily was grabbing her dolls and running out front and wasn’t paying attention to Haley.

She set up her dolls on the porch around Sayer’s book, which she pretended was a table. Her dollies kept falling over. They weren’t good at sitting up. The necklace Aunty Tia had made for her kept falling forward and getting in her way as she leaned over the dollies, trying to move them around. The pouch kept hitting her favorite doll, Emma, right in the face. Lily slipped the necklace off, tucking it into Emma’s pocket.

Once she had the dolls settled, they played coffee shop, where she served drinks for Sayer and the dolls. Sayer took the game very seriously, pretending to walk up as different people, doing different voices and walks for all of them. He chose the silliest drink names and soon she couldn’t stop giggling.

Then Lily had the *best* idea. A few weeks ago, when her mom was getting coffee she saw a customer get a drink for her dog! Her mommy had explained that it was just a cup filled with whipped cream, which sounded much better to Lily than coffee anyway. She could do that now, and Sayer wouldn’t even have to pretend to be a dog. He could be a *real* dog!

She tried to explain it to him, though Sayer looked dubious.

“You want to make me a puppucino? Like they do at Starbucks?”

“Yes! Please, Sayer! Please? Daddy won’t let us get a dog until we’re older and I’ve always wanted one and this would be *just like* having one, so can we please?” She clasped her hands together and gave him big eyes, a trick that frequently worked on adults.

Sayer sighed. “Like I can say no to that. Okay, fine. I’ll just duck around the corner to change—”

Lily didn’t wait to hear the rest, she was already running into the house, heading right for the fridge. She had the door open, her hands on the can of whipped cream before Haley noticed her.

“Hey kiddo, what are you doing? Do you need a snack?”

“We’re making puppucinnos!” She squealed over her shoulder as she climbed up onto the counter using a step stool to grab a mug out of the cupboard.

“You’re doing what now?” Haley asked, blinking in confusion as she tried to track Lily as she darted around the room.

“Puppucinos!” She pelted for the door. “I have a customer waiting!’

She heard a shuffling sound as Haley got up from her seat at the table, but it was mostly lost in the noise of her running feet and the swinging of the kitchen door behind her.

When Lily got outside, Sayer was already waiting patiently. Lily froze, the mug and whipped cream in her hand. She hadn’t seen a lot of dogs, and she’d never seen one like Sayer. He was *big*. He looked kind of like pictures she’d seen of wolves, but different. He had reddish spots, like stains of blood, here and there on his fur. If she hadn’t known it was Sayer, she would have run away. Even knowing it *was* Sayer, was she froze, her heart beat a rapid flutter in her throat.

This made Sayer whine. He laid down, his nose in his paws, making himself seem smaller. Lily smiled with relief. It was still Sayer, he just *looked* scary. Lily already knew that things that looked scary sometimes weren’t, just like things that didn’t look scary sometimes *were*. The shadow people had taught her that.

Lily held up the cup. “I’ve got your drink, sir!” As she set it on the ground, she caught movement from the corner of her eye. Another dog trotted up. Smaller than Sayer, but similar looking, with red patches on white fur. Brid had been on guard with Sayer—this must be her.

“Another customer!” Lily beamed. “You’ll have to wait your turn.” She held the whipped cream can over the mug, pushing on the nozzle like she’d seen mommy do many times. It came out faster than she expected, making a harsh noise that startled her. She sprayed whipped cream over the grass, but some of it made it into the cup.

She heard a snort behind her. Haley had come out on the front porch to watch. “Smooth, kiddo. Very smooth.”

Brid barked, her mouth curled in a doggie grin.

“Be patient. Sayer is first.”

Sayer sniffed the cup dubiously, giving it a tentative lick.

“It’s good. I’ll show you.” Lily scooped up Emma and pointed the nozzle into her face. She was just about to give Emma a little taste when something crackled behind her, like static. The air around her—already chilly—got even colder.

Lily felt all the hairs on her arms stand on end, and her neck prickled.

She dropped the can of whipped cream.

She turned around slowly, her mouth dry, her heart a frightened rabbit in her chest. Faintly, as if it were coming from far away, she heard Haley gasp.

Then Lily saw it.

At first, her eyes couldn’t make sense of it.

Last month her mommy had read a lot of Halloween books to them. One of Sarah’s favorites was *Room on the Broom*, a funny story about a witch, her broom, and all the animals that wanted to take a ride. At one point something wants to eat them, but is scared away by a terrifying mud creature. In the story, the mud creature was really just the animals from the broom, standing on each other’s shoulders and covered with mud and sticks.

The thing in front of Lily looked like the mud creature, but made of shadows.

It…rippled when it moved, like when you throw a rock in a pond. Lily clutched Emma to her chest, her eyes wide as the thing surged forward.

It made…noises.

Singing noises, but wrong. So wrong. Lily broke into a sweat, unable to move now, eyes trained on the monster.

It scooped her up with sticky arms. She felt prickles, like little bites, anywhere the monster’s skin touched hers.

She tried to scream. No sound came out.

Haley was shouting, but from so far away. A wolf howled, the sound slicing through the noise.

Lily wanted to howl back, but all she could do was cry silently as she stared up into the face of the creature. Two liquid eyes stared back, the color of oil on pavement, beautiful darkness.

Slits where a nose should be.

A mouth curving around words Lily couldn’t understand. Her world narrowing the longer she stayed in the monster’s arms.

Hungry. It was *so hungry.*

The world shifted then, like they’d stepped through a doorway.

The sun blinked out.

The crisp colors of fall faded sharply, replaced by plum purples, midnight blues, and glorious fathomless black.

The colors of nighttime. Of eternity.

And Lily slipped into them, borne gently in the arms of the monster eating her powers bite by bite.

#

Creature hadn’t been able to find the cold star. It would blaze into existence, only to blink out a moment later.

Teasing.

*Taunting*.

It made Creature angry. Why was the cold star so mean, so cruel?

Didn’t it know how *hungry* Creature was? Starving, it was starving, and the cold star was mocking it.

Creature howled in the darkness.

It needed more food for its nest. Why was this so hard?

At least it had the nest now. The cave Creature had found was perfect. Tucked back from the shadow road, in the towering trees of the forest, next to a sluggish stream that made weird music.

Something long ago had burrowed into the rock, making a home. Long gone. Creature’s now.

*Nest.*

*Home.*

Creature’s angry howls turned to hums of contentment. The cold star may be mocking creature, but at least Creature had something of its own now. A place to *be*.

The opening of the tunnel led back, twisting and turning, before entering into a large cavern. Crystals bloomed along the ceilings and sides, giving off a soft, constant light of gentle violet. Black sand lined the bottom, soft against Creature’s feet.

Creature flexed its feet into the sand, enjoying the welcome of its nest.

The new food lay limp in Creature’s arms. So small. The food came in so many different sizes. Creature wasn’t sure what that meant. This one was so little, it hardly seemed worth the effort.

But Creature took it anyway. Food was food.

It would need to be careful when it ate again with this one. Easy to take too much. It almost had.

Creature could still see the cold spark, the barest ember, deep in the new food’s body. Carefully, gently, Creature laid it down next to the other food.

More. It needed so much more than this.

Creature moved away, squatting by the entrance of the cavern. It needed to think.

How was the cold star hiding? How had this little morsel suddenly appeared, when before there had been nothing?

Creature wished it could talk to the food. Make it understand. Make it give away its secrets. Creature couldn’t make sense of the weird sounds it made. Creature had *tried*. The food mostly seemed to scream. Maybe it hadn’t learned to make words yet? Maybe it communicated a different way.

Creature could try to teach it. Make it learn.

Then once it learned, Creature could take its secrets. Find out where the other food was hiding.

When it had enough food, maybe Creature would go looking. Find others like itself. Creature couldn’t be alone. There had to be more like them.

It didn’t want to be alone.

Not when it could have a full nest. Creature understood the difference between full and empty. One didn’t exist without the other. So if the nest was empty now, it had the potential for full.

Creature just had to figure out how to make that happen.

It had a start now. It had the food. Maybe if it kept the food here in one place, Creature could draw others like it here! Make them come to Creature.

If it had the cold star, the draw would be stronger. Creature couldn’t imagine any of its kind ignoring the glow of the cold star.

Creature would be patient.

Creature would wait.

And in the meantime, the food would learn.

Chapter 21

Homeward Bound

(I Wish I Was)

Brid had followed the creature that snatched Lily on silent paws, her brother Sayer quietly trailing in her wake. Not that the ghoul—she assumed it was *the* ghoul, the one that had gone after Sam, because she didn’t want to entertain the thought that there was a whole passel of them—paid them any mind. It was like it couldn’t see them. Or maybe it could see them and just didn’t care.

Either way, they weren’t really registering as a threat on the ghoul’s radar. It had ignored them as they leapt through the magical rift in their reality. Ignored them as they followed it along the unfamiliar twilight path, paws sinking into the strange dirt.

Lily hung so limply from the ghoul’s arms; Brid might have thought that they were too late—that the worst had happened. If Brid hadn’t been able to hear Lily breathing, she would have been really worried.

No, that wasn’t right. She was already worried. She would have been frantic. Brid liked Lily Hatfield. Even if she hadn’t, she felt the drive to protect the young in the pack. It didn’t matter that technically Lily wasn’t pack.

She wasn’t even a werewolf.

She was *Sam’s* though, and that made her pack. Brid had known that somewhere, not-very-deep-down, she hadn’t accepted that she’d broken up with Sam. What she hadn’t realized was how thoroughly she’d rejected her own actions. In her mind, Sam wasn’t a *friend* of the pack—he was *pack.*

He was hers, full stop.

The certainty of that couldn’t be ignored, not when she had followed his little sister into the underworld. Not when Sayer had gone along with no argument, not even a questioning glance.

Because he felt like Lily was pack, too. Otherwise he would have at least *tried* to make his Taoiseach consider the risks before plunging into a totally different reality. When she got home—and she refused to consider the fact that she might not be able to get home—she was going to have to think more on this.

She didn’t think she’d made the wrong move breaking up with Sam in the first place. Her pack had needed some stability and considering a necromancer as one half of their leading pair of alphas would have rocked the boat on tsunami levels.

Even though she hadn’t been wrong, she could admit that there might be other options. They could come up with something. They *needed* to come up with something. It wasn’t every day that a person went gallivanting off into the underworld—not alive, at least. And yes, she would have done it simply because it was the right thing to do, but she also knew that hadn’t been her primary drive. In this case the right thing to do had just happened to dovetail with her course of action.

Her pack had tried to convince her that Sam was a passing fancy. Young love and all that. Statistics were against a couple her age being together for the long run, she knew that. It wasn’t like she could just say, “oops, I was wrong” and get a divorce. Not if she picked him as her mate.

But…

And that was the problem right there. That very persistent, very loud *but*.

But it was Sam.

They might argue and screw up. He was different from her, from her life, in so many ways. But no one, absolutely no one, made her feel like Sam did. It wasn’t just that he made her feel loved. Brid was spoiled in that way—she never, ever doubted that her family, her friends, loved her. Being loved wasn’t a novel feeling, not for her.

With Sam, it was more than that. It was the way he looked at her. The way his eyes would shine as he softly smiled and she would feel like she was more. Just…more. Not only capable of doing what needed to be done, but also that, should she fail, he would still smile at her like that. Still love her.

And that’s what it came down to, really. Sam loved her with his whole self, and goddess knew she loved him right back. How was she supposed to pick someone else when that certainty had settled into her soul like the solid foundation that it was?

The simple fact was she couldn’t.

And none of this would matter if she couldn’t get Lily back from the ghoul and get them all back from the underworld.

They followed the ghoul on quiet paws into a cave that lead to a large cavern. The ghoul darted ahead, depositing Lily next to another person—an adult, though Brid couldn’t see much of her. She was turned on her side, curled up in the fetal position facing away from Brid. The soft purple glow of the weird cave they were in did strange things to colors and shadows, so her vision wasn’t great to begin with.

She hoped it was June, because that would explain where June had gone and why she wasn’t answering her phone, but she also hoped it *wasn’t* June. That maybe she’d randomly decided to go on vacation and not answer her phone or tell anyone. If she was here and breathing, though, at least she was still alive.

The ghoul squatted by them for long enough that Brid laid down at the far end of the cave and watched. The sand had muffled any sound of her movements, so she still wasn’t sure if the ghoul could hear or not, but it didn’t seem to be able to see her. Sayer nestled next to her in sphinx pose, focused entirely on the ghoul.

It had stopped singing at least. Or humming? Brid wasn’t sure how it had made that sound. It had been almost hypnotic and made Brid think of sirens. Did the ghoul use its voice to beguile Lily? She’d never heard of ghouls doing that, but then, she had never really heard anything about ghouls. She had no real information beyond the fact that this one was the kind that fed off necromancers.

There was a scraping sound as the ghoul leaned against the wall to stand. It took long, flowing steps across the sand, moving more like a liquid than a solid. Ghouls were built so differently than anything Brid had ever seen. She couldn’t predict anything it would do or how it would act, and that unsettled her.

The ghoul flowed over to the entrance into the tunnel part of the cave and collapsed down into the sand again. Resting, maybe? It didn’t seem to be paying much attention to anyone else in the cavern. Long minutes ticked by and Brid started feeling restless. She wanted to check on Lily and the person that was possibly June. The ghoul didn’t seem to be paying attention to them, but it was possible that this was a trap.

She must have started unconsciously to stand, because Sayer leaned against her. A warning—stay down. Just because the ghoul hadn’t noticed them didn’t mean that was the truth. Time moved slowly as Brid rested and waited, listening to the unfamiliar sounds that floated into the cave. Birds? Were those birds? What kind of things lived in the underworld? Did things live in the underworld, or were they…not alive, but something different?

Brid shivered. She’d never felt so far out of her depth.

Or so afraid.

She wasn’t sure how much time had passed when the woman started to wake, but the quality of the light filtering in from the tunnel changed, making her think a few hours had gone by. Nothing really noticeable, but her breathing changed, and her foot twitched.

The ghoul straightened. Stood. Moved in that smoothly rolling wave that it had. Hovered over the woman. As Brid watched, it leaned in, covering the woman’s body with its mass. Brid couldn’t see the woman who was possibly June anymore except for her sneaker. The sneaker jerked, going rigid, digging a gouge in the sand. The soft sound of it echoed in the cavern. Followed by strange sucking noises.

Feeding. The ghoul was feeding.

Brid’s stomach rolled.

Sayer leaned into her again, a silent *I know*.

It was terrible and they couldn’t do a single thing except watch.

The feeding didn’t take long, the ghoul straightening after a few moments. By then the woman’s sneaker was limp again. So still that Brid strained her ears to listen for any indication that she was still alive. Relief flooded her when she picked up the shallow sound of the woman’s breathing.

Whatever the ghoul wanted, it wasn’t to kill them. At least, not yet. The ghoul hovered over Lily and the woman for a long moment, head cocked to the side. Something must have grabbed its attention then, because its head snapped to the side, its focus so intense Brid could almost feel it.

The ghoul let out a soft cry before it moved swiftly to the entrance of their cavern.

It disappeared without a backwards glance.

Brid and Sayer waited, ears pricked, listening to make sure the ghoul had really left. A few minutes ticked past with nothing but the soft violet glow of the cave and the quiet sounds of Lily and the woman breathing.

Brid stood, trotting over to them, Sayer right behind her. Between one step and the next, she was human, her brother following suit. Without speaking, Sayer went to check on Lily while Brid went to the woman. Once she was close enough, she grabbed her shoulder, turning her gently onto her back.

Brid had never met her in person, but she’d seen a picture. If this wasn’t June, it was her doppelgänger. “It’s June.” She kept her voice so low it was almost sub-vocal. Sayer would still be able to hear her, and she didn’t want anyone else listening in. The ghoul might have left, but they didn’t know what else was out there. No need to advertise they were here more than necessary.

Sayer grunted, the sound matching the same level of volume as Brid’s. “Figured as much.”

Brid grasped her wrist, laying two fingers over June’s pulse point. The beat was steady, but her breathing sounded a little shallow. Brid couldn’t quite tell if it was the light from the cave walls making June’s brown skin look a little ashen, or if it was a side effect of the ghoul feeding off her. Brid placed her hand on June’s forehead, finding the skin clammy to the touch.

“How’s Lily?” She whispered.

Sayer gently pulled back the young girl’s eyelid to check her pupils. “Out like a light. Pulse is good. Breathing okay. I don’t like how cold she seems, though.” He turned worried eyes to Brid. “This cave isn’t chilly, it’s humid. Her skin should be a lot warmer.”

“June’s too,” Brid said. “We’ve got to get them out of here.”

Sayer took in the cave, his expression grave. He sniffed the air and sneezed. “I don’t particularly want to keep them here, either, but where are we going to take them?”

Brid shrugged. “We’ll figure that out later. Right now, the biggest threat is the ghoul. Let’s get them away from it, first. Then we’ll regroup and try to find out way home.”

Sayer nodded. “Switch me. I’m taller than you and it will be less awkward for me to carry June.”

She took his place, scooping Lily into her arms. Lily’s doll fell to the ground, jostled out of her arms when Brid picked her up. Sayer scooped up the doll, tucking it into her arms. Then he picked up June, cradling her to his chest.

“Follow me,” Brid said, picking her way across the sandy floor of the cavern.

“Don’t I always?” Sayer asked.

“Yes, but considering everything…just stay close, okay? I don’t like the idea of losing sight of you here.” Even thinking about it for a second made Brid shudder.

“Yeah,” Sayer said, his voice quiet. “I get it. You stay close, too.”

“I will.”

Brid stepped out of the cavern and into the tunnel that would lead them out, her brother right behind her, practically treading on her heels. She didn’t mind. Losing someone in the underworld was definitely a bad idea.

They made it out of the cave entrance, taking in the area around them in a glance. Brid didn’t see any sign of the ghoul and didn’t want to stay out in the open long. They were too exposed, too easy to see.

Even though she’d seen the area around the cave opening earlier, she hadn’t had much time to study it. The geography kept surprising her. She hadn’t expected there to be plants in the underworld. Or streams. She hadn’t known what to expect, honestly. It was a strange twilight world unlike their own, and yet, similar in lots of ways, too.

“Which way?” Sayer asked.

Brid huffed. She had no idea where they should go. This world not only didn’t correspond with theirs as far as she could tell in terms of geography, but she also wasn’t sure where she could go to get them out of this place and back to their homes. “I’m pretty sure we can’t get back the way we came.”

“Whatever kind of portal it opened,” Sayer said, “closed behind us.”

“That would probably be the first place it looked anyway,” Brid said. “But that’s a guess. Just in case, though, let’s go the other way.”

“It’s as good a choice as any,” Sayer said, adjusting June in his arms.

Brid turned left, leading her small party away from the cave quickly. She wanted to put as much ground between her and the ghoul as she could.

Somewhat aimlessly wandering through the underworld wasn’t a great option, but all things considered, Brid figured it was better than being *found* in the underworld. Unless their friends somehow came and got them.

Brid prayed hard to her goddess that Sam or Nick would be able to work their magic and come find them. Because right then, she couldn’t see any other way they were going to make it back home, and that thought chilled her down to her marrow.

Chapter 22

She’s Gone, She’s Gone, Oh I…

(Better Learn How to Face it)

I yanked at the tie around my neck, striding across my lawn like I had somewhere to be. Sean and Ramon were still with me, which I’d expected, but Kell was with us as well, his parasol up and mirrored sunglasses on to block the fall sunlight. Our new “friends” surrounded us, checking out my yard with careful eyes.

Ezra whistled. “Council pays well, doesn’t it?”

“We knew that,” Lock said. “It’s not like our Council members were living in hovels.”

“Yeah, why else would you deal with the devil?”

The last was from Ava, who didn’t have the greatest opinion of the Council.

“I didn’t get it from being Council,” I said, leaving my tie to dangle around my neck. “I got it from killing the devil himself.” I turned to look her in the eye. “Twice.” Apparently, I wasn’t too over the kidnapping thing, and honestly, I wanted them a little wary of me.

The kelpie, Fitz, sidled up next to me with an easy grace. “How do you kill a thing twice?” His level of interest was a little concerning.

“You bring it back from the dead,” I said, my voice trailing off as I noticed James opening the front door. “Which happens to be my specialty.”

“Hmm,” Fitz said. “Could be handy, that.”

I expected James to be doing his best thundercloud expression. An immaculate thundercloud, but one nonetheless. Fuming, that was the word. Instead…

Instead. Until this moment, I hadn’t realized how much James had really opened up to us the last few months. He made actual human expressions now. Or maybe I’d gotten better at reading his subtle changes. Either way, when I looked at James now, I could generally understand what he was feeling.

This was old James. A buttoned-up fortress practically oozing menace. Could that be directed at the kidnappers?

No. I didn’t think James would want to give them the idea that he was in any way worried for my safety because I was a powerful necromancer and should be able to handle my own shit. Which meant…

“Something’s wrong,” Ramon said, picking up speed. Sean and I started jogging behind him. James met us within seconds.

He spared only the briefest glance at our newcomers. “Go away.”

I’m not going to lie, if James had said those words to me like *that*, I would have turned right the fuck around. Hell, I was tempted to do that now and it wasn’t directed at me.

“They’re here to find June,” I said.

James pinned Ava with a stare, picking her out as the ringleader. “Go. Away.”

“No,” Ava said calmly. “Alistair sent us. We have a job to finish it, and we will.” Ezra and Lock flanked her, while Fitz leaned in and gave James a sniff.

James hissed at him.

Ramon stepped up and cupped the back of Fitz’s neck. “Bears eat salmon, you know. I bet kelpies taste like salmon, and I’m already not inclined to like you.”

Fitz’s grin was razor sharp and feral.

“Oh, fuck off, all of you,” I ground out. “I don’t have any fucking time for posturing.” I folded my arms and looked at James. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re gone.” Just like that, James fell apart. A fine tremble shook his frame. He started sucking in breaths. I’d never seen him like this. It made my heart rate pick up, cold fear sliding along my veins.

I’d been wrong. He hadn’t been ready to run off and kick ass. He hadn’t been oozing menace. He’d barely been holding himself together.

“Who, James? Who’s gone?” I was surprised how steady my voice was.

James didn’t answer. I wasn’t certain he could hear me anymore.

“He was like this before,” Ramon whispered. “When you went missing, but not as bad.”

“But I’m fine,” I said. I put a hand on James’s shoulder. Was this a delayed reaction to us going missing today? “James, we’re fine. We’re all here.” I pointed at the group. “See? Ramon, Kell, Sean. All accounted for.”

“You don’t understand,” James whispered, and I wasn’t entirely sure he was talking to us. “They’re mine. I’m supposed to protect what’s mine. I promised to protect them.” His breathing was jagged, the tremors getting worse. His eyes were a bright silver when he looked at me, gaze imploring me to comprehend whatever the fuck he was trying to say. “I *promised*, Sam. And they’re *gone*.”

“Someone he considers part of his hoard,” Kell said, his voice measured. His sunglasses glinted in the sunlight as he readjusted his parasol.

“I thought a hoard was stuff?” Ramon was still gripping Fitz, though he wasn’t paying attention to the kelpie. “Like gold?”

Kell’s expression was fit for children who had underperformed. “The dragon in him hoards shiny, priceless things—jewels, gold, cars, etcetera. The cat will hoard whatever catches his fancy, because cats are adorable hedonists. But the man? Sam, his house is his hoard.”

I looked at the house looming in front of us. Nothing appeared amiss.

Kell sighed. “I’m surrounded by children.”

“We can’t all be ageless vampires, Kell.” My patience was thinning, and we were no closer to understanding why James was half-catatonic.

“Not *house* as in building,” Kell said, biting off each word to make us understand. “That’s territory. He’ll guard it, but it’s not the same. House as in *lineage.”* At our continued blanks stares, Kell turned those shiny sunglasses on me. I could see my pale, sweaty, confused face in the mirrored lenses. “What is a *pukis*, Sam?”

“They’re house spirits,” I said automatically. “They guard the house.”

“Yes,” Kell said. “*You’re* the house. Anyone James considers part of your family, part of the lineage or an offshoot, is his hoard. For a *pukis* to lose a member of his hoard, it’s a tremendous shock to the system. For them to lose more than one?”

They. James had used a plural. The panic in my veins solidified into stark terror, my heart pounding in my ears. I grabbed James, shaking him. “Who did you lose, James? Who’s gone?” A tear snaked down James’ cheek. The only time I could remember James’ crying was when Douglas had died. Time slowed as I felt my heart fracture at the edges. My mind blanked as I tried to think of names—who would James consider part of my family? “My mom? Haley?”

He shuddered in my arms, but otherwise didn’t react. Not mom or Haley. “Frank?”

No reaction.

I cupped his face with my hands. James wasn’t home, his eyes blank. According to Ramon, when I’d gone missing, James had acted like this, but not as bad, and then freaked out and then started tearing apart New Orleans to find me. I was pretty sure I would be considered the head of James’s house, and he hadn’t gone into shock like this. Multiple people, but not Frank, my mom, or Haley.

“Nick?”

Nothing.

That left…*oh god.* “Lily? Sara?”

James’s sob had edges to it. “Lily. It got *Lily.*”

“We’ll get her back,” I said quickly, assuring him of something I had no confidence in or any idea how to do. “It will be okay, James. We’ll get her back and—”

James’s focus snapped back into place with a vengeance, those shining silver eyes made all the brighter by tears and pure rage. “It took Brid and Sayer. That thing took them Sam, all of them, and I wasn’t there to stop it. All of my protections, my wards, and they didn’t even slow it down. I was *useless.*”

James couldn’t have ripped out my heart any more cleanly and effectively than if he’d reached into my chest with clawed hands and done it himself.

*Brid.*

*Sayer.*

*Lily.*

My pulse thundered back to life, too fast. I felt queasy with adrenaline. Think. I just needed to *think*.

I shook James. “We can track them. I know we can.” I had no doubt that I would follow the ghoul into hell itself if I had to. “Where did it take them James?”

He continued to shake in my hands. “They’re *gone*, Sam.”

The ghoul had left me in the swamp, but it had taken June. We thought it was moving along the Shadow Roads…

I let go of James, running to the house.

“Sam!” Ramon shouted behind me. “Where are you going?”

“To get supplies!” I yelled, not turning around. “It took them to the underworld!”

And I was going to need supplies to summon someone so I could figure out how to get there. Hell itself, huh? I’d just had to make that promise to the universe. Well, the Underworld wasn’t hell, but it was damnably close.

There was no doubt in my mind that I was going to get there. If a ghoul could do it, why couldn’t I?

Chapter 23

I Say a Little Prayer for You

Leo watched Bran Blackthorn going at a punching bag like he was fighting for his life. Sweat dripped down his face, leaving his torso slick and darkening his short hair. His teeth were caught in a snarl, a low-level growl emanating from his chest, the sound carrying throughout the long room. The few other werewolves in the gym were plastered against the walls, eyes wary. No one was working out anymore, choosing instead to freeze in place, afraid that any movement would attract the eye of the bigger predator in the room. The usual gym noises of clanking weights and humming treadmills had vanished, replaced by the heavy *thwack* of Bran’s fists smacking the heavy bag and his growls.

Leo was sure they didn’t know *why* their beloved beta was having what for him constituted as an epic meltdown, but they for sure knew he was having it. Leo could understand why Bran was out of control—two of his siblings were missing, not in a general sort of way, but from the call they’d received from Haley, in a *left this mortal plane of existence* kind of way. His reaction made total sense to Leo, because Leo knew what was happening. The rest of the pack? Not so much.

On top of that, the pack was without their *Taoiseach* and they wouldn’t be able to hide that for very long. Which meant that, though the meltdown was warranted, Leo needed to snap Bran out of it.

First, he needed to get rid of the bystanders. Leo dropped his head, and stepped around Bran, so that he stood between the younger man’s back and the stragglers in the gym.

Leo often downplayed his own dominance. Partially because he was truly confident in his own abilities—he knew exactly how strong, cunning, and agile he was, and also knew that there weren’t a lot of people who could match him. Knowing that meant he didn’t feel the need to beat his chest or walk around like he owned the place. He was a wolf, not a rooster.

He also did it was because he liked people being comfortable around him. Part of the reason he liked the Blackthorn pack so much was that no one feared their *Taoiseach*. Respected, yes, but if they had a problem, they would go to Brid or her brothers and ask for help, comfortable in the knowledge that they would get it.

No one cowered. That was the kind of leader Leo wanted to be—the leader you came to in your time of need.

Besides, it meant when he *did* unleash that dominant part of himself, it packed a bigger wallop. No one expected it. He let his dominance fill him now, that knowledge that he could take anyone in the room, that he could handle anything thrown at him, that he could protect every single member of his pack. He let it fill his eyes, knowing his wolf would shine through when he lifted his head.

He tipped his chin up and the stragglers visibly flinched. He grinned and he knew it wasn’t pretty or charming, but objectively terrifying. When he opened his mouth, the wolf and Leo spoke as one. “Clear the room.”

They scattered.

Bran didn’t seem to notice. He kept hitting the bag, spit flying, blood starting to soak through his wrapped knuckles. He needed to get it out of his system, but Leo didn’t think the bag, despite being reinforced and made for the kind of abuse the Blackthorn Pack could dish out, would last much longer.

What Bran really needed was a real opponent to vent on—someone who *could* take it.

Before this, Leo had been in a video conference call with his old pack, which meant he was wearing a full suit, tailored and heart-stoppingly expensive. Not the kind of outfit you fought in if you could avoid it. He stripped off the jacket, laying it neatly on one of the lifting benches. Removed his cufflinks, then his shirt, then his slacks, each item placed with care into a neat stack. Finally, he took off his watch, leaving him in a pair of black boxer briefs and nothing else.

He prowled over to Bran, catching his arm when he pulled back to wallop the bag again. “You want to throw a tantrum? That’s fine. Let’s see how you do against something that hits back.”

Bran snarled at him.

Leo grinned wickedly back. “That’s all you got?”

“Fine,” Bran growled. He tipped his head to a shelving unit against the wall. “Tape’s over there.”

Leo dropped Bran’s arm. “Don’t need it.”

“Suit yourself,” Bran said, and launched himself at Leo.

Leo dodged, dancing out of the way. He’d seen videos of all of the Blackthorn siblings fight. On any normal day, Bran was a combatant to be reckoned with. He was fast, had a nasty uppercut, and never lost his cool. He fought with his brain first, fists second. The kind of fighter that would give Leo a run for his money, something Leo founded *very* appealing.

That wasn’t how he was fighting today. He took swings he shouldn’t have. Was too slow to block. His footwork was, for him, sloppy. Leo let him get it out of his system for two minutes, putting him on the ground several times.

When Bran was rabid with the fight, Leo rushed him. He grabbed him by the torso, slamming his body against the wall. He wrapped a hand around Bran’s throat, feeling the rapid flutter of his pulse under his palm. Normally, the other fighter would go limp now, admitting defeat. Tension filled Bran’s body as he snarled at Leo, still bucking for a brawl, even though it was a lost cause. Leo was bigger, outweighed Bran by at least forty pounds of muscle, and wasn’t out of his mind with grief.

He pinned Bran to the wall with his entire body, putting his mouth right next to Bran’s ear. “I could have your throat, right here, right now. *Submit.*”

“Fuck you.”

Leo laughed, genuinely delighted. Oh, how he’d love to spar against Bran when he was himself. Sadly, today was all business. “Don’t threaten me with a good time, pup.”

Bran arched his back. “This was your plan the whole time, wasn’t it? Wait for an opening then take over?”

Leo nipped his ear, chastising Bran. “If I’d wanted a bloodbath to a throne, I would have stayed in Chicago.” He leaned back, staring Bran in the eye. “And if I wanted that now, I would have offered a formal challenge, not pinned you in an empty gym with no witnesses.”

Bran blinked, finally coming back to himself. He took in the gym, its emptiness, the only sound the heavy breathing from the two of them. At this moment, Bran could go in any direction—back into fight mode, anger, or temporary madness. Leo had been watching the whole pack since he got here, but he’d watched Brid and Bran the most. He’d heard their reasoning for Bran not being the Taoiseach, but he’d wanted to assess the reasons for himself.

What he’d seen was that, while Brid could function just fine in the leadership role by herself, leaning on her brothers when necessary, Bran would have struggled. He could lead, but he needed a strong partner, someone to hold him up in difficult moments, because Bran wouldn’t reach for the support like Brid would. In his attempt to be strong, he’d made himself weak. Wolves weren’t meant to be that self-contained. That was why they had packs.

Luckily for Bran, Leo could be that person right now. He shifted his hold, moving his hand from Bran’s throat to his chin. It went from a hold of dominance to one of support, of comfort. Bran remained rigid, still trying to hold onto himself so tight he was shaking with it.

“Hey,” Leo said, his voice gentle. “It’s okay. I’ve got you now. I’ve got you.” For a split second, he wasn’t sure it was going to work. Then Bran collapsed against him, shaking apart in his arms, though he didn’t make a sound. Even in total collapse, Bran wouldn’t allow himself that.

Leo cradled him, the sweat cooling rapidly on their bodies, and rocked. Crooning wordless nonsense in his ears.

“I don’t know what to do.” Bran’s voice was barely a whisper, raspy with grief. “My sister, my brother—and…I don’t know what to do.”

“We hold the pack together,” Leo said, stroking a hand through his hair. “That’s what we do.”

Bran shivered some more, before pulling back from Leo. Only a little, barely enough to separate their bodies, but Leo felt the loss nonetheless.

“What does that mean?”

“We hold the line until your sister gets back.” He snarled when Bran went to argue. “I wasn’t finished. I’m not trying to pull a fast one here, Bran. I meant it when I said I wasn’t trying to steal the pack from your family. I really do think Brid and I would make a solid team.”

Bran scowled. “So, what, you put yourself forth to stand in for Brid? That might have worked if you’d been formally engaged, but it wouldn’t work now.”

“No, that wasn’t what I had in mind at all.” And it wasn’t because he’d had the *best* idea. While he matched up very well with Brid as a partner for leading the pack, they were a dud romantically. Zero chemistry. Holding, Bran, though? *That* he was interested in.

“Then what did you have in mind?”

“You and me,” he said simply.

Bran jerked his head back, but didn’t make it far, since he was still held tight by Leo. “What?”

Leo was a talker—he could generally steer people around to his way of thinking with words alone, but he knew when words wouldn’t work. Sometimes you had to use your fists. Sometimes you had to use something else.

He closed that fraction of space between them, slid his hand to the back of Bran’s neck, and kissed him.

Leo was not a religious man. He considered himself to be open to the possibilities of the universe, because frankly, he’d seen too much weird shit not to be. It was a little difficult to contest the idea of an underworld or an afterlife after you’d met ghosts, necromancers, and knew what kind of things were out there. That being said, Leo thought that if there was such a thing as angels, he was pretty sure he heard them chorus right then.

Kissing Bran was a revelation, a tiny miracle, and Leo didn’t fuck with miracles. He went all in. Only fools denied the wonders of the world, and Leo was many things, but not a fool.

Bran seemed less sure of the experience. He kissed Leo back, but his body tensed. He smacked his palms against the wall. He whimpered.

Leo didn’t want to stop, but he did, though he stayed in place. “You seem conflicted.”

Bran didn’t look like he was swimming in grief anymore. He looked dazed. “I don’t understand.”

“It’s simple. We can’t announce an engagement to someone who’s not here.” Leo grinned down at him. “But luckily for the pack, you haven’t disappeared.”

“Neither have Roarke or Sean.”

Leo gave an amused snort. “Don’t want them. I want you. You’re not interchangeable.”

Bran blushed. “What about when my sister comes home, because she *will* come home.” He said it like he’d tear the world apart for his family and make it so, and any hesitancy Leo had about this idea evaporated like the last whisp of smoke. He wanted that level of devotion.

“Yes, she will, because she has us, but she also has Sam, and if anyone could and would rip open the underworld and fetch her, it’s him. He’s hers, Bran. They may not have been through any sort of formal ceremony, but that man will die before he gives up on her. And we’ll be there to make sure the pack is waiting for her when she gets back.”

“So we’d…” He swallowed, hard, his expression shuttering. “We’d just be for show? And once she’s back, what?”

Leo shook his head slowly. “Oh no. You’re not getting away from me that easily. No fake engagements. No smoke and mirrors. If I say you’re to be mine to the pack, I will mean it.”

Bran’s brow furrowed, but to Leo’s delight, the blush was back. “Then…how’s that going to work?”

“Easy,” Leo said. “Brid gets her mate. I get mine. Brid and I manage the pack as an alpha pair, we just won’t be married to each other.”

Bran blinked at him. “Can we do that?”

Leo shrugged one shoulder, his face drifting closer to Bran’s. “I would love to see them try and take it from us. Besides, siblings function as alphas on occasion.”

“In emergency situations, and only if they’re not part of a mated pair.”

Leo hummed, brushing his lips down Bran’s jaw. “Someone has to set precedent. Why not us?”

“We’ll be challenged.” Bran’s breath hitched.

“We’ll win.”

Bran huffed. “You can’t know that for certain.”

He straightened so he could see Bran’s face clearly. “The fuck I can’t.”

“You’re incredibly arrogant.”

Leo grinned, because while Bran didn’t look amused, his hands had found their way to Leo’s hips. “It’s only arrogance if my confidence is misplaced. This isn’t hubris, darling. I can back it up. I sure as shit know your sister can.”

Bran seemed to consider that.

And kept considering.

Leo’s patience, which he usually had an abundance of, fled. As far as he was concerned, he had his arms full of the man he intended to marry and was a little annoyed that Bran was dragging his feet. “Are we going back to kissing, or what?”

Bran scowled at him. “You’ve given me like ten seconds to consider your plan. It’s a big step. You can’t just bully your way into a relationship.”

Leo dipped his head, pretending to be contrite.

Bran wasn’t buying it.

A slow grin split Leo’s face. “Oh, darling. I don’t need to bully my way in. I’m very persuasive. Give me five minutes and you’re going to be rolling out the welcome mat.”

Bran’s eyes snapped with irritation. “The hell I will. Of all the high-handed, egotistical—”

Leo kissed his chin, his neck, hovering over a spot that made Bran gasp.

“Egotistical…”

“You already said that one.” He ran his teeth along that spot. Bran’s hands clutched Leo’s hips tighter.

“It was worth saying twice.”

Leo gave a low laugh, before straightening up. “I will freely admit to being all those things, darling, but am I yours?”

Bran gazed back at him helplessly. “Yes.”

The wolf in Leo howled in triumph. He grinned, feeling light all over. He knew it wouldn’t last. The minute they left this room, they would have to deal with the pack. Find Brid, Sayer, and Sam’s little sister. Wade through pain and heartbreak.

But for now, he’d wallow in the joy.

Bran sighed, waiting for Leo to brag because he’d folded the way Leo predicted, and quicker, too.

Instead of gloating, Leo offered Bran his throat.

“But…” Bran frowned. “You won.”

“Yes,” Leo said. “I won. I won *you.*” He placed his free hand against the wall, bracing himself. “And when we leave this room, I will strut. I will brag—to them. Not to you. Not about this.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t see this as you submitting to me,” he said, his voice low. “I see it as you taking mercy on a wolf already on his knees.” He let his mask slip, showing Bran how vulnerable he was to him and him alone. He’d earned that.

Bran gazed up at him, eyes wide in wonder, as he traced Leo’s face with his fingertips. “This really wasn’t about tactics or the pack for you, was it?”

“No,” Leo admitted. “Though it does speed things up a lot, rather regrettably.” This time the smile he gave Bran was tight-lipped and rueful. “I won’t have time to court you.”

“Too bad,” Bran said, his voice dry. “I was looking forward to making you write some truly bad poetry. Bringing me flowers. A truly old-fashioned wooing.”

“We’ll just have to go about it backwards,” Leo said. “Announce our engagement, save our pack, and then I’ll court you after that.”

Bran laughed and the sound made Leo’s heart lurch. “For how long?”

“Forever,” Leo said. “I think I’d like to court you forever.”

Bran blinked at him. “You’re very good at this, when you’re not being an arrogant dick.”

“You like it,” Leo said. “You just won’t admit it.” He tilted his head to the side. “So do I get that kiss or what?”

This time it was Bran who leaned forward first, finally giving Leo what he wanted.

They both decided, without discussing it, to stay in the gym for a little longer, carving out a moment of comfort, of happiness, before letting the reality of their world come bashing its way back in.

They’d earned it.

Chapter 24

There Ain't No Man, a Man That Can Change the Shape My Soul is in

It didn’t take me long to set up the new summoning circle, because I poured sand over the one Nick used last time. I was doing my part by recycling, I guess. If I kept this up, I should probably invest in making a permanent outside circle. It would be fun explaining it to visitors.

I had a small audience for this one. James and Ramon were there. Ava stayed to watch, Lock at her side. The rest of her crew had wandered into the house to find something to eat. Kell had gone with them, saying someone should keep an eye on them, but I think it was mostly because he didn’t want to be around me when I summoned Douglas. Kell avoided my kind of magic when he could.

The circle complete, I wasted no time creating a small incision on the side of my left wrist with my athame. Ramon had offered to donate, but with my connection to Douglas, I felt my blood would be a better choice.

“Try Ashley first,” James said, his voice carrying in the quiet yard.

“Do you think she’ll be able to answer?” Ramon asked.

James gave a sharp shake of his head, his shoulders tense. “No, but we should try anyway. Summoning Douglas…”

“Not the best idea,” I finished for him. “I know.” I closed my eyes, calling up my power. I flicked my hand, spattering blood on the grass. I felt each drop that fell, a frigid burst of power, like dropping rocks into an icy pond. The power splashed back up, igniting on my skin. As much as I hated what I was sometimes, it felt good to have my power back. To be *me* again.

I called for Ashley, picturing her in my mind.

Once.

Twice.

No response. I tipped my head to the side, my eyes opening on a silent question to James. He was chewing on his thumb. He flicked his fingers out in a go on gesture.

I shook my shoulders, loosening them up, sprinkling more blood into the grass. Impatience snapped at me, fueled by fear and worry. I skipped the pleasantries, punching his name into the ether with my power. “Douglas Montgomery!”

Nothing happened. I sucked in another breath. Before I could yell his name again, he popped into being a few feet in front of me.

Douglas had his hands out, like he’d been in the middle of doing something. He focused on me, unblinking. “Well, that was unexpected.”

“I need answers.” Adrenaline and power coursed through me, giving my words a snarl they wouldn’t normally have.

Douglas slowly lowered his hands, examining the situation “You only invoked one circle.”

“I know.” That had caused a short, brutal argument between me and James, but I’d held fast. “I don’t need one. You’re going to do what I say, and answer my questions, or so help me Douglas, I will spend the rest of my existence making your afterlife as miserable as possible.”

Douglas put his hands behind his back, a shark smile gliding across his face. “Our agreement—”

I cut him off. “Was for you to tell me everything to do with my situation. To share knowledge. This is the same problem, so I consider it part of our original agreement. I’m not in the mood to barter or fuck around.”

My approach was something James and I had agreed on. Normally, I would have played it cool, tried to give as little information to Douglas as I could. Pretended the situation was no big deal. That wouldn’t work here, and I wasn’t so good of a liar that I would have been able to pull off nonchalant.

Douglas tipped his head, his gaze assessing. “The ghoul came back.”

“The ghoul came back,” I repeated, dread in my voice. “It came back and it took people that were ours.”

“Who does it have?” Douglas asked, his attention on me sharpening.

“Does it matter?”

He didn’t answer, just waited.

I glared right back.

“It has two necromancers that we know of.” James had stepped up to the edge of the circle while I’d been staring at Douglas. “June Walker, from New Orleans. Lily—” He choked on her name, only for a second, but Douglas caught it, his expression shifting to an unreadable mask. “Lily Hatfield. It also took two of the Blackthorn pack—Bridin and Sayer.”

Douglas watched James—I was all but forgotten in this conversation. After a long silence, Douglas moved closer to the edge of the circle, inches from James. They were having some sort of silent conversation that I couldn’t follow.

Finally, so faint I could barely hear the words, James spoke. “They’re *mine*.”

Douglas nodded once, turning toward me. “I’ll help you.”

I couldn’t keep the shock off my face. “You will?” It was too easy. It felt like a trap.

Douglas made a sound then, part irritation, part amusement. “Do you know what the afterlife gives people like me, Sam? It gives us *time*.”

Time didn’t sound like a bad gift to me or a punishment, and I said as much.

Douglas sighed, crossing his arms almost like he was hugging himself. “For you, no. Time would be a great boon for someone such as Samhain LaCroix.” He dropped his arms. “But I am not someone such as you. I was a monster in life, Sam. I am a monster in death.” His gaze dropped to his hands, and I had the sense that he was seeing something I couldn’t see. “The things I have done.”

Normally, I would have been down to listen to Douglas—not because I wanted to hear what he had to say, really, but because I didn’t want to hear it at all. Douglas was a warning, a flashing neon sign in the darkness of what could be if I let myself slip down the wrong paths. But not right now. “For every second you speak, that’s another second the ghoul has them.”

Douglas nodded. “I know.” He looked at me then, and for the first time in I think ever, I saw Douglas the man. Not the power-hungry necromancer. Not the man who had waded through blood in his long life. No, I was seeing the person he could have been. “But you won’t trust my help if I don’t explain why I’m doing it.”

Which was true, damn it.

“I owe James,” Douglas admitted, his voice in that moment as close to an abasement as Douglas would ever get. “For everything he gave and everything I took, I owe James.” He turned from me, his attention back on James. “I’ll help you get back your hoard.”

James swallowed hard, his silver eyes shining. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Douglas said. “Not for this.” Then he stepped away from James, like being so close to him was physically painful. And maybe it was. James, as far as I knew, was the only person who had ever loved Douglas. Who was family in any way that counted. That was both amazing and extremely sad. My life contained so much wealth that Douglas’s didn’t.

“What do you need?” Douglas asked me.

“I need to go to the underworld,” I said. “I need to open a pathway and get them out. That’s the first priority. Then I need to figure out a way to contain the ghoul so it can’t do this again.”

Douglas went into what I’d started mentally referring to as his thinking stance—gaze soft, arms crossed, his mouth pinched. “I’m not sure what I can tell you about the ghoul,” he said finally. “I never found the original spell or any information on how they dealt with them before. But I can tell you how to get into the underworld.”

I tamped down on the excitement trying to flood my system. It wouldn’t do any good to get my hopes up yet. “How?”

“There are certain places where the boundaries between us and the land of the dead are thinner than others. They’re hard to find and normally it would take time to track one down, but you’re in luck.”

“I am?” If this was luck, I didn’t want any.

“You are. I already know where one is. I built a cabin by it.”

James’s head snapped up. “The cabin?”

Douglas smiled. “The cabin.” His smile faded. “In this case, that’s the easy part.”

“Funny, it doesn’t sound like the easy part,” I said. Ramon snorted.

“You’re going to need pillars to hold the breech open,” Douglas said. “As well as a few other things, but it’s the pillars that you need most. And you’ll need them on both sides—which will be tricky right now, because access to the underworld is limited.”

“Okay,” I said, not liking at all how this sounded. “What’s a pillar, exactly?”

“I can be one on the underworld side of things,” he said. “It’s best if it’s a ghost you have a strong tie to, someone powerful in their own right. You’ll need a second one, but I have a suggestion for that. However, we’re going to have some trouble on your side of things.”

James made a pained sound. “Necromancers.”

Douglas nodded. “He’ll need two, and while I know you have Nick…”

“Sara is too young,” James said. “We’re short one.”

“No other necromancers will come near this,” Douglas said. “Not anyone with any sense.”

Which wasn’t really the problem, anyway. I didn’t know any others.

“Does it have to be a necromancer?” This was from Lock—I’d forgotten that he had been watching with Ava. “Can something else with similar magic work?”

“Like a vampire?” Ava asked.

Douglas frowned. “I don’t know. I don’t think so—their magic is similar, but not quite what we’re looking for. This doesn’t seem like the best time to experiment.”

I wracked my brain in desperation. I couldn’t fail at the first hurdle. It wasn’t an option. I was going to get my friends back, Brid back, I just needed to *think*.

An idea came to me then—a desperate, mad, surely couldn’t work kind of idea, but what did I have to lose. “What about a vessel?”

Douglas’s attention sharpened back on me. “A vessel…”

“What’s a vessel?” Ava asked.

“Something full of our power,” I said, not taking my eyes off Douglas. “Or as you would think of it, a zombie.” I was, after all, chief zombie wrangler. Time to get back to what I knew best.

“That could work,” Douglas said slowly. “At least, I don’t see why it wouldn’t. The power signature would be the same.”

James’s eyes gleamed as he straightened, a fierce expression on his face. “I know just the vessel for the job.” He clapped his hands once, the sharp sound echoing in the quiet air. “Okay. Ramon, make a list—have Douglas tell you everything we’re going to need.”

“What are you going to do?” Ramon asked, fishing out his phone.

“I’m going to make a few phone calls. He won’t ignore an official summons, but he’ll still have to catch a plane.”

“Who will have to catch a plane?” Ava asked. “Do we have time for planes?”

“We don’t have a choice,” I said, catching up to James’s plan. “We need him. We’ll just have to have faith that our people can take care of themselves a little longer.”

They had to. Imagining any other scenario—I couldn’t. Not if I wanted to function. I would hold onto my faith, and in the meantime, do everything I could to bring them back safe, just as I knew Brid would be doing everything she could to come back to me.

And she *would* come back—even if I had to go to the underworld myself to make it happen.

Chapter 25

We All Have a Hunger

Creature couldn’t find the cold star. It would flare, only to disappear. Like a wink in the nighttime sky.

Still taunting. Still cruel.

Every time Creature got close, it would disappear, vanishing from reality like an oasis in a desert fever dream.

Creature howled in frustration.

Angry and frustrated, Creature headed back to its nest. It instinctually knew the nest would bring comfort. Its own, quiet spot, to eat. To rest.

Not to sleep—never to sleep. Creature had slept enough. It was afraid to do it again.

What if it didn’t come back? What if it went into a dream, a nightmare, and stayed there. Stuck underground, waiting and half dead.

No.

*Never.*

Yet creature could feel the energy draining from its limbs. It needed food or sleep, and soon. It wasn’t sure there would be enough in the nest. Paltry scraps of food compared to the cold star. Again, frustration welled up inside Creature, making it roar into the twilight world around it. Roar into the shadows.

Even though the shadows never roared back.

Yet.

*Yet*.

Because someday, Creature would find more like themselves. More for the nest. One day, a shadow would yell back, revealing that Creature was not alone.

It just needed to hold on. Just a little longer.

Creature trudged back to the nest, its mind whirling through plans, ideas, thoughts about the cold star. Keeping only half an eye on the surroundings.

Thinking, not looking. Not watching. Not paying attention.

Until it was through the cave entrance and into the nest. Where it sat for several minutes, mind lightyears away, before it noticed how *empty* the cave was.

The food.

The food was *gone*.

Panic swelled within Creature, making it run, making it dig through dark sand, as if the food might have burrowed out of sight.

It tore apart the cave, desperation giving its limbs strength, while taking away any semblance of control.

But it did no good.

The food was gone. The nest was empty.

The creature screamed in fury.

It howled.

And howled.

And hoooowwwwlllleeed.

Until it was empty.

Sobbing.

Exhausted, it fell into a doze. A slumber. Collapsing like a felled tree into the sand.

When it awoke, Creature was afraid, because Creature had slept, and sleeping scared Creature. Then it was filled with wonder, because while Creature had slept, it hadn’t disappeared. It was still here in its empty nest.

Creature laid in the sand and took in the simple joys of existing. Of being.

When it was calm, Creature climbed out of the sand. It looked for the food, examined the shadow lands for that spark, that power, that called to Creature.

The spark wasn’t as clear here. Something about the shadowlands made it hard to see. It stood out in that other place, that other world. A beacon.

Here it was…muted. The power too similar to the shadows in some ways. Creature left its nest, through the cave, and back out into the open air. It listened. It sniffed. It tasted the air around it like a snake might have done.

There.

Off to the left. Out in the shadows was…something. Creature wasn’t sure what, exactly, but maybe it was the food. Maybe.

There was only one way to be sure. It had to go see. It had to follow. So Creature took long strides, moving quickly in the shadows, to do just that.

#

Brid wasn’t sure how long they’d traveled. The light was strange in the underworld. Time…she wasn’t sure time even moved here. Not like it did back in the land of the living.

After untold minutes or hours, they stopped, taking refuge in a copse of trees. They looked like birches, with their papery bark, the color a deep, forlorn gray. Sayer found a good spot to set June down and Brid set Lily next to her. Both were still out cold, though their heartbeats were steady. Brid didn’t think their color was very good. They needed proper care. Not just food and rest, but maybe a doctor. Three things that Brid didn’t think they’d find here.

Sayer peered back the way they came, pausing to scent the breeze. “Do you think it’s following us?”

“Yeah,” Brid said, taking the opportunity to rest, the strange moss-like ground covering softer than she would have thought. “I do. Not sure how far back it is but…” She grimaced. “The ghoul tracks them somehow. It knew where to pop up to grab Lily. I can’t imagine that it wouldn’t do that here.”

Sayer settled down next to her, stretching out his legs. “We need rest, all of us.”

“I know.” Brid flopped down, laying flat, knowing her brother would continue to keep a look out while she relaxed for a moment.

Sayer glanced at their charges. “We’re all going to need food and water, too. Soon.”

Not surprisingly, her brother had come to the same conclusion that she had. Lily and June would need to eat to replace whatever life-force or magic the ghoul sucked out of them. Both her and Sayer had changed forms a few times and then walked a long distance carrying another person. They were burning through calories with no way to replace them.

“I could try to hunt.” Sayer’s offer sounded dubious, even to him, she could tell.

“Do you think the Persephone myth has any truth to it?” Brid asked. “Or is the underworld like Underhill in faerie stories?”

“You mean would it even be safe to eat or drink anything while we’re here?” Sayer frowned out at the landscape as he thought it over. “I don’t know.”

“Me either,” Brid said. “Which makes me very reluctant to experiment. I don’t fancy the idea of spending months of my life down here because I decided to eat some berries or a rabbit. If they even have rabbits.”

Sayer turned worried eyes on her. “Then I don’t think we should risk it. And I’m not sure I’d want to see their rabbits.”

“Neither do I on both counts.” Brid rolled to her knees, moving closer to June and Lily. She started checking their pockets.

Sayer didn’t say anything, but she could almost feel his question. “Just checking to see if they have anything useful. Matches. A stick of gum. Anything.”

“Good thinking.”

Brid’s slight hope fizzled out quickly, her hands finding nothing. As a last-ditch effort, she checked Lily’s doll to see if she had anything stashed there. Her fingers closed over something strange and she pulled it out into the light.

“What is it?” Sayer asked.

Brid recognized it quickly, but gave it a sniff to make sure. “It’s one of the pouches Tia makes for Sam. She made some for the girls. It hides their magic.” Seeing the pouch that was so like Sam’s brought on a bittersweet wave of emotion. She missed him, which hurt, but the reminder was also comforting. After a moment’s thought, Brid tucked the pouch between Lily and June’s hands, using the necklace cord to bind the hands together.

“Do you think that will hide them both?” Sayer asked.

Brid settled back in the moss, pulling her knees up to her chest. “I’m not sure.”

“It’s going to be difficult to carry them like that—”

Sayer’s words were cut off by an eerie howl. To Brid it sounded like anguish buried in rage.

Brid and Sayer froze, heads up and alert. It howled again, sounding far off, but closer than either of them would have liked.

“Was that the ghoul?” Sayer whispered.

“I think so,” Brid whispered back. “And it sounded pretty unhappy. Which makes me think the pouch trick worked.”

They sat for several minutes, not talking further, only listening. As time flowed past, the small sounds of the underworld came back to their version of life. Things rustled. Something small and high pitched sang in the trees.

But they didn’t hear anymore from the ghoul.

After another long wait, they relaxed a little.

“I know it’s stating the obvious, but we really can’t go much longer without water,” Sayer said. “Or food.”

“We’ll put it off for now,” Brid said. “Until we have no choice. What we can do is sleep.”

Sayer frowned, but didn’t stop watching the direction the scream had come from. “Do you think that’s safe?”

“Safe as anything else here,” Brid said. “We need rest and now the ghoul can’t track them by their power.”

“We don’t know how well it can see,” Sayer reminded her. “Or whether or not it could sniff us out.”

“I know, but we can’t keep up as we have.” Brid waved a hand out their current hideout. “This is the best hiding place we’ve seen since we left the cave. It’s not great, but it’s not out in the open, either. We can take turns playing lookout and get a nap in.”

Sayer sighed. “You’re right, of course. I don’t like it, but you’re right.” He patted the moss. “You go ahead and catch a few winks. I’ll take first watch.”

Brid didn’t bother to argue. It would only waste time. “Maybe we’ll be lucky and by the time I wake up, they’ll both be awake and ready to march.”

Sayer gave her a faint smile. “I think you’d have better luck wishing for a picnic hamper to appear.”

“I see no reason that I can’t wish for both,” Brid said, settling into the moss. “There’s no rules here about wishing for more than one thing.” After all, at this point, wishes were pretty much all they had. Which meant Brid didn’t feel bad at all for tossing up a third one along with the rest. In her mind she phrased it as a general plea—for someone to arrive to take them home.

To see their friends and family again.

But in her heart, she knew she was wishing for Sam.

She didn’t feel guilty about it, either. If anyone she knew could get them all out of here, could get them home, it was Sam.

Chapter 26

Bringing Sexy Back

Douglas’s old cabin wasn’t much to look at, but it was the old and sturdy kind of thing that would withstand the elements. I didn’t think anyone had been up here since Douglas had hidden out in it when he’d tried to come back to life a few months ago. I had considered burning the thing to the ground and burying the ashes but was glad I hadn’t since we now needed it. I stood in front of it now, glaring at it in the low morning light, everyone clustered around me. Despite the timeline we were all on, none of us were barreling forward into the cabin.

“That,” Ramon said, “is one creepy ass cabin.”

“But it’s *our* creepy ass cabin,” I told him. “We could spruce it up, add some decorative touches.”

“Is gasoline a decorative touch?” He asked.

I turned to him. “You know, I was thinking the same thing?”

We were interrupted by a long, drawn out “Whoa” from behind us. Minion stared at the cabin, conflicting emotions on his face. “Never thought I’d be back here. Not after Master.”

Minion had been one of Douglas’s zombies, only something had gone wrong in the original process. No one knew what. I’d been working on fixing whatever it was, with mixed results. It was difficult with Minion’s schedule. He was a busy man.

I’ll give him credit—when I asked, he’d gotten on the next plane. Even so, the night had passed, and we faced the cabin in the early morning light. Travel took time and so did gathering what we needed. One didn’t just waltz into the underworld, I guess.

There had also been a bit of a fight as to who would go to the cabin and who would stay behind. We needed some people to guard Sarah from the ghoul. In the end, we moved Elaine and Sarah into my house for the day. My mom and Haley were with them, mostly for moral support. The gnomes—including Merry Death and Merciless Blade—were keeping watch over the house along with our other usual security measures. Frank and Brooke were coordinating the watch, with help from Leo, Bran, and Roarke.

Everyone else came with me to the cabin. We couldn’t take the entire party into the underworld—several people would stay in the cabin, guarding the vessels and the portal I was going to open. Sean was coming with me—he was both sibling and pack, and so might have an edge on tracking down Brid and Sayer. Ramon wouldn’t stay behind. James was torn—he wanted to go with me, but he also thought we might need him on the side of the living in case something went wrong. Plus he didn’t entirely trust leaving Nick and Minion in the hands of Ava, Lock, and Fitz, who were on cabin guarding duty.

They were currently yelling at Ezra, who had decided to come with me.

“One of us needs to go,” he said breezily, like we were talking about going to the market. “To make sure they take care of June. I’m a good fighter and foxes are lucky. Besides, I still have all of my nine lives.”

“That’s cats,” Lock said, his body stiff. He didn’t want Ezra coming with us. Couldn’t say I blamed him. If I could figure out a way to talk Ramon into staying in the land of the living, I would, even though I felt better about going with him at my side.

“I can go—” Ava said, before they both turned on her and said, “No.”

She huffed. “Why not? Is this a sexism thing?”

“No,” Lock said. “This is a ‘you have a tendency to get into trouble and shoot off your mouth’ thing.”

“You would smack talk the king of the dead, and then where would we be, dumpling?” Ezra shook his head. “You said I could charm the very devil, well, now we get to find out.”

“There’s no devil in the underworld,” James offered helpfully.

Ezra shrugged. “Foxes are tricky.” He pointed at me, Ramon, and Sean. “These fellows are a lot of things, but tricky isn’t one of them.”

“He’s not entirely wrong,” I said. I could see both of them gearing up to debate this further, but I stepped in before they could start another round. “We could argue forever, but seconds are ticking and we need to go. Ezra’s in.”

Nick piped up from where he’d been standing, his eyes shut, his face tilted up at the sun like he might never see it again. His leg jiggled a nervous rhythm. “You’re not going to be any safer in the cabin.”

“There’s a big difference between being in danger and being in the realm of death,” Lock argued.

Nick opened his eyes and stared at him, and it reminded me suddenly of that moment where I had felt like I was seeing Douglas as a human for the first time, except the other direction. Nick as I was used to him was gone. Nick the necromancer was in his place. His eyes were flat and bleak, like a winter night with no moon. “You make a wrong move protecting us, and you’ll end up there anyway. I don’t think any of you fully understand what’s going to happen when we open this portal.”

“Enlighten us.” Lock’s tone could have sliced through granite it was so cutting.

“Portals to the underworld are unnatural.” Nick’s voice was so quiet, you’d think we’d have to lean in to hear him, but somehow it carried. “Life transitions to death. When it doesn’t, you get things like him.” He waved at Minion. “And the only reason Minion functions is because one of us is involved. We’re handling it.” He crossed his arms tight, like he was hugging himself. “I won’t be able to help any of you. Everything I have will be bent on keeping the portal open.”

“I know,” I said. “But—”

Nick jerked his head. “I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it. If I didn’t agree, I wouldn’t be here. But that kind of magic calls to things. Terrible things.” His gaze took in all of us. “You’re going to be fighting to keep things from coming through the portal into this world. You’ll also be fighting to keep things from crossing in the other way.” He swallowed hard. “It’s going to be very dangerous, and Sam and his small team will need to move fast.” Nick sighed as he turned back to Lock. “So don’t think that keeping your friend here is going to keep him safe. There is no ‘safe’ in what we’re doing.”

No one spoke for a long moment as we digested this. I knew Nick wasn’t wrong. I knew what kind of risk this was, but the idea of not going after them was unfathomable.

“Best get going then,” Fitz said amicably, his teeth bared in the kelpie version of a grin. It’s wasn’t pretty. There were a lot of pointy teeth involved, and I had to suppress a shudder.

“Right,” I said clapping my hands together. “I’ll do the ceremony to open the portal. Once I’m on the other side of the doorway we open, I’ll summon Ashley if I can. She might be able to track Lily or June.” I pointed at Sean, who had been uncharacteristically quiet. “You’ll do your thing to try to track down your siblings. We go in, we get out, fast as we can.”

“What if you get lost?” Ava asked.

“Not possible as long as the portal is open.” James dropped two backpacks at his feet. The larger one was for Ramon—he would be able to carry more. It held first aid supplies, water, food, that sort of thing. Mine held a little of that stuff, but mostly tools of my trade—athame, candles, lighter, silver dollars, and a few other tidbits James had added. I had the protective pouch my mom made me around my neck, as well as the stygian coin for luck. Brooke wouldn’t need it inside the house as she was anyway. The spell I’d built into the house would keep her around, she just wouldn’t be as solid as she would be with the coin around her neck.

“Sam will be able to feel the portal,” Nick said. “Since his magic will be twisted up in it.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “I know you’re used to having tons of power at your fingertips, but we have no idea how long you’ll have or how quickly this will drain you. Be careful, but be quick.”

I gave him a hug, squeezing him tight. “I will.”

After a second of surprise, Nick returned the hug, clutching me just as tight. “I love you, you know that, right?”

“Yeah,” I said, my voice hoarse.

“If I had the magic to go back and make you mine instead of my brother’s, I would in a heartbeat, but don’t think for a second that makes me love you or Haley any less.” He leaned, not quite letting me go. “Come back to us, okay?”

I nodded, my throat tight, not quite able to find the words to tell him that I felt the same way. I couldn’t get all of that out. So I settled on the shorthand that felt woefully inadequate. “I love you, too.”

Ramon joined our hug. “I’ll bring him back, promise.”

“Okay,” Nick said, visibly pulling himself together. “Okay.”

“Are you ready?” James asked.

I let go of Nick and Ramon and blew out a long breath, shaking out my limbs. “Yeah. Let’s do this.”

Before we could get going, I had one more person to deal with. A large figure stepped out of the woods, garbed in a flat brimmed hat and dressed in the typical ranger gear of tan and green.

That was the only typical thing about him.

Sexy Gary was a bigfoot, for starters, with all that entails. He was huge, hairy, and gave off a pheromone that draws women—and I’m sure some men—into a blissful state of attraction. He usually wore something to block it when he’s around humans. When he didn’t, he said it caused problems and frankly I didn’t want to know the details. I did know that he used to work for UPS and the combination of the inexplicably sexy brown uniform plus the pheromones when he forgot to wear his charm caused a bit of a riot when he made a delivery to a local winery.

It also gave him his nickname. The shorts, he told me, were too powerful, so he left that job behind and worked as a forest ranger, a situation that worked much better for all involved.

I held up a hand before he could get too close. “Are you wearing your thingie? The scent blocking one?”

He grinned, putting a little dance into his walk. “Are you worried that I’ll be too sexy for this mission, too sexy for this mission, no way I’m disco dancing.” His grin faded when only Nick and James laughed. “Kids these days.” He shook his head. “For the record, that was hilarious.”

I looked at Nick.

He shrugged. “Right Said Fred. They had a song about being too sexy.” He shrugged again. “It was the 90’s.”

“I miss the mesh shirts,” Gary said.

That surprised a laugh out of Nick. “I don’t.”

Gary flexed his admittedly impressive bicep. “Well, yeah, but you don’t have these guns to show off.”

“Why would the shirt need to be mesh—” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “Never mind. Is everything set, Gary?”

“Yeah, I’ve done the best I could blocking off the road leading up to here and getting some eyes on any trails. Who’s your home team?”

I introduced him to everyone that was going to be staying at the cabin on the side of the living, giving him a brief rundown of their roles.

Gary nodded gravely when I was done. “This is no small thing. I’m afraid I can’t help much.” He offered them a faint smile. “I’m a lover, not a fighter. But between me and my eyes in the forest, I’m hoping to be your early warning system.” He tipped his ranger hat at us. “Good luck. I’ll be in touch. I have James’s number.” With a backwards wave, he strode back out into the woods. I was pretty sure he was singing, “I’m too sexy for this forest” but I wasn’t positive. Sometimes we hear what we want to hear.

I ushered everyone through the thick wooden door and into the musty dark of the cabin. It was time for the next step.

We had decided to open the portal inside the cabin. The floor would work better for what we needed to do, and the cabin itself would add another boundary between Nick and Minion and whatever was coming their way. Lock built up wood in the fireplace, Ava setting it ablaze. She said it was easier to throw fire that was already there than creating it out of nothing. I tried very hard to not think about what she might be throwing the fire *at.*

James walked me through the set up, carefully chalking in the symbols and designs needed. We didn’t want anything smudged. When we were done, it outdid even the Bathory ritual in complexity. Ramon and I got our backpacks on, and I got ready to do my part.

James and I had argued about the next bit. My powers needed blood, but I didn’t like to kill things, instead using blood from donors like Ramon, people who healed quickly. It circumvented the cost of the ritual. James didn’t think that would work for this. We were going into the underworld.

We needed a death.

Normally, we’d need a big death, but I didn’t want to go there, so as much as I hated it, we were compromising. Fitz, Ramon, and I would all give a little of our life-force in the form of blood, but I was going to have to kill something.

James brought in a large carrier from outside. He unlatched the gate, reaching in quickly and snatching out a large Canadian Goose. I held my athame, a queasy feeling in my gut.

“It’s not young,” James said. “He’s lived a long, healthy life. When we’re done with this, he will be used to feed Taco. Nothing about this death is wasteful.”

“I know,” I said. “I still hate it.”

“I know you do,” James said gently, “but you still need to do it.”

I nodded, feeling a little stupid that I was tearing up. People did this all the time. They killed to eat, to live, and how was this any different? But I still wept for the goose. I couldn’t change who I was and I didn’t really want to. Death should always mean something. It should always demand a little grief, a little respect.

I held the athame out.

Fitz offered his arm. “How come that goose isn’t terrorizing this room right now?”

“It’s drugged,” James said.

Fitz nodded, rolling up his sleeve. “Makes sense.”

I wanted to give it over with. I slashed a line into Fitz’s arm. Then Ramon’s. Then mine, the sharp bite of the blade making me hiss. I shook my arm, spattering the blood into the circle. Ramon and Fitz did the same. With each drop, I could feel the power ratcheting up. Flowing through me and seeping into our symbols.

James stepped in front of me with the goose. I didn’t think about it, shutting off my mind from my action, like stepping out of myself for a moment. With a quick jerk, I sliced open the neck of the goose. He made very little in the way of sound beyond a watery gurgle.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, stroking his soft feathers.

Blood hit the floor, the ritual symbols flaring to life, and I forgot about the goose.

I closed my eyes, opening up that other vision, that way of looking at the world that only necromancers could do. With that much power soaring through my veins, the thin veil between the worlds was laughably clear. It billowed in front of me, like a close-up aurora borealis. Using the athame, I sliced a vertical line into the folds, parting them like cloth. I handed one piece to the first vessel, Minion, who grasped it in both hands, a grim expression on his face.

I handed the other piece to Nick. He could have taken it on his own, since he could see what I was seeing, but James said it was part of the ritual. I stepped up to the next layer, stroking it with one hand. It was like chilled velvet, and I felt the power of the dead at my fingertips. “Open,” I said, command lacing my voice. “Open the underworld and welcome me home.”

The veil parted without the knife, peeling back from my touch. I edged closer, moving quickly to the next part of the ritual. “I summon Douglas Montgomery. Heed my call.”

Douglas had been waiting and listening, so he appeared immediately, moving forward and grasping the side of the veil closest to Minion. I sucked in a breath, hoping the other spirit was as speedy. “I summon Brannoc Blackthorn, former head of the Blackthorn pack. Heed my call.”

Nothing happened. A few seconds ticked by. I tried again. “Brannoc Blackthorn, I beg you, heed my call.” I wouldn’t command him. That didn’t seem right. Which struck me as funny. I was standing there, blood on my hands and dripping down my arm, opening a portal into the underworld, and I was concerned about being *rude.* A maniacal giggle escaped, making Ramon’s head snap in my direction. I waved him off.

“Brannoc Blackthorn—” I started.

A foot stepped out of the murky darkness. “I’m here, Samhain LaCroix, and I’m heeding your call.”

Sean sucked in a breath. “Dad.”

The ghost of Brannoc smiled at him. “Sean.” Volumes of unspoken dialogue flowed between them. A wolf stepped out of the darkness, head high, steps light. When I looked, more eyes shone out of the misty blackness.

Brannoc dug his fingers into the scruff of the wolf at his side. “You have protection on your side. I figured we’d need protection on this side. He looked down fondly at the wolf. “You won’t let anything through, will you, love?”

The wolf bared her teeth and next to me, Sean let out a strangled sound.

This was an unexpected gift and I dipped my head respectfully. “Mrs. Blackthorn, welcome. We appreciate your help. Thank you.”

Brannoc’s smile disappeared. “Bring our babies home, Sam. That’s the only thanks we need.”

“I will,” I said, stepping forward and handing him the other half of the underworld veil. “Hold tight.”

“I will never let go,” Brannoc promised me. “Not as long as I’m able.”

“I know you won’t,” I said. In fact, I was counting on it. I pointed my athame at Douglas, even though I was speaking to Brannoc. “I know it’s going to be tempting, and out of anyone here, he owes you more than a pound of flesh, but he’s here to help, so try to not eat our other vessel.”

Brannoc grimaced and the wolf at his side growled. “If he helps save my children, we’ll keep our hands off him.” The wolf yipped. Brannoc’s answering smile was feral. “And our teeth.”

Wisely, Douglas didn’t respond beyond a slight lift of his chin.

Right. There was no putting it off any longer. I breathed deep and let it out, stepping forward from our world and into the land of the dead, a bear, a wolf, and a fox at my side.

I sent a quick prayer to the goddess Bridget that they’d be enough. She wasn’t exactly *my* goddess, but at least she had a vested interest in how this played out. After all, she was the patron goddess of the Blackthorn pack.

And we needed all the help we could get.

Chapter 27

Say it's Only a Paper Moon

Sailing Over a Cardboard Sea

I’m not sure what I expected the Underworld to be like. Fiery, maybe? Desolate? Lots of spirits wailing, that sort of thing. It was possible that part was deeper in. Where we stood, it was like a primeval forest wrought out of darker hues—a world in perpetual twilight. Lots of blacks, grays, and purples. Not forbidding or evil or anything like that, which…I’m not sure why I’d had that image in my mind. Almost two decades of absorbing popular culture and the mythologies surrounding death, I guess.

But if anyone should know better, it was me. While the way people died could be horrible, unjust, a waste, or straight up evil, death itself wasn’t like that. Death wasn’t like anything we knew or could truly understand, and the forest I stood in was like that. Vast, ancient, utterly foreign. The kind of place that inspired true awe.

“I somehow expected it to be both hotter and colder,” Ramon said, hands on his hips.

“It’s kind of balmy, isn’t it?” Ezra surveyed his surroundings with a careful eye. “Sort of pleasant, if you ignore the terrifying aspects like the color scheme and that we’re in the land of the dead.”

Sean stared at him.

“I’m not saying I’m going to bring a hammock out here for the summer or anything, I’m just saying I thought it would be worse.” Ezra tipped his nose in the air. “The smells aren’t really conjuring up underworld vibes, either.”

“Right?” Ramon sounded weirdly disappointed. “I thought it would be more like brimstone or death or rot or *something*.”

“Smells weird,” Sean said, “but not bad.”

“The underworld isn’t like anything you would have imagined,” Brannoc said from where he stood holding the veil.

Douglas made an exasperated noise. “And there are parts of it you will never see until you pass through the veil at your proper time, in the meantime, *we cannot hold this portal open forever.*”

One of the wolves nipped at my heels, illustrating his point.

“Sorry, sorry,” I said, straightening up. “It’s just—” I waved around me. “It’s a lot to take in.” But they were right, we were wasting precious seconds gawking. I squared my shoulders, taking a moment to hold Ashley’s image very clearly in my mind. I’d never summoned in the underworld and I wasn’t sure what that was going to be like. I was a little worried I would call something…else. With that in mind, I used my knife to carve a quick circle around us, instilling it with power the second it was completed.

Once the circle was invoked, I started my summons. “I’m calling the Harbinger Ashley.” I put power into my words, making it a proper summons. To my great relief, a whirlpool of smoke opened up next to me right away, revealing an opening into what appeared to be an employee lounge. A few scattered tables and mismatched chairs took up most of the space in the kitchenette, the other half had a squashy looking sofa and a fireplace. A painting hung over the fireplace. It kept shifting, revealing paintings that I recognized, but couldn’t name. One was bright blue with branch and some flowers—I was pretty sure that one was by Van Gogh. The next one had a bunch of women in flowy, gauzy dresses and guys in togas under a bunch of orange trees.

If this had been a more traditional hell situation, the lounge would have been full of motivational posters.

Ashley and Ed were on the kitchenette side, hanging out by the coffee maker. Ashley wore batman pajamas with a little cape, her black hair in two neat braids. She held a sky blue mug with a chibi style panda on it. The panda had a dagger in its hand with the script, *Talk to me and I will cut you* next to it. Ed in all his wepwawet glory leaned against the counter across from her, stirring the contents of his mug with a spoon. They both turned and looked at us, freezing mid-sentence.

Ashley examined us carefully. “You see them too, right?”

Ed nodded, sipping his tea which…I wasn’t entirely sure how Ed did that what with having a jackal head and not a human one, but somehow he managed. It was like my brain glitched and I missed the part where he actually drank.

“I thought we were in lockdown?” Ashley said, glancing back at him.

“Me too.” Ed motioned to us with his mug. “Apparently they didn’t get the memo.”

“What does that mean, anyway?” Ashley asked. “Get the memo?”

“It’s an antiquated term,” Ed said, taking another sip. “Get the message might be more your generation.”

Ashley shrugged. “Either way, they didn’t get it.”

Ed set down his mug and straightened. “Sam, Ramon, Sean, Ezra—good to see you again. Always a pleasure. You need to leave before the boss sees you.”

I turned to Ezra. “You know Ed?”

If there was an award for nonchalance, I think Ezra’s face would be carved into the medal. Nothing seemed to surprise him. “Yeah,” he said, staring off into the trees. “We did a thing once.”

Ed snorted.

Ashley set her mug down on the counter with a heavy thud. “Focus. We need to get these guys out of here.”

“No,” I said, crossing my arms. “Or at least, not until we get who we came for.”

Ashley stilled, her face a mask. “Who died?”

“No one,” I said, “at least not yet.”

Ashley drooped in relief, her breath going out in a whoosh. “You scared me there for a minute.”

“We don’t know, you see,” Ed said, dropping his voice. “With lockdown, we’re not handling any of the crossing over. It has slowed the process down exceedingly.”

“It’s kept the boss busy,” Ashley admitted, concern on her face. “But not so busy he won’t notice a couple of live souls tramping around the place.”

“He already has,” Ramon said. “Had a couple of souls tromping around, I mean.”

Their attention whipped to Ramon.

As quickly as I could, I filled them in. I was a little surprised Ashley hadn’t felt them—she dealt with necromancers after all, and said so.

“I have to actively look.” She tapped her fingers along her arm, a frown on her face. “I didn’t think to do so while I was here. Why would I?”

“Can you look for them now?” I asked.

Ashley tilted her head, her gaze softening with distance. Precious seconds ticked by, and with each one, my stomach dropped a little more.

Finally, she shook her head. “They’re not there.”

Cold sweat broke out on my skin. Were they—

I didn’t say anything, but Ashley had followed my train of thought. She slashed at the air with the side of her hand. “I’d know if they were dead, Sam. I suspect they’re doing what you were doing.” She waved at my chest. “They’re wearing one of those.”

I placed my hand on my mother’s pouch, relief flooding my system. “So you can’t track them?”

Ashley shook her head.

“Okay,” Ramon said, slipping out of his pack. “Then we go to plan B.”

“What’s plan B?” Ashley asked.

Ed watched everyone but me drop their packs and start stripping out of their clothes. “I suspect they’re about to cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war,” he murmured.

Ramon scoffed. “More like let slip the bears of war.”

“No one *lets* a fox do anything,” Ezra said, folding up his clothes and tucking them into his pack. “Foxes do what they want and are gone before anyone can even try to tell them different.” And with that, he shifted, his form slowing from one to the next in a blink. A fox sat in his place, whiskey colored eyes staring up at us.

“Huh,” Sean said, tucking away the last of his clothes. “I think that was even faster than me.” Sean followed him, moving from human to his canine form between one breath and the next.

Ramon scoffed. “Show offs.” Ramon’s transformation was a slower thing, his muscles and bones moving and reknitting at a more lumbering pace. The end result was the same—where there once was a man, there was now a beast. Except this one was a bear and looked faintly irritated.

“You going to carry all those backpacks?” Ashley asked.

“Against my better judgement, I’m going to ride a bear with a pile of backpacks, yes,” I said. I was probably going to fall on my ass. A lot.

“Where are you going to start looking?” Ashley shook her head, an amused look on her face. “It’s a like a bad joke—a bear, a fox, a wolf, and a necromancer walk into the afterlife…”

“I just hope it has a good punchline,” I said absently, trying to figure out how I was going to get the bags up there along with myself and then keep everything on the bear’s back with me. “And I have no idea. I was hoping they could pick up a scent or something, or that Sean would be able to sense his siblings.” So far, Sean was sniffing the ground and whining, which didn’t bode well.

Ed stepped through the smoky portal, his sandals depressing the soft earth at our feet as he left the employee lounge behind. With an easy grace, he scooped up the bags, slinging them easily over one shoulder. “I have an idea where you can start.”

Ashley nodded, snapping her fingers. Her pajamas changed into a pair of black leggings and a T-shirt. “Since we can’t send you back—or I should say, since we won’t send you back without getting everyone out, we’ll help.” She trotted after Ed, the portal disappearing until the employee lounge blinked back out of sight.

Ramon lowered himself and I did my best to clamber on board. Ed grabbed my belt loops and hauled me up. “Thanks.”

“Of course.” Ed waited for Ashley to join us, then took off toward the woods with a ground-eating stride.

“I guess we follow him?” I asked.

“You should definitely follow me,” Ed said over his shoulder. “Because I have an idea of where you should start.”

I didn’t know where Ed was taking us, but if a guide to the underworld says “follow me” well…okay, I can see how that could be suspicious as hell. But I knew Ed and I knew he wasn’t going to throw me in a pit or trick us into going somewhere we didn’t want to go.

Even not knowing, it was a surprise when we broke through the forest and onto a river bank. The river was a wide one, the ink-dark waters rippling blue-black in the low light. We made our way down the low-grade slope to the water’s edge. The area where we walked bracketed a portion of the river that flowed along smoothly, rippling around the occasional rock. We stopped at the river’s edge, waiting. For what, I didn’t know.

Ashley peered upriver. “He should be here shortly.”

“Who?” I asked.

Just then all the shapeshifter’s heads swiveled to the left, looking upstream. It was eerie, really.

“There he is.” Ashley sounded relieved. “I was worried we’d have to wait.”

“I sent him a message,” Ed said, his tone only slightly affronted.

From upriver came the faint sound of someone strumming what I guessed was a ukulele, or maybe a mandolin? I don’t know, I wasn’t a musician. I strained, trying to hear it. After a few strums, a man started to sing. The tenor voice was pleasing and cheerful, rolling out over the river, sounding both completely out of place and totally natural at the same time. *“Yes, it's only a canvas sky, hanging over a muslin tree. But it wouldn't be make-believe, If you believed in me…”*

The song was a really old one, and I tried to place it as I watched a long, flat bottomed boat float our way. The boat was made from wood, old, with no motor that I could see. There was a mast, but the sail that was lashed to it wasn’t being used. A row of oars stuck out of the side, dipping into the black river water in a steady rhythm, but I couldn’t see anyone manning them.

What I could see was a lone figure sprawled out, leaning against the mast. He had olive skin, his teeth flashing bright when he smiled. He wore white pants, his maroon suspenders a dark slash over an equally white shirt, the sleeves rolled up. A straw boater on his head was tipped back to reveal brown hair. He looked like he’d stepped out of the 1920’s.

He grinned at us as the boat rowed our way, strumming on his…was that a mandolin or a lute? It seemed like the instrument shifted as I watched. *“It's a melody played in a penny arcade…”* He kept playing, his posture easy, until the boat came right up to the edge. The he sat up, setting his instrument aside.

“Ed, Ashley, as I live and breathe.” His speaking voice was as uncanny as his singing voice, sounding both natural and other at the same time. I couldn’t really describe it. Only that I felt his words as much as heard them.

“If you can call this living,” Ashley said.

The man laughed. “True enough.” His laid back smile didn’t quite reach his dark, shining eyes as he looked us over. “Looks like you have some passengers for me. Can’t say they’re my usual sort.”

“No,” Ed hedged, “but we thought maybe you’d make an exception.”

The guy in the boat was already shaking his head. “Against the rules, I’m afraid.”

The fox down at Ramon’s feet shifted back into Ezra, his expression curious. “I’ve never seen a boat like that.” He examined it carefully, then sniffed, his expression dubious. “Could it even hold us?”

The boatman looked affronted. “Are you slandering my vessel? My baby has ferried kings and demigods, you know.” He scoffed. “Could it hold you, indeed.” The boatman patted the wood planking at his side. “Don’t listen to him,” he crooned to the boat.

Ezra shrugged. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”

The boatman squared his jaw. “Do you even have payment?”

I dug into my backpack, pulling out the sack of silver coins James had packed, just in case we ran into the ferryman. This man was hardly the skeleton in robes I’d been imagining, but nothing else was meeting my expectations, so why not this, too?

I held up the coins. “Two silver pieces for each of us.”

His eyes took on a glowing sheen as his grin took on a feral edge. “Well then, who am I to turn away a paying fare?” He waved a hand generously out toward the deck of the boat. “Welcome aboard, weary travelers. I’m Charon and I’ll be your skipper on this glorious evening.”

He picked up his instrument. “Climb aboard, then. And do be careful—you really don’t want to touch that water.” Charon strummed a discordant chord on the strings of his instrument. “Not if you value your soul.” His fingers plucked out a handful of notes. “Not to be dramatic but trust me when I say you won’t live to regret it, mostly because there won’t be enough ‘you’ left to regret anything when the waters are done with you.” He laughed at the worry on my face. “Oh, mortals. How I have missed dealing with the live ones. You’re so deliciously entertaining.” He tapped out a beat with his foot, making the oars quiver. “Now hurry aboard. I might have all do, but you certainly do not.”

I tried to hide the shiver cascading down my spine as I handed over our payment and tried to figure out how we were all getting on the boat.

Chapter 28

And I've Been Begging and Begging Myself  
Please Don't Close Your Eyes

Brid awoke with a start, her pulse in her throat as her muddled brain tried to figure out exactly what had woken her. Sayer’s hand on her shoulder—that was what had bolted her awake. Sayer wasn’t looking at her now. Instead his eyes were narrowed as he scanned the area outside their little hideaway, his body rigid. She listened, trying to figure out what he was focused on. The breeze eddied through the leaves, making a gentle shushing sound reminding Brid of water, but she didn’t hear anything else. Slowly she sat up, making as little sound as possible.

She lifted her nose to the wind, trying to remember what the ghoul had smelled like. She hadn’t been paying attention in the cave. No, that wasn’t exactly true. She’d been paying attention, just not to scent signatures. She’d been too focused on not being noticed by the ghoul and checking on June and Lily.

As she sniffed, she tried to remember what the cave had smelled like. Part of the problem was that nothing here smelled like anything she was used to. The dirt, the plants, the—so far—unseen creatures had entirely different scent signatures than the living world. Her brain had been a bit overwhelmed at first, getting used to them.

But she’d been here awhile now. Not sure how long, exactly, but long enough for her memory to start storing the new, strange smells. The copse of trees they were nestled in was very different from the cave, so all she had to do was keep her nose up and wait for any smell she recognized from her time in the ghoul’s lair. If she smelled it out here, then logic told her that scent would belong to the ghoul.

All of this flitted through her mind fast as lightning as she sat next to her brother, scanning the area outside the trees. Nothing but the breeze. Still, Sayer had heard *something* that concerned him enough to wake her, so Brid didn’t relax.

After several long moments, she heard it—a wet snuffling sound off to the left. It wasn’t right up close, but some distance away. Fear iced her veins as she considered the possibility that it was the ghoul…and the possibility that it was something else. Something…worse.

A noise scraped behind her. Brid’s head whipped around to see June’s foot sliding to the side. It was a normal movement, the kind of twitch people did in their sleep, and it brought Brid some relief. They’d been so *still.* The timing, however, couldn’t have been worse. As she watched, June’s eyes slowly opened. She blinked.

Brid motioned to Sayer to keep watch as she duck stepped over to June, moving slowly to stay quiet but also to not spook the necromancer. She was pretty sure June knew who Brid was, but they’d never met. She might not recognize her, and she didn’t want to startle June into making a noise. It was in their best interest to not attract whatever was snuffling about.

June blinked hard, trying to shake off the stupor she’d been in. Brid took advantage of the moment, making the last lunge to her side while putting a hand over June’s mouth. June’s eyes went wide as Brid put a finger to her own lips, letting the necromancer know not to make a sound. When Brid had her attention, she pointed toward where she heard the creature snuffling, before tapping her own ear, hoping that even in her muddled state, June understood. *Don’t make a sound.*

Slowly, carefully, Brid removed her hand from June. Relief settled in as June stayed silent.

It was short lived.

Next to her, Lily bolted awake with a scream, her small faced screwed up in relived terror, her mind no doubt still frozen in the moment she was abducted. Brid clamped her hand over the child’s mouth, hissing Lily’s name while absorbing the blows and kicks as the terrified little girl lashed out.

“*Lily*,” She hissed again as the young necromancer got in a particularly good shot to her kidneys. Lily’s eyes snapped open, wide with fear. Her breath sawed in and out between Brid’s fingers. She saw the exact moment terror shifted to realization in those wide eyes that reminded her so much of Sam’s.

“Brid?” She whispered, her breath tickling Brid’s fingers.

Brid nodded, raising her finger again to her lips before mouthing the word *quiet.* She waited until Lily nodded, her entire body trembling.

She wrapped an arm around Lily, comforting her as she glanced back at Sayer. He scanned the area, brow furrowed. The snuffling noises were louder now. Whatever it was had come closer to them while Brid had been dealing with their charges. She heard no other noises beyond the sniffing sound. Whatever the creature was, it moved on silent feet.

Sayer’s nose tipped up, the furrow on his forehead deepening. He turned confused eyes on Brid mouthing the word *canine?*

She mimicked him, taking in the scents herself, trying to see what he was talking about. He was right, she definitely smelled canine along with some other, odder scent. Not the ghoul—she was certain of that. But what was it?

She frowned at her brother, offering him a small shrug, right as a big ball of *something* bounded between the trees and directly into their makeshift camp.

Brid and Sayer scrambled back, putting themselves instinctively between the monster and the necromancers. She bared her teeth, a growl issuing from deep in her chest, her brother doing the same. She watched as the creature turned its head to the side, reminding her of a curious wolf.

Then she watched the next head tilt.

And the next.

Silence filled their little copse of trees as Brid and Sayer stared at the interloper.

“What the absolute fuck,” Sayer whispered.

“Okay, so you’re seeing three heads, too, right?” Brid asked. “Because for a second, I thought maybe I had banged my head.”

Behind them, Lily let out a delighted shriek. “Puppy!” She bounded forward, all fear gone, as she slipped past a stunned Brid and Sayer, right at the strange canine. Only Brid’s well-honed reflexes made it so she caught the back of Lily’s shirt. If the canine had been at all aggressive, it wouldn’t have been enough. Lily was too close, her hands reaching out to clasp the middle head of the dog, squishing its cheeks.

“Lily!” I tried gently tugging her back, but she was surprisingly strong.

June’s voice came from behind her, raspier than she’d ever heard it on the phone, like maybe June had been screaming so much she’d strained her vocal cords. “You’d think I would be past shock and awe at this point, but turns out I’m not. Is that Cerberus? It has to be Cerberus.” She coughed, talking apparently a struggle for her right now. “I thought he’d be bigger.”

Since the canine…thing…seemed okay with Lily squishing his face—in fact as Brid watched, the canine licked Lily’s cheek—Brid took a second to examine him. He was large, but lanky, making her think he was in the adolescent years of doggy life. Not quite a puppy, but not quite filled out into adulthood yet. His coat was a startling white, especially against the backdrop of the underworld around them. He almost appeared to glow. There was a faint hint of apples underneath his canine scent, making Brid think someone had recently given him a bath. If it weren’t for the fact that he definitely had three heads, she would think he was just a normal dog.

Something rattled against one of his necks, making Brid peer closer. Each head had their own collar, A nameplate dangled from each one. She reached forward slowly, her eye on the dog’s body language. It watched her, but in a cautious way that Brid understood. She flipped the tag over slowly, reading the block print etched into the surface. “It says ‘Spock’ on the nameplate. So not Cerberus, I guess?”

“Maybe,” Sayer said, fingers barely brushing Spock’s coat, “It’s not *the* Cerberus, but *a* cerberus?”

Lily giggled as the middle head licked her cheek, her terror temporarily forgotten.

Sayer caught June’s eye, mouthing a question. *Zombie dog?*

June squinted, then shook her head. “He’s not a spirit. My guess is that some of the myths are true—Cerberus guards the gates into the underworld, right? Maybe he’s a portal guardian, trying to figure out how some of the living wandered into the realm of the dead.”

“That’s not as comforting as you seem to think it is,” Sayer said.

“Well,” Brid said slowly, giving Spock an experimental head scratch. “Whatever he is, he’s friendly, so I say we just roll with it for now. I mean, we’re in the underworld running from a ghoul. How is a three headed portal guardian any weirder?”

June edged forward until she was right behind Sayer. She held out a hand, letting Spock’s far left head sniff her fingers before she scratched behind his ear. “Is that what got us and brought us here? A ghoul?”

“Yeah,” Brid said. “There’s a lot to catch up on. But first, how are you feeling?”

June grimaced. “Wobbly as a day-old kitten. And empty.” She tapped her sternum. “I understand why Sam was so freaked out. I mean, I understood *then*, but in an abstract kind of way. Now I *feel* it. Or I guess I should say, I don’t feel it.” Her smile was tight-lipped and sad. “I’ve overdone it before, but I’ve never felt what it was like to have my powers gone.”

“I don’t like it,” Lily said softly, her hands buried in Spock’s fur.

“I know, kiddo,” Brid told her rubbing a hand on her back. “But we’ll get it back, okay?” They just needed to get back to the living world, first. Brid traded a concerned look with Sayer. They still didn’t know how they were getting back home. For now, it would have to be enough that they were still alive.

There was a sound then, a shriek off in the distance. It split the still air, making shivers crawl up the back of Brid’s neck. Lily stiffened under her hand and all three of Spock’s heads turned to the noise.

“The ghoul,” Sayer murmured.

Both their heads whipped over to where June and Lily had been sleeping a few minutes before. There, lying in the dirt, was the bag Sam’s mom had made. Brid dove for it, snatching it off the ground. As quick as she could she grabbed June and Lily’s hands, sandwiching the pouch between them. Understanding dawned in June’s eyes, so she leaned down to whisper an explanation to Lily while Sayer and Brid watched, listened, and waited.

Off in the distance, the ghoul howled in triumph. The sound was moving toward them. *Fast*. It had found them, or at least their general direction.

“We need to move,” Brid said.

Sayer nodded. “And we need to do it *now.”*

Chapter 29

Everybody Look at Me  
'Cause I'm Sailing on a Boat

When I was a kid, I used to check out D’aulaires Book of Greek Myths on a regular basis. I read the chapters featuring the underworld a lot. I wasn’t sure if that was from a subconscious understanding of my connection to the dead, or if I just thought the pictures were cool. Now that I was standing on Charon’s boat, I don’t think it was either of those things. No, I think what kept bringing me back was the fact that those stories were always infused with a sort of heavy, bittersweet sadness that I could now identify as grief. Loss was something I knew intimately as a child, which made those stories resonate so deeply within me. The stories of the underworld were always at their core about grief, and in many ways, so was mine.

In those stories, Charon always had a gravitas to him. He was a specter, his benevolence purchased and so always consistent. You could count on death’s ferryman in a way that you couldn’t count on other personas in Greek myth. I couldn’t remember much else about Charon beyond the basics—he ferried the dead across the river Styx. He was supposed to have a temper and was often pictured as a guy who’d been living rough on the sea for a long time. I definitely remember a beard.

This Charon was clean cut and dressed sharply, if in an old-fashioned manner. The last time I saw suspenders and a straw boater was when Ramon went out for a play in high school. I didn’t remember any connection to music, either. You couldn’t always trust myths and stories to give you the facts on these kinds of things—I knew that. I wasn’t sure about a temper yet, but his moods appeared to shift quickly from one to the next.

In all my time reading that book of myths in my school library, I never imagined that I would see Charon pouting…but he was absolutely pouting right now. He strummed his instrument idly, the entire time glowering at Ramon, who was still a bear. Ramon, for his part, sat on his furry rump and looked cheerfully back. I hadn’t been sure how well we’d all fit when Charon’s boat had first pulled up to the bank of the river, but like the stringed instrument in his hands, it seemed to shift, growing bigger and wider to fit our party.

“I still think it was cheating,” Charon mumbled darkly, his eyes flashing.

“We had a bear, we used a bear,” I said with a shrug. I sat a few feet from him in the middle of the deck, Sean curled up at my side, his eyes closed. Until this moment, I had no idea that canines could get seasick, but apparently they could. With no dock and the boat being a few feet from the riverbank, we’d been worried about touching the river. So instead of climbing aboard and taking our chances, Ramon had tossed us onto the deck. Not everyone had been keen on being chucked over a soul-eating river by a werebear, but beggars could not be choosers. Then Ed had helped him scramble onto the deck to join us. As a wepwawet, Ed apparently didn’t have to worry about touching the water.

“I’ll admit it was a loophole I hadn’t foreseen,” Charon said. He picked out a sprightly tune with nimble fingers. Charon was a lot like his boat, and if I watched him long enough, sometimes those fingers flashed to pure bone, but only for a moment.

I scanned the deck, checking to make sure the others were safe and accounted for. Ashley and Ed stood at the prow, looking ahead. Sean and Ramon seemed pretty settled where they were, but Ezra was leaning over the side and staring at the water in a way that made me nervous. He was also still completely naked. Which, honestly, if I looked as good as Ezra, I’d probably swan about naked all the time if I could.

“Ezra, I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” One bump and he’d be over the side. I did *not* want to explain to Ava and Lock that I’d lost their friend in the Styx.

“But it’s the river Styx!” Ezra told me indignantly. “When am I going to see this again?”

“You’re going to see a lot of it if you fall in,” I warned.

He scoffed. “Fox like reflexes, Sam.”

“Water splashes, Ezra.” I turned to Charon. “If the water splashes up, it would still affect him, right?”

Charon nodded with a skeleton grin. I had to try very hard not to shudder.

Ezra sighed and it was a whole body affair. “Fine.” He came over to where I was sitting and dug through the backpack, taking out his jeans and slipping them on. He glanced at me. “Splinters.” Then he flopped onto the deck.

I couldn’t help it, I started to laugh.

“What?” Ezra said.

I shook my head, wheezing. “It’s just—” I had another fit of what could only be called giggles. “We’re on Charon’s boat on the river Styx and I was just thinking that in all the times I read about this as a kid I never once thought this trip would include the mention of ass splinters.”

Ezra leaned back on his palms. “What can I say? I bring joy. I’m a constant source of amusement.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. I’d desperately needed that laugh.

“As much fun as this is,” Charon said, once again plucking idly at the strings of his instrument, which had taken the form of a banjo. “I cannot hold this boat at the shore forever. We need a destination.”

“You can’t just…” I waved my hand around. “Take us to them?”

Charon shook his head. “I can’t track the souls of the living. I only ferry the souls of the dead.” The edges of his lips curved up. “Usually.”

“Ashley,” I said, waving her and Ed over. “Any ideas on how we can find them?”

She frowned at Sean. He whined miserably, whether from his inability to sense his siblings or from being on the boat, I wasn’t sure. She pursed her lips, her head cocked to the side as she thought. She turned to Ed. “Crow?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “Now there’s an idea.”

I groaned. Crow didn’t really have a name as far as I knew it. I wasn’t even entirely sure what Crow *was*. He wasn’t a normal crow—for starters, he was gigantic. He could also talk to me, though he usually used that super power to mock me. As far as I could tell, he was sort of a celestial crow. A crow of the gods, but not quite a god himself. He was sort of like Ed, straddling some sort of middle ground between mortals and higher beings.

He also couldn’t keep his beak to himself, and that thing hurt. I sighed. “Fine, but he’s not always keen on being summoned.” It wasn’t even really a summoning, more of an entreaty. Being able to call on him was one of those things that I was pretty sure made me weird, even among necromancers. I’d never seen my uncle call the Crow. They were linked with death, sure, but that didn’t mean they were ours to summon. I was pretty sure it was one of those things that came from my mom’s side of the family. After all, it was her fault my middle name was Corvus.

I closed my eyes, attempting to center myself, and called for Crow. Nothing happened. I kept my eyes shut, trying not to be distracted by the sounds of the river, or Charon’s music. Finally, when I was about to give up, I felt a sharp pain in my skull.

A sharp pain that I recognized. I slapped my hand over the spot, rubbing it. When I opened my eyes, a large crow was settling onto the deck. “That hurts, you know. You could just say ‘hi’ like a normal person.”

Crow ruffled his feathers with mild contempt. Crow’s feather ruffling was an incredibly nuanced thing. *The gods preserve me from being normal.* He turned bright eyes on the surrounds. *What interesting things you’ve been up to, Meat.*

“I try to stay busy,” I said dryly. I rested my hands on my knees and straightened my back. “I was wondering if you could help us locate some souls.” I told him briefly what was happening and who we were looking for.

Crow hopped in place, ruffling his feathers in thought. *I will do this, Meat, on one condition.*

“Okay,” I said warily. “What are you going to ask for? A steak? Sacrifice in your honor. A lifetime membership to the Audubon society?”

Crow pinned his sharp gaze on me. *You will not repay me with such fripperies. This is no small thing, therefore your repayment must be equally weighty.*

I did not like the sound of that. “What do you want?”

Crow considered this for a moment. *When you have a child, you will name it after me.*

“That,” I said, “Is some classic Rumpelstiltskin shit. I’m not giving you my first born.”

Ashley snorted. “What is it with you? No one wants your baby, Sam. No one.”

“He wants me to name my first born after him,” I said, waving my hand at Crow. “How else should I interpret that?”

*You’re named after me*, Crow pointed out. *Do I own you?*

I considered this. Being named after Crow hadn’t brought anything bad down on me, beyond the occasional peck to the skull. It had, in fact, been very helpful. So far. “What’s the catch? Ten years from now, and I going to owe you my soul or something?”

Crow cawed a laugh. *That’s not how I work, Meat. I simply find I like having those who share my name.*

I thought this through, but it was one of those situations where I didn’t really have enough information. I looked at Ashley and she shrugged. I guess she didn’t know either. Could be a bad idea. Could be good. I guess that was a problem for future Sam and his hypothetical children.

“Okay,” I said, holding my hand out to shake before I realized that was a stupid thing to do. Crows don’t have hands. “If I ever have a child, I will somehow manage to convince my partner to give them the middle name of Corvus. Does that work?”

*You could just use ‘Crow’ you know. No need to get fancy.* Then he pecked my hand hard enough to draw blood.

“Ow!” I snatched my hand back, shaking it to make it stop stinging. “Was that necessary?”

*No*, Crow admitted. *But it was funny.* He stretched out his wings before leaping into flight. I watched him circle a few times above the boat, before he spread his wings out and flapped down river.

“Follow that bird, I guess,” I said, holding my arm out like a presenter.

Charon tapped a beat with his foot, keeping time while he strummed a lively tune on an old, beat up acoustic guitar.

*Just so you know, Meat—the first one of you to make an ‘as the crow flies’ joke will get pecked in the head.*

“Duly noted,” I said, settling back on the deck, relieved to be finally making some forward progress. I only hoped we would get to them fast enough.

*Hold on Brid*, I thought. *Please hold on. We’re coming.*