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 8

?

If I’d hoped to slide back into Seattle unnoticed and lay low for a while, those hopes were quickly dashed.

I’d barely made it over the threshold into my home before I was assaulted by work and responsibility. Just once I’d like work and responsibility to give me a nice cuddle and a pat on the head instead of walloping me.

My sister, Haley, had been house sitting in my absence, partially because she knew how dangerous things in my house could be. I’d inherited it from an unscrupulous necromancer named Douglas and his hobbies had been torture, collecting nice things, and doing evil magic. Possibly walks on the beach, but I had no evidence of that.

We’d done our best to find, neutralize, and sometimes contain the things he’d left behind, but he’d had decades to work. That was a lot of time to make evil happen. I think we’d only managed to find one tenth of the dangerous things in this house, and I think even that fraction might be optimistic.

Haley was smart, careful, and a witch in her own right, so she was one of the few people I’d let watch the house.

Plus, the gnomes, marble centurions, and various hedges and statuary around the place basically thought she was the best, so no one would give her any shit. My sister could hold her own.

So I was not expecting to slightly frantic look on her face as she greeted all of us at the doorway. “You have a stack of voicemail on the business line, the gnomes won’t stop fighting, you got a weird package, and Brooke is on the fritz.”

I didn’t like handing out my cell phone for council business, so we had a landline that James usually took care of. It normally rerouted to his cell phone, but he’d left it connected to voice mail while we’d been gone. Any nercomantic emergency was supposed to be handled by my uncle, Nick.

Despite sleeping on the plane, I was beat. Travel always took it out of me, but I suspected the lion’s share of my exhaustion belonged to whatever the hell had happened to me. I rubbed a hand over my face. “James, can you make caffeine happen?”

James was already walking past me to the kitchen, waving a hand at me in dismissal. When I first moved into the house, I would have thought he was blowing me off. Now I knew it meant, “I got this, carry on.”

So I carried on. “Frank, gnomes.” Frank peeled off with Chuck at his heels.

Ramon picked up the bags. “Ramon, bags.”

I shot him a look. “I wasn’t going to demand you put our luggage away. I was going to leave it and have you come with me.”

Ramon snorted. “Please. This will take me two seconds and then I’ll come help your sad ass.”

“My sad ass thanks you,” I said. Okay, that was gnomes and coffee sorted. “What did you do with the package?”

“Put it in a salt circle. Should be good for now.” Haley crossed her arms, her expression anxious.

“Voice mails handed off to Nick?” I asked hopefully.

She shook her head, dashing all of my hopes and dreams. “He’s tapped out. Now that you’re home, I’ll have him come over and fill you in.”

Okay, straight to work then. “We’ll