

5-16-2008

From Plumpy's to the Grave

Lish McBride
University of New Orleans

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

McBride, Lish, "From Plumpy's to the Grave" (2008). *University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations*. 659.

<https://scholarworks.uno.edu/td/659>

This Thesis is protected by copyright and/or related rights. It has been brought to you by ScholarWorks@UNO with permission from the rights-holder(s). You are free to use this Thesis in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.

This Thesis has been accepted for inclusion in University of New Orleans Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@UNO. For more information, please contact scholarworks@uno.edu.

From Plumpy's to the Grave

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing Workshop

by

Lish McBride

B.A. Seattle University, 2005

May 2008

Dedication

*To my mother:
my anchor, my buoy,
and my star to sail 'er by.*

Acknowledgements

Contrary to popular belief, novels don't happen by themselves. Here are a few of the people who helped me along, so you now know exactly who to blame. I hope you can all live with yourselves after what you've unleashed on the world.

To my family for your support, even if half of you have no idea what, exactly, it is that I do; Adam, for constantly believing in me, even when you hadn't read a single word. Thanks for the faith; Gryphon, for telling me his own stories and dragging me away from the screen once in a while; My mother, Maryanne, for not killing us all as children (sorry for any ill behavior) and for your endless efforts to keep me in school as well as constantly telling me that the whole mess would be worth it; Jeremy for teaching me how to read, even when you didn't enjoy the written word yourself; Darin for recommending books and constantly going your own way; Alex, for listening to my tales and for being such an amazing person. You are all a constant inspiration. I am lucky to have such brothers, and you are lucky to have such great wives; Dad, who took me to many different places, letting me see how others lived; Michele, for multiple trips to the library for just one more book; Grams, for reading my stories just because I wrote them; Aunt Ann and Uncle Brian for words of encouragement and guidance, and to the rest of you who helped me out. I am lucky that there are too many of you to list.

To my friends: what can I say? You all keep me sane. Devon, for being my Porkchop and my hetero-life-mate; Abby for helping bring Ling Tsu to life, and for being a like mind; Tiny and Erica, for taking care of me and cheering me on; Ben "Man of" Steele and Rachel Trujillo for baby wrangling and first reads (I owe you.); Jen Violi for guidance—both spiritual and line-by-line, and J'romy Armstrong, for listening to many, many insane ideas and telling me they were perfectly acceptable; Parker for beers, thumbs ups, and general shenanigans; Casey "Fox Bandit" Lefante for constant encouragement, laughter, and for always reading my stuff with a critical eye while remembering to tell me what works, and, of course, for getting me my darling orphans; the fine poets, Trisha and Jeni, for good vibes and the occasional glass of wine; Dense and Jason for bad movies and reminding me what readers want; Blake and Jimmy for following me to New Orleans; Barb Johnson for saying that of course I could do a novel, and to the rest of Team Parkview: where would I be without you all?

Last, but of course not least, to my professors: Sharon Cumberland, for helping me get into graduate school in the first place; Joanna Leake for kind words and for reading stories about unicorn death matches and not instantly throwing me out on my ass; Joseph Boyden, for playing the good cop and for always making me stay for another round; Amanda Boyden, for making me throw away the first chapter, and for telling me what I needed to hear, whether it was good or bad. You have greatly shaped this thesis (and now you have to live with that hanging over you). You have all made me a better writer and a better person. Now, if I could just get Joseph to stop teaching my son bar tricks...

And to Ed Dieringer, former NOPD. Thanks for answering all my police related questions. If I got any of it wrong, I swear it's not your fault.

You are all fully and completely, chock-full of awesome.

Table of Contents

Dead Man's Party	1
These Are a Few of My Favorite Things	20
She's a Lady.....	26
Brown Paper Packages, Tied Up with String.....	35
Hold Me Closer, Necromancer	48
The Future's so Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades	60
She Loves Me Like a Rock.....	73
I Put a Spell on You, Because You're Mine	89
With a Rebel Yell: More, More, More	103
Strangers in the Night	119
Don't Rock the Boat, Baby	125
Kickstart My Heart	131
C'mon Baby, Don't Fear the Reaper	150
Make a Little Birdhouse in My Soul.....	167
Easy Like Sunday Morning	174
School's Out Forever	187
Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting	193
Those Cats Were Fast as Lightning	205
Back in Black.....	215
Vita.....	241

-Chapter 1-
-Dead Man's Party-

I stood in front of today's schedule still holding my skateboard, still drenched from the ride over, and still desperately wishing that I hadn't dropped out of college. But my wishing wouldn't erase *Sam* from the counter slot and rewrite my name under the grill slot. Maybe I could switch? No, the schedule told me Ramon worked grill today. Nothing short of fifty bucks and a twelve-pack would have made him switch, and I didn't have either of those. I groaned and leaned my head against the wall.

Someone walked in after me and slapped me on the shoulders.

"Should've stayed in school," he said.

I recognized Ramon's voice without opening my eyes. Not surprising since I'd known Ramon since sixth grade. I wasn't shocked by his lack of sympathy, either.

"You didn't drop out, and yet you're still here," I said, rolling my head to the side to look at him.

"What, and leave my man Sammy here all alone? What kind of friend would that make me?"

"A smart one."

He laughed and tossed his black hoodie on the coat hooks, trading the sweatshirt for an apron. I did the same, but with much less enthusiasm.

Ramon was the only person who called me Sammy. Everyone else called me Sam, even my mom, except when she was pissed and did the full name thing.

I signed onto my register slowly, glad that nobody stood at the counter waiting to be helped. While the manager counted and checked my till, I stared at the pictogram of a burger nestled between similar representations of shakes, sodas and fries on my register. I wondered

why humankind seemed so dead set on destroying all its accomplishments. We drew on cave walls, spent thousands of years developing complex language systems, the printing press, computers, and what did we do with it? We created a cash register with the picture of a burger on it, just in case the operator didn't finish the second grade. One step forward, two steps back—like an evolutionary cha cha. Me working here just proved that the only things separating me from a monkey truly were my opposable thumbs. And pants.

My name is Samhain Corvus Lacroix, and I am a fry cook.

I tried to take some pride where I can. If I was going to be a drop-out loser, then I was going to be the best drop out loser. Short of a manager, it always depressed me to spot anyone working fast food over the age of eighteen. I try not to look in any mirrors at work.

“There you go, Sam.” My manager, Kevin, shut my till and wandered off. Probably to read Danielle Steele novels, which usually occupied his time. I slapped on my name tag and settled in.

I had my mom to thank for my name. My dad took his sweet time showing up to my birth, and in an uncharacteristic moment of spite, she named me Samhain just to tick him off. Apparently my dad wanted to name me Richard or Steve or something. But Mom got there first, and since I happened to be born on that happy pagan holiday, Samhain it was. To get back at her, my dad started calling me Sam, since he said *Sowin*—which is how Samhain is pronounced—sounded funny. Their divorce didn't surprise anyone.

The Plumpy's crowd was in a lull, so I watched Frank, the other counter jockey, triple-check his condiments, napkins, and the rest of his fast food accoutrements. Frank was younger than me, and so he still had a little enthusiasm towards his work. Brooke, Ramon and I had all started a pool on how long it would take for this place to suck the life out of him. If he cracked

next week, I got ten bucks. Brooke had this week, and she was doing her best to get Frank to break early.

Brooke left her station at the drive-thru window and sauntered over to the milkshake machine. I only had four years on Brooke, but she's young enough and tiny enough that Ramon and I both spend more time protecting her than ogling her. Not that we can't do both, really. I just felt a little dirty after. But I can't help my programming, and Brooke looked like a cheerleader in a dairy commercial: bouncy blonde ponytail, clear blue eyes, and a wholesome smile that could turn any guy into man-putty. Frank didn't stand a chance because, although she tended to be a sweet girl, she could be devious when she wanted something. I probably wouldn't get my ten dollars.

Brooke finished pouring a large shake, snapped the lid on, and turned to look at Frank while she took a long sip from the straw. He ogled. I watched as she slid her hand over and flipped the machine's off switch. Frank manned register one and was responsible for the milkshake machine. Frank missed the tiny movement, his eyes intent on her lips as they wrapped around the straw. She sauntered back to her station, and I wondered how long until Frank noticed the machine no longer chugged behind him. If she kept on the offensive, Brooke would have him in tears before the weekend.

After about two hours, a dozen surly customers, and a minor shake machine malfunction, I decided to take a quick break. Frank could mop up shake mix and man the counter. Sure the mess might make him crack early, but if I helped him, he'd never learn. And really, wasn't learning more important? I saluted him and hopped over the mess, stepping out back with

Ramon. On the way, I grabbed my broom and the doorstep so we could leave the back door open in case someone needed to shout for us.

Ramon quit smoking a year ago, but he never let that get in the way of a good smoke break. I never smoked in the first place, but I didn't really let that get in my way, either. And since the rain had finally let up, nothing stood between us and a good game of potato hockey.

It is relatively straight forward. You get a medium-sized potato and two brooms, designate the goal areas, and you're ready to go. Today Ramon defended the garbage bin by Plumpy's back door, and I defended a silver Beemer because, according to Ramon, it represented the privileged white aristocracy of America trying to keep the Latino man down.

"Our duel," Ramon said, spinning his broom like a bo staff, "will represent the struggle our nation's currently engaged in."

"Please, we both know you're just going for home team advantage."

"You wound me, Sam. I can't help it if your cracker-like oppression gives me the better playing field." He did a quick hamstring stretch. "Suck it up."

"Fine," I said, "then I get the handicap."

"Sam, you're Texas. Texas always gets the handicap."

"I'm team Texas again?"

He nodded, rolled his shoulders and wiggled his arms, loosening them.

I gave up and nodded at the Beemer. "Just try not to dent the car, Team Mexico."

"It's Team South America," he said. "I have the whole continent behind me. And it's that guy's own fault for parking in our lot so he could sneak over to Eddie Bauer or Starbucks or whatever."

UVillage was an open air shopping orgy that sat behind Plumpy's restaurant. Between the Gap, Abercrombie, and not one but two free-standing Starbuck's, the place attracted a certain clientele that rubbed Ramon the wrong way. Mostly because UVillage had its own parking structure but their customers still parked over here. I didn't know why that pissed him off. He didn't like Plumpy's either. Maybe it was the principle of the thing. I didn't think UVillage was totally evil. Some of the food was good, and I found it hard to hate the bookstore. Of course, the bookstore contained the *third* Starbuck's in the complex.

"Whatever," I said, "game on," and I rolled the potato into the center.

Brooke came out to watch after Ramon made his fourth goal, making the score a depressing 4 to 1.

"Ramon, order up," she said. She reached for his broom. "I'll pinch hit in your absence."

"And leave Frank all alone up there?" he asked.

Brooke grinned, devious.

"That's my girl," Ramon said. Ramon had already lost the bet, so he was now considered a free agent and worked to aid both of us. The important thing, he felt, was that Frank cracked, not who won. Ramon handed Brooke his broom and walked inside.

"The devil in pigtails," I said.

Her grin widened as she adjusted her stance.

"Okay," I said, "but we're switching sides."

Brooke straightened up and sighed. "Fine, I'll be Texas."

I can be a man and admit that Brooke was much better at potato hockey than me. I don't know what sports she played in high school or if she just worked out, but I think in reality she was just a better athlete than I am. I didn't even skateboard very well. My board could move me from point A to point B okay, but I couldn't really do anything fancy on it like Ramon, so I didn't feel the least bit ashamed in asking for the home field advantage.

We crouched down, brooms ready. I saw the faintest twitch around Brooke's eye before she flipped the potato into the air with the tight-packed bristles of her broom. Then she leaned back and gave it a whack with the handle. I blocked it from the garbage bin, barely, but only by slamming my own body into the bin's green, chipped side and taking the spud directly in the chest.

I squinted at her. "Dirty move," I said.

"My brothers played lacrosse."

We both hunkered back down, eyes never leaving each other as the breeze pushed the gray clouds overhead. I blocked out all the chatter from the shoppers in the distance and all the sounds from the kitchen behind me. Then I tried to duplicate Brooke's move.

I didn't have any brothers who played lacrosse. Hell, I didn't have any brothers, period, though I'm pretty sure my little sister Haley could've given Brooke a run for her money. My lack of skill meant that my shot had force behind it, but little aim.

The potato flew so far to the right that Brooke didn't even try to go for the block. I got the point, and the BMW got a broken tail light.

Brooke picked up what was left of the potato off the ground, walked towards me, and threw it in the bin. "Game over," she said.

I stood, stuck to the spot. "In retrospect, the choice of goals might have been poor."

Brooke shrugged, grabbed a wad of my shirt-sleeve up by the shoulder, and pulled me towards the door. “They shouldn’t have parked there,” she said. “Besides, that’s what you get for being Texas.”

I kicked the doorstep out from under the door and held it open for Brooke. “I hear Austin’s nice.”

We were slammed for the next two hours as the dinner rush invaded Plumpy’s. We were busy enough that Kevin actually popped out of his office for a moment to tell us he was too busy to help. Not a useful gesture, but his concern was noted by all. Hell, we were lucky. Kevin usually only surfaced for Armageddon-level events.

Finally, the people trickled out, and the place became ours again. I wandered toward the back while Brooke made Frank mop out the newly puke-spattered Plumpy’s Fun Zone. Brooke leaned against the counter, watching Frank and keeping an eye on the few straggling customers. Ramon and I started a rousing game of “Guess What I Put in the Fryer.”

I closed my eyes and leaned against the back of the shake machine. There was a fairly large plop and a hiss from the fryer. “Pickle,” I said.

“That’s uncanny, Sam,” Ramon said.

“Not really, I just helped Frank get the bucket out of the walk-in freezer.”

“Damn,” he said.

After the pickle, a bun, one set of tongs, a spoonful of mayonnaise and a hat, Ramon ran out of ideas, and I decided not to eat the fries here anymore. I stared at Ramon’s spatula.

“Thou shall not covet thy neighbor’s spatula, Sammy.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not in the Bible,” I said.

“How do you know? Have you ever read it?” He slapped a chicken burger on the grill.

“Not really, but I’m still pretty sure that’s not in there.”

“Trust me,” he said.

“Fine,” I said, “what version then?”

“The King Ramon version. Spatulas are considered very sacred in the King Ramon version.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “Well, I’m not Christian, so I can covet. I can covet like a fiend.”

“Won’t get you back on grill, flame-boy,” he said.

So I’d caught the grill on fire a few times. Okay, more than a few. Kevin had to remove the smoke alarms when I cooked. “I can’t help it if grease is flammable. Besides, it’s not like it hurts the grill.”

“And what about last time?” Ramon asked, flipping the chicken burger onto a bun and placing it on a tray.

I handed the tray up to Brooke. “You’re referring to the Plumpy’s kid’s meal incident? A lot of crap over a few boxes. Water under many bridges.”

“Sam, the toys ignited and exploded melted plastic onto your apron, which also burst into flame.”

“That’s what fire extinguishers are for.”

“The little girl at the counter started to cry because she thought you were going to die.”

I waved him off.

“Besides,” he said, pulling out a hotel pan full of pre-cooked bacon, “can I help it if the grill responds to my raw Latin heat? You skinny white boys cook the burgers, but I make love to it. I give those babies wings.” He flapped his hands like a bird.

“That’s disgusting,” I said.

In the last hour before closing, I crouched under a table with a putty knife and chipped old gum away. Man, you couldn’t beat my job. I could tell Brooke was going to make Frank do it, so I took the job before that could happen. Instead he got to sweep, and I was that much closer to winning the pool. Brooke sulked behind the counter, blacking-out teeth and drawing mustaches on the people pictured on our tray liners. There were no customers, and the only sound besides the scrape of my putty knife and Frank’s sweeping was Ramon who, for some reason, hummed show tunes while he cleaned the grill. Right then it sounded like, “Luck Be a Lady.”

As I scraped, I wondered why people stuck gum to tables. Seriously, we had garbage cans, trays, wrappers, hell they could stick it on Frank, so why always the table? While I considered this, I heard the door swing open. The sound wasn’t loud, but I hadn’t expected anyone else to come in so late on a weeknight. Especially with what sounded like dress shoes. Plumpy’s caters to the sneaker set. I tilted my head so I could see a little past the table.

The man looked tall, but I was lying on the floor, and everyone looks tall from that angle. I twisted my head so that I could follow him with my eyes, and as he got closer to Brooke, I decided that he must be about average height, maybe just an inch or two shy of six feet. He looked skinny too. No, lean. But he gave off the impression of being much bigger than he looked. His shoes weren’t like anything I’d seen in a department store, and his charcoal suit

looked expensive. He held an old fashioned doctor's bag in his left hand and what looked like a piece of a potato in his right.

Shit.

He held the potato out to Brooke. "I'd like to speak to someone about this," he said.

The guy had a preacher's voice, smooth and rolling, worn with use.

That voice scared the crap out of me. I froze under the table, not even daring to bring my arm and putty knife back down.

Brooke looked at the man, her eyes cool, her body language saying casual indifference. She pointed one dainty finger at the man's right hand. "It's a potato," she said.

The man didn't respond.

"You know, a kind of tuber? Grows in the ground. Almost killed Ireland. Any of this ringing a bell?"

I could see Brooke's face and the pink fingernail polish she was wearing as her hands gestured at the man.

"I know what it is," he said.

"Then why did you ask?" Brooke rested her hip on the counter and crossed her arms.

The man didn't move, but I saw his grip tighten on the handle of his bag.

I stayed motionless under the table even though my arm was starting to get tired from holding the putty knife up. I didn't know why the man didn't scare Brooke, but my guess was that being the only girl raised alongside a bunch of gigantic lacrosse-playing male siblings had more than one benefit. Brooke doesn't scare easy. My childhood, however, had made me much more cautious.

The man took a deep breath. His hand relaxed around the handle of the bag. I could only see the back of his head, but I bet his anger never showed up on his face. “What I want to know is why it was in my broken tail light.”

Brooke put her elbows on the counter and cupped her chin in her hands. “Oh, I love riddles,” she said. She kept her eyes wide and innocent, her pink lips straight. Her blonde ponytail slipped forward, and she absently twirled the end of it with one finger. Brooke had long ago mastered the vapid look. “I give up. Why did you put a potato in your tail light?”

“I didn’t. It was there when I got back.”

Brooke’s eyes got a little round. “Oh, a mystery.” She straightened back up off the counter and let the vapid look fall away. Her eye lids drooped a little and her lip quirked up at one side, pure devilish disdain. “Well, then I’ll just get Shaggy and Scooby, and we’ll get right on it, mister.” She crossed her arms.

The man laughed, and I couldn’t help but think that it was the most joyless sound I’d ever heard.

Ramon sauntered up from the back, drying his hands on a towel. “Is there a problem here?” He’d asked Brooke but kept his eyes on the man.

The man held up the potato. “I found this in my shattered tail light.”

Ramon shrugged. “I don’t know anything about it.”

“I’d be grateful if I was you,” Brooke added. “Your car could have been impounded for being in our lot.” She shrugged one shoulder. “A mashed potato taillight is getting off easy.”

The man set the piece of potato onto the counter before straightening up and squaring his shoulders. He inclined his head toward them. “I will speak to the manager.”

“He’s busy,” Ramon said. We all knew that Kevin wouldn’t come out of his office unless it was closing or the building was burning to the ground, and we liked it that way.

Ramon’s eyes flicked down to where I hid under the table. His eyebrow raised just a twitch, and I shook my head frantically. I tried to make my face say, No, don’t look at me. I didn’t know who the complaining man was, but he scared me. The lizard part of my brain screamed *predator*, and I believed it. With predators, if you move, if you’re seen, you’re eaten, and this man in his innocuous, expensive gray suit could swallow me whole.

Ramon looked back at the man, but it wasn’t fast enough.

I watched the man look back over his shoulder, just a short glance, a scan, an eye-flick down to me hiding under the table, before his attention back to the counter.

I let a breath out slowly and tried to stop my hands from shaking. He hadn’t really seen me.

Then he jerked back around.

His footsteps echoed in the empty restaurant as he headed my way. I scooted further under the table, but I could feel the uselessness of the action already. The man leaned down, grabbed me by my Plumpy’s T-shirt, and dragged me out from under the table. I heard Brooke and Ramon shout something, but I couldn’t make it out. All my attention focused in on the brown eyes of the man in front of me. Lean as he was, he held me up by the shirt with little effort. Hanging like that was awkward, so I grabbed his wrists for balance. I felt a cold snap of electricity, like frozen static shock, and I immediately released his wrists.

“What,” he said slowly, “do you think you’re doing here?”

“I work here.”

He tightened his grip on me and pulled me closer to him. Not really a place I wanted to be. I swallowed hard.

“Not here, fool. Seattle.”

“I live here.”

His face got even closer to mine, and I grabbed at his wrists again. The shock was still there, a cold crackling up my arm, but I held on anyway. Unpleasant, but I didn’t want to let him get his face any nearer to mine. The man’s voice dropped to a low whisper. “You live here and you haven’t petitioned the Council?”

“What?”

“When you moved here, you should have contacted us...” He looked down at my name tag. “Sam.”

Oh good, he’s crazy and scary. What an awesome combination. I let go of his wrists and pulled my T-shirt out of his grip.

“I have always lived here,” I said, enunciating each word in that peculiar way people do when speaking with the insane. “I was born here, and I’ve never heard of the Council.”

“Impossible,” he said. “I would have known.”

“Perhaps my mother forgot to send you an announcement.” My hands shook. I did my best to get them to stop.

“Is there a problem?” Kevin had finally come out of his office.

I didn’t look at him, thinking it best to keep my eyes firmly on whatever threat this man represented. My body still wanted to run screaming in the other direction, but I held it there anyway. I couldn’t quite figure out which would be the safer choice.

“No, sir, “I said, “no problem.”

A moment passed as the man stood, eyes still locked on me, face unreadable. Then his face broke into a grin, and he reached over and straightened my shirt. “No,” he said, “just a misunderstanding.” As the man turned toward Kevin, his face lit up, smiling and lighthearted. “A case of mistaken identity. You know how it is.”

Kevin looked confused. “My employee tells me you had a complaint about your car?”

I looked, and behind Kevin, Frank cowered a little, his eyes wide, broom still firmly in hand.

The stranger waved his hand in dismissal. “No, no. It’s not a big deal. Again, simple misunderstanding.” He walked over and shook Kevin’s hand. Kevin still looked a little apprehensive, but he didn’t seem to be having the same problem touching the stranger as I did. “Thank you for your time. I appreciate it.”

He turned to leave but nodded in my direction on his way out. “Sam,” he said, like he was my friend, but it wasn’t friendly. It was ominous, like when my mom would say my name in public with that tone that said I was going to get an earful once we were alone.

I didn’t think I’d seen the last of crazy Beemer guy.

I leaned my skateboard against the wall so I could zip up my hoodie. After the weird events earlier, closing time had seemed a little anticlimactic. Ramon still did his usual tricks to try to get a laugh out of me, and I forced a few smiles, but I felt too distracted to really pay attention to any of it.

What the hell had crazy Beemer guy been talking about? What Council? I’d chalk him off as nuts, or eccentric since he drove a Beemer, except for the memory of cold electricity

running up my arms. He'd talked about my birth. Well, where I'd been born. Maybe I should call my mom.

Ramon flicked off the lights, and Frank, Brooke and I filed out. "Anything going on tonight?" Ramon asked.

Frank cleared his throat and pulled out a stack of DVDs.

Ramon grabbed them and started to read. "*Beast Master, Dragon Slayer, Conan*. Frank, I'm sensing a theme."

"Sweaty guys in loin cloths?" Brooke asked.

"You're so funny. Just funny, funny, funny all the time," Frank said. "My sides ache just looking at you."

Ramon handed the movies back to Frank.

"Well," I said, "I know what we're doing tonight."

Brooke scoffed. "Huh-uh, count me out, boys."

"Really?" I asked. "These are the most girl-friendly movies we've watched in weeks."

"Please," she said, "I've seen *Conan*. He throws a chick into a fire."

"Yeah," Ramon said, "but she was asking for it."

"Nice." She huddled into her jacket and pushed her purse toward her hip. "I'll see you guys later, okay?" She flashed a grin at us and waved before walking to her car.

Frank watched her and looked like he might drool. I just wanted to make sure she got to her car okay. Tonight had made me a little paranoid. But she climbed into her blue VW beetle and drove away, honking and waving as she left.

We all turned and walked towards Frank's white Jetta. I didn't live too far from Plumpy's, so I'd ridden my skateboard to work. Ramon didn't have a car. He usually found it much easier to just force me to drive him everywhere in my Subaru.

Frank opened the trunk of his car so Ramon and I could throw our boards in. I reached up to shut the trunk door and saw movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned and saw a man walking toward me. A big man. Of course, I'm not that tall, so a lot of guys make me feel short. But I think this guy would make most people feel puny. He was just one of those guys. Tall and muscle-bound, like he spent a lot of time in the gym, but he was also tan and moved like one of those guys you see in the commercials for the military where they're climbing rock walls and running down beaches. The kind of guy you don't want to get in a bar fight with.

He moved up close to me, not totally in my face, but definitely in my personal space. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Frank and Ramon watching. "Are you Sam?" he asked.

The way today was going, I didn't really want to answer. But I also couldn't think of anything else to say, so I answered, "Yeah."

"I've been sent by Douglas Montgomery."

"You say that like I should know who that is," I said.

He grinned at me—not so much a grin as a flash of teeth. "You should," he said.

"Yeah, well, I don't," I said.

"Then I guess you should find out."

"No, I'm good. My social calendar is chock-full, but I'll check with my secretary.

Ramon?"

"Booked," Ramon said.

I fixed on the big guy's brown eyes and tried not to flinch. "Tell your boss to get back to me in a few months." Then I did something stupid. Well, something stupid besides shooting my mouth off. I turned my back. I heard a bit of a growl, low and deep, and then my feet left the ground after I was hit by a fist that felt like an SUV. When I struck the pavement, I did the best I could to protect my head. I skidded along the parking lot, grateful for my hoodie and jeans, knowing that I would be hurting soon anyway. I felt another blow hit my back, and whatever it was, it hurt like hell. Like sharp, burning, hell.

A hand grabbed me by the back of my jacket and lifted me up. I spun like a top, and the grip shifted to my throat. Not a positive move for me.

The man loomed in front of me again, looking pissed. He pulled me in close, right up to his face. His nostrils flared in and out as he breathed, as if he were taking in all the smells around us. His pupils were dilated. He'd had an adrenaline rush. I didn't think this guy had the best self-control. I held my body still, ignoring the aching of bruised muscles and the burning in my back. What had he done to me?

I hung there and tried my best to radiate calm. Fear would only make it worse, I was sure of it, and I couldn't get angry because this guy could wipe the floor with my carcass. So I hung there in pain, pretending to be calm, and waited for him to make his next move.

"You even smell a little like him," he said, his voice going throaty.

"Like who?" I choked out. Buff guy had a vice grip.

"Like the grave," he said, "like cold death."

"Thanks," I said. I didn't add that he smelled like meat. Not that I could. Maybe choking would help me keep my mouth shut and mind my manners. Then maybe he'd put me back down.

"And blood," he said, "you smell like blood."

My pulse began to speed up despite my attempts to stay calm. Futile attempts since a huge guy was talking about my blood, and he looked really, really happy about it. I was going to die in the parking lot of a Plumpy's, and there was nothing I could do. But I wasn't going to just hang here and die.

I yelled in his face with all the air I could get and grabbed onto his wrists for leverage, kicking whatever was in reach.

The man laughed, but I kept kicking.

Then I heard Ramon yell, "Duck!" I did my best, but with the vice grip on my throat, it was more of a leaning motion.

There was an unholy cracking noise as Ramon whacked the man in the head with a skateboard, breaking it in two. The man's grip loosened as he turned to evaluate the new threat, and I pushed away from him with all I had. For the second time in as many minutes, I hit pavement.

I heard a car engine and turned to see Frank backing his Jetta up and coming right at us. I rolled out of the way and onto my feet. The man didn't move as Frank drove at him, just cocked back his fist and punched the back of the car. With his damn fist, he stopped the Jetta cold. While the man turned his scary grin on Frank, I got to my feet and grabbed for the door. I slid in at the same time as Ramon.

Frank froze, staring at the back of his car.

Ramon slapped him to get his attention, yelling, "Drive!"

Frank slammed his foot down on the pedal, drove over a small cement median, and pulled onto the empty street. I kept my eyes on the man, the man who now held Frank's bumper in his hands as we drove away. I watched him toss it over his shoulder like it was made of paper.

"Seatbelts!" Frank's voice held an edge of hysteria.

I stopped watching the man and curled into my seat, grabbing the seatbelt and slipping it on. The motion made damn near every muscle and joint in my body scream, and I had to arch so my back wouldn't touch the seat.

Ramon turned as he clicked his own belt and eyed me. "You okay, Sammy?"

"What the hell is going on, Ramon? Did someone paint a target on me at work?"

"I don't know," he said, "but whatever it is, I don't think it's over."

"Me, either." I closed my eyes and tried to find a semi-comfortable position to hold myself in, only to realize that there wasn't one. Frank would need a new bumper and Ramon a new skateboard. I'd have to assess my damage when I got home. At least Brook had left before anything had happened to her.

-Chapter 2-

- These Are a Few of My Favorite Things -

Douglas shifted to the left, delighting in the warmth of the soft leather. Few things on this earth were as heavenly as self-warming seats. If that kind of luxury was a sin, he'd happily dance his way into hell.

He looked out through the dark in front of the house, letting his eyes get accustomed to the lack of light. A Beetle pulled into the driveway, and he watched as the girl got out. He would let her enter the house, get settled. It gave him time to prepare. Michael would have been a better choice for this mission. But since he'd botched the earlier assignment, Douglas decided to handle the matter on his own. A delicate touch would be needed to sort this mess out.

Douglas sighed. The adage was true: It was so hard to find good help these days. Not that he cared about Michael smacking the boy around. Violence certainly didn't bother Douglas. No, what bothered him was Michael's lack of finesse. He'd simply escalated the violence too quickly. Douglas had meant to try to woo the boy first, lull him into complacency. Then, if Sam didn't come around, well, time for plan B. But he hated having his hand forced. He also hated surprises. Douglas chewed absently on a thumbnail. How could he have missed the boy, even with so small a power? If he'd discovered him earlier, Douglas could have planned better. He could have molded the boy in his image instead of using brute force to do the job.

Douglas watched as the girl unlocked the front door. No use debating what could have been. The gloves were already off, and now he was going to have to give a very ungentlemanly kind of warning. Pity, that.

But Douglas knew the little shithead was lying. How could he not know? It wasn't like necromancy was a power one could ignore. Douglas could remember seeing his first spirit when he was quite young.

At the time, Douglas hadn't really understood why he was at his Aunt Carol's house. He just knew that he was to be quiet and that he had to wear his itchy clothes. He yanked at his collar for the third time, and his mother took her hand off her swollen belly to push his hand away. She glared at him and went back to fanning herself. He opened his mouth to argue, but, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Auntie Lynn frowning at him. Douglas snapped his mouth shut and looked at his feet, trying to make himself small.

Douglas was bored. He wished there were children to play with. The adults were busy crying and talking, and if they did come over to him, it was to greet his mother. Douglas spotted a tray of cookies. With a sideways glance at his mother, he leaned slowly toward the table. Mother was busy talking to someone, her fan doing little to dry the sweaty curls around her face. Douglas made a quiet getaway and headed over to the cookies. He looked for gingersnaps, his favorite, and shoved one in his mouth while hiding a few others in his pockets. He took one last cookie and turned, nearly bumping into a sad-faced little boy. Douglas spoke around the cookie.

"Hi, Charlie," he said, spraying a fine mist of crumbs everywhere. Douglas quickly looked around. No one noticed the crumbs. If they did, he wouldn't be let into the parlor ever again. This was what his mother called a "nice room."

Charlie waved feebly at him. His skin was a little pale, and Douglas was surprised to see that Charlie wasn't wearing his itchy clothes.

“Your mother’s going to whoop you if she finds you in here in your pajamas, Charlie.” But Charlie just shrugged and motioned to the living room. Douglas brightened. “You wanna play trucks?”

A while later, Douglas’ mother came into the living room and asked him what he was doing. “It isn’t right,” she said, “making a ruckus at a time like this.”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” he said, “I was just playing with Charlie.” His cousin looked a little guilty at getting in trouble, but he looked a little sad, too. Douglas felt bad. He didn’t mean to get Charlie in trouble, especially for still being in his pajamas. “It’s my fault, Mother. We’ll be quieter.”

The color faded from his mother’s face. “What did you say, baby?”

“I didn’t mean to get Charlie in trouble.” He looked down, stuck his lower lip out, and tried to look contrite. If he got the look right, he might avoid his talking to. “I was being too loud.”

His mother sank slowly to the floor. “Honey,” she said gently, “do you know why we’re here?”

“I promise to be quiet.”

She shook her head and reached out, grabbing his face in her delicate hand. “No, I meant, do you understand why we’re here today at Grandma Montgomery’s?”

Douglas stared back at her.

She rubbed at some dirt on his cheek before letting go of his face. “Dougie, Charles got sick. Real sick.” She paused. “He’s, well, he can’t play with you anymore. Charles has gone to heaven.”

Douglas looked at Mother. Her face was open, honest. She wasn't fibbing. But he could still see Charlie right there. Mother was wrong. But Mother was never wrong. "You," he stammered, trying to force the question out, "you can't see him?"

"What?" Confusion pushed away the honest look on her face.

Douglas pointed over to Charlie, who sat three feet away from her in his blue striped pajamas. "He's right there. See?" His mother looked, but he could tell she couldn't see anything. Douglas peeked at Charlie, who shrugged at him and pointed back at the trucks. His mother patted his head, worry clouding her eyes. She didn't believe him. Douglas felt the rotten sting of disappointment. He watched as his mother got up and went to find his father. Douglas went back to his trucks.

His mother's skirt had no sooner whisked out of sight than his Auntie Lynn calmly strode over. "What's your cousin wearing, Douglas?"

Douglas frowned at the question. "Blue stripe jammies," he said, all the moisture leaving his mouth. He was a little scared of his Auntie Lynn. The air around her always felt cold.

"You're not going to tell on him, are you?"

"No, child, I'm not going to tell."

A few days after the funeral, Auntie Lynn offered to take Douglas away. His parents hadn't argued much. They talked it over for a few days, mostly at times they thought Douglas was sleeping. He couldn't believe they were even talking it over. He'd expected his mother to instantly say no to Auntie Lynn. When she hadn't, he thought his chest might cave in. What had he done? Then, for the first time, Douglas realized his parents were afraid of something. They were afraid of Auntie Lynn. And now they were afraid of him.

One week after the funeral, he packed his suitcase.

He cried at first, but in the end, it had all been for the best. He had to be trained, and his aunt could do that. She'd helped him understand how useless his parents had been and how weak. She'd taught him everything: calculus and etiquette along with Sun Tzu, Aristotle, and Machiavelli. He learned all about the family curse. That's what she called it, a curse. But she said the word lovingly. Of course, by then, Douglas understood. The curse had brought her all of her wealth and had kept her alive for a very, very long time.

By sixteen, Douglas had learned all his aunt could show him. He could summon spirits and speak to them. He could raise the dead. And he'd grown powerful, more so than she. She'd started to figure that out, towards the end. But by then, Douglas had fully grasped her lessons concerning total practicality. Auntie Lynn never tasted the sedative in her sherry, and she didn't wake up when he slit her open and stole her power. As he'd knelt there, covered in her blood, his hand lolling to the side but still holding the dagger, drunk on her power, he couldn't help but think she'd be proud of him. He'd become the perfect pupil. Douglas was no longer weak.

Well, Douglas thought, he'd clean this mess up, too. After all, he was number one. He was Council, and Sam had no right to be here. Douglas would have to train him. Or kill him. Both plans had their positives. And if it all worked out, Douglas would have another servant at his beck and call. And if not, well, he still had that knife, and he could steal the boy's power too, no matter how insignificant. As they say, every little bit helps.

First, he had to show the boy—his nametag had said Sam—that he meant business. Well, he'd already done that, hadn't he? Michael may have gotten a little ahead of the plan, but the message he sent must have been clear. Still, Douglas didn't want to overestimate Sam. The

public schools these days didn't always teach kids how to think on their own. No, he'd have to send him something a little more personal.

Douglas got out of his car where he had been sitting—brooding, really, if he could admit it to himself—and shut his door quietly. He crept up the last bit of drive toward the blue Volkswagen Beetle he'd seen earlier at Plumpy's. He peeked into the carport, looking for anyone else who might have pulled up earlier, but the Volkswagen sat alone in the empty driveway. He smiled, singing happily under his breath. *“Rain drops on roses and whiskers on kittens, Bright copper kettles and warm woolen mittens, People in terror bowing to me, these are a few of my favorite things...”*

Douglas slid past the Beetle and went in to collect his package.

-Chapter 3-

- She's a Lady -

Brid woke to the taste of blood in her mouth and the smell of wolf in her nostrils. The smell usually calmed her but now it made her uneasy. If they were close enough to smell, they should have been close enough to call with her mind, or at the very least, reach out and touch. But Brid could tell she was alone, and with the heavy smell of wolf around her, that shouldn't be.

She tried to sit up, but the world tilted in her vision. She put her head back down on the cool surface of the floor. Squashing the flood of panic, she willed stillness throughout herself. First, the facts. She could panic when she knew what kind of mess she was in.

It hurt to open her eyes, and she felt dizzy. A concussion? The blood in her mouth didn't taste fresh, so whatever had hit her had been a while ago. She should have healed a concussion by now. But she hadn't, so either she'd taken on more damage than she knew, or something was interfering. Her stomach burned, her throat felt torched, and then she smelled it. Aconite. She'd been drugged, then. Drugged and beaten. Not good. And cold. Damn it. She'd been drugged, beaten and stripped. That did not bode well at all.

Brid rolled quickly onto her side and dry heaved for what felt like a very long time. When she thought she could manage it, she sat up. She leaned against cold bars and opened her eyes.

Bars. She'd been put in a cage. She touched the floor. Iron. Being enclosed in the stuff would keep her from her weapons. She could, however, just as easily bend the iron like it was wicker. Sometimes it was good to be a hybrid. She stood up, reaching for the bar closest to her, and frowned. There at the top, were runes done in silver, wards drawn with a cold fire. She felt the chill of the symbols with the tips of her fingers and frowned. Somehow, someone had built a cage, not just for a werewolf, but specifically for her.

Shit.

And then it hit her. The wolf smell. Her eyes burned with a red flame, fueled by hatred as the name slid between clenched teeth. “Michael.” Then she smiled. This was also a chance at revenge. Things were looking up.

She’d been dozing, eyes closed, her body leaned into the bars behind her. Escape wasn’t an option at the moment, so she rested until opportunity presented itself. If she kept lying on the iron floor, she’d get a rash. Of course, since the whole thing was made of iron, and since she was naked and completely enclosed in it, she didn’t see much of a choice. She’d looked around long enough earlier to figure out that she was being kept in a basement, no windows, solid concrete. Every scent she got felt tainted with death, incense, and old blood. Enough blood that Brid felt that the sooner she got out of here, the better.

The only other things she could see were a few shelves piled high with old books and what she thought might be a small refrigerator under the stairs. She could hear the soft whir of a small motor, and the size looked about right a mini fridge.

Brid stood and stretched, feeling a pleasant pull through her body as she did. She walked closer to the bookcase to get a better look. The books on the shelves were old enough that most of the leather bindings had lost their print. The few words she could read didn’t give her a warm feeling. They looked like grimoires, but not like any of the ones Brid had seen before. She hadn’t seen many, and most of those had been in the hands of witches who avoided black or tainted magic.

Brid stilled. She heard voices, both male, one the grinding base of Michael. The other voice soothed her ears even though she didn’t recognize it. The stranger sounded angry, but that

smooth voice still rolled around in her mind, lulling her. Brid fought to keep her muscles tense. Usually if someone you didn't know used those tones, they meant to ensnare you in some way. She quickly curled up on the floor. Even tense, she tried to appear relaxed and dozing. Brid wanted to hear as much as she could.

"I don't understand why you're so pissed." That was Michael. "If you didn't want me to do it, why'd you help me build the cage?"

"I know we discussed something similar to this, but your actions were a bit premature."

Brid heard the slide and click of several locks from the top of the stairs. Muttering. Did the man have the door booby trapped? Footsteps sounded on the stairs, a dusty shift and steps coming closer to her.

"The bitch was sniffing not two feet from me," Michael said. "What was I supposed to do? Hide?" Michael snorted. "I was upwind. She'd have run straight to her freak family."

Brid cast around in her memory, trying to pull out her last action. She'd been jogging in the park, trying to burn off some excess energy. One of her dad's conditions for her to stay in the city was that she had to run everyday. If she didn't, she'd have to change more, and that was harder in an urban setting. But she hadn't seen Michael there. She had stopped when a strange smell had hit her. She remembered jogging in place, trying to catch it. Then she'd pretended to tie her shoe. Then...nothing.

The stranger spoke again, this time much closer to the cage. "You were lucky, then. I heard the last time you scuffled this slip of a girl wiped the floor with you." Brid could hear a faint trace of amusement in the stranger's voice. He was prodding Michael.

Brid heard Michael spit. "She cheated."

“How?” the stranger said, laughter definitely in his voice now. “By being better than you?”

Michael growled as he walked up to the bars. He grabbed her by the neck, pushing her body further into the cage before pulling her back and slamming her into the bars. She let him do it. Even with only a few inches of momentum, it hurt like hell. The drug made dodging chancy, and this way a piece of him was in the cage. Her turn.

Brid grabbed his arm and bit down hard before pulling back with her head. A chunk came free, and Brid rolled to the center of the cage. She opened her eyes. She spit the chunk of flesh out of her mouth and onto the floor, an insult Michael was sure to get. Wolves did not waste food, not ever. Only humans killed for sport. By refusing his flesh, she was implying something unsavory about Michael. Like weakness.

Michael howled and pulled back his arm. Blood poured down. Michael ripped off his T-shirt and held it to the wound. He glared at her.

Brid smiled at him, wide and toothy, like a yearbook photo. She knew how that smile would look coming from a mask of blood—his blood. Even naked, injured and locked in a cage, she had gotten the best of him, and he knew it.

Michael came at the cage again.

“Michael,” the stranger said, the command in his voice absolute.

Michael stilled and glared at her. “Mongrel bitch,” he spat.

Brid sighed and pulled her knees up to her chest, rolling her eyes at his childishness. Just the kind of action that she knew would piss Michael off.

Michael’s lip curled back, showing his teeth, still trying to dominate her even now. No matter how many times she’d won, he just kept on trying. But he wasn’t the dominant wolf here,

she was, and she let that knowledge show in her face. Michael broke first. Brown eyes turned away, and a single earthy-brown curl dropped onto his forehead. Not for the first time, Brid wondered why the goddess had wasted such beauty on a total ass-hat.

Michael kept his eyes averted. "I should have been next in line."

Brid released her knees and leaned back, palms on the floor. "No, you shouldn't," she said. Michael had always relied too heavily on his biceps while ignoring his brain. Brid watched the muscle clench in Michael's jaw. He'd never been able to understand that in wolf packs, Were or otherwise, it wasn't always the biggest who ruled. Strength didn't mean much when everyone was super strong. Her brothers could change all the tires on her dad's truck without a jack. She'd never tried to do that, but she was strong enough that she had to watch it when she lifted weights in the school gym.

She didn't flinch as Michael launched himself at the cage, angry and thinking only of her throat in his mouth, she was sure. She clucked her tongue at him. "That's no way to get what you want. Go ahead," she said, "open the door. Who knows, with all the aconite you've given me, you might even stand a chance."

Michael slammed his fists on the floor and howled, spittle flying from the corner of his mouth. The other man walked up behind him and placed a hand on Michael's shoulder. Instead of reacting like Brid imagined he would—taking the guy's hand off at the wrist—Michael actually calmed, his brown eyes softening and losing their focus.

"I think," the man said, "that now would be a good time for a run, don't you?"

Michael absently nodded his head. Then he got up and walked for the door.

Brid had never seen Michael so docile. Michael was rogue, had been for years. Only a pack leader should have had the power to subdue him so quickly, and even then it probably

would have taken longer. Brid made no outward move; she kept her position open and unconcerned, her brain filtering through all the information she had, and each thought placed the man in front of her higher up on the fear scale. Michael had the potential to cause problems, but Brid didn't fear him any more than she feared any foolish person with too much power. The man in front of her, however, was cause for concern. Lots of concern.

He pulled up what looked to be an old hand-carved wooden chair. The filigree made it look expensive, but he kept it in the basement. The man took off his dove-colored suit jacket and hung it carefully over the back of the chair. He used the same care to settle himself in the chair when he was done, smoothing nonexistent wrinkles out of his pants leg as he sat. Finally, he folded his hands in his lap and quietly maintained eye contact with her.

Most people aren't able to keep eye contact for more than a few seconds without feeling uncomfortable. Even fewer could do it without speaking. The man managed to do both with seemingly no problems. Brid had always secretly believed that people looked away because they took the "eyes as windows to the soul" thing too seriously; she wondered if the man across from her had much of a soul to worry about. As he appeared to have no qualms about openly studying Brid, she felt it was only fair that she got to do the same.

The man was not imposing based on his physical characteristics. Medium build, probably around 5'9. His hair was dark and cut in a Caesar style, and he had pale skin as if he didn't go out much and didn't care if he looked good at the beach. He was clean shaven with a good mouth and solid jaw line. Even his nails were clean and evenly cut. Brid realized that everything about the man should have added up to handsome, and yet she wouldn't have looked at him twice on the street. There was something about him that turned her system off. He reeked of power,

though, and Brid suspected that there were more than enough women attracted to that to keep the man company.

She felt her nostrils flare slightly as she scented the air around him. It was faint and hiding under the smell of all the old blood in the room, but she could just make it out. He'd cleaned up, but the hint of fresh blood spoke to her senses. He'd most likely killed, and recently.

The man apparently had finished his evaluation of her. "Are you comfortable, Ms. Blackthorn?"

"I'm naked and in an iron cage."

"Yes, my apologies about that," he said. "I understood werewolves to be an unself-conscious bunch."

Brid gave him her yearbook smile. "I don't give two shits about whether or not you can see my nipples, but you do have me on a cold iron floor, which is uncomfortable, to say the least."

"Again, my apologies, but I can't just let you have free run of the place. That would be." He paused and pursed his lips. "Problematic."

"Nice euphemism."

"I try. Bridin, may I call you Bridin?"

"Could I stop you?"

He tutted at her like an old school mistress. "Let's try to maintain a little civility, okay?"

She shrugged her shoulder. "Whatever floats your boat."

"Do you know who I am?"

"I could take a few guesses," she said. In fact, the list of who the man could be was pretty short. The power, the blood, the cage. Very few could do these things. She'd never personally

seen Douglas Montgomery because her father hadn't taken her to Council meetings yet, but she was willing to bet serious money that the man in front of her was the head of the Northwest Council. The fact that he held that position told Brid quite a lot. Other Councils, if they even had a necromancer, weren't led by them. The Council that governed the area of Louisiana and Mississippi was the only one she could think of.

"Then why don't you take one?" he asked, amusement filling his voice.

"If you insist," she said. "Mr. Montgomery."

"Excellent. Now that we are acquainted, let's get down to business, as they say."

"Is this where you tell me your evil plan? I just want to know if I need to get comfortable." If her comment angered him, Brid could see no outward signs of it.

"Sorry to disappoint," he said, "Here is what I will share: if all goes well, you'll be free in a few days. Meals and such are contingent on good behavior." He smiled, completely without warmth. "Essentially, Miss Blackthorn, if you are a good girl, then you needn't have any worries." He stood up to leave, clearly feeling their discussion was finished.

Brid didn't agree. "Well, then I'm afraid we have a problem, Mr. Montgomery."

He pulled on his suit jacket and checked his cuffs.

"I am a lot of things, but a 'good girl' isn't one of them. Neither is stupid. You don't plan on setting me free." She'd been raised to lead, and she knew that some prisoners could be released and some couldn't. Brid knew she fell into the couldn't pile. The thought chilled her, but it was nothing new. She'd either escape or, failing that, hope that her pack found her in time.

He straightened his jacket.

"I'm dangerous to keep, yes, but I'm worse to let go."

Douglas laughed, a hollow booming sound that made Brid's spine want to straighten. "Why, because your pack will track me down and kill me for what I've done to you? I thought more of you, Bridin. Your father doesn't have the clout to challenge me."

Bridin leaned her head to the side and flicked her bangs out of her face. "Oh, I wasn't talking about politics. No, I'll kill you myself for the whole kidnapping thing, that's a guarantee. But this—" she waved at the cage, palm up like a spokesmodel. "Once this little cage thing gets out? Every Were and Shifter in the world will be on you for this. You're a dead man, Douglas Montgomery."

Douglas smiled and gave her a short bow before marching back up the stairs. "It has to get out for your prediction to come true," he said. "As you yourself have pointed out, you are too dangerous to set free. Good night." He flicked out the lights.

Brid heard the door shut and several locks click. His footsteps faded. Once they were gone, she stood up and shook herself, loosening her muscles. She stretched, walked around the cage a few times, then settled back down into a ball on the floor, the most warmth and comfort she could expect. When she'd relaxed herself, she began to cycle back through all the information she'd gotten so far. She'd find a way out. She just hoped she found it soon enough.

- Chapter 4 -
- Brown Paper Packages, Tied Up with String -

I lived in a small one bedroom apartment that I couldn't really afford. When I rented the place, I justified it because I could easily ride a bike to the University's campus from there and still be nowhere near Frat Row, which was the one place in Seattle I hoped never to live. The neighborhood was nice, with a lot of trees and a small park. And despite the blah gray of my building, the inside of the apartment wasn't bad.

Once I became a drop-out, my flimsy justification left along with my student loans, so I was forced to rock the Top Ramen lifestyle that is envied by so many. Standing in my hallway, I took comfort in the quiet of the building and the fact that I had always helped Mrs. Winalski with her groceries, so that when she spotted me coming out of the elevator scratched, greasy, dirty, and already bruising, she didn't immediately call the police. Sometimes, you had to take the few small comforts life offered you.

"Sam, honey, you look filthier than a hot tub in a brothel."

"That's kind of gross, Mrs. W," I said.

She eyed Ramon and Frank behind me. "One of your little boyfriends didn't beat you up, did they?" She pointed a long delicate finger at my friends. "Sam's a nice boy," she said, "and if he won't call the cops on you two, I will."

"I'm grateful," I said. "I really am, but I'm neither gay nor a sufferer of domestic violence."

Mrs. Winalski dug around in her purse for her keys and made a harrumphing noise. "You worry me, Sam. I'm seventy, and I get a hell of a lot more action than you, boy. You're young,

take advantage.” She clasped her keys in one hand and patted her short steely, hair with the other. “How do I look?”

“Great. Knock ‘em dead, Mrs. W.” Mrs. Winalski sang karaoke on Tuesday nights. Come to think of it, she went out almost every night. Mrs. Winalski did not fuck around when it came to her free time. She made me feel old.

“You’re a good kid,” she said. She waved behind her as she walked toward the elevator. “See you later boys, and don’t wait up.”

I waved at her and opened my door, flicking on the light and looking around before stepping in. I was still a little jumpy after the attack. Frank and Ramon followed behind me.

“She seems nice,” Frank said.

“Dude,” Ramon said, “did your seventy-year-old neighbor just order you to get laid?” Out of habit, he leaned to put his skateboard by the door. There was a dirty smudge on the wall from Ramon always putting his board in the same place. He sighed. “You owe me a new board, Sammy.”

I nodded, even though we both knew I didn’t have the money. Maybe I could just loan him mine for a while. In the morning. After the night I’d had, I planned to sleep with the damn thing. Skateboards made a great weapon in a pinch, as Ramon had proved earlier.

“What can I say? She worries.” I slumped down into my ratty, plaid easy chair, not even bothering with the footrest. I felt exactly like a brothel hot tub, and it was not a pleasant feeling. Ramon kicked off his shoes and flopped onto the couch while Frank walked through my small apartment. I could hear him methodically checking my closets and under my bed. He caught me watching him as he exited my room, and his face flushed.

“Just checking,” he said. I didn’t want to think what for. I felt stupid for not doing it myself. He picked at the hem of his shirt. “Shouldn’t we take you to the hospital? Or the cops? We should go to the cops.”

“And tell them what?” I snapped. “That a man said weird things to me and then another man tore off your bumper? No, I don’t think so.”

“But you were assaulted!”

“I agree with Sammy,” Ramon said, “I think telling the cops on these guys would just make things worse.”

“But—”

“I’m taking a shower,” I said, getting up. That’s all I wanted. Actually, there was a long list of other things that I wanted, but I’d settle for a hot shower. Ramon wanted to talk about earlier, I could tell, but it would have to wait.

The quiet of my bathroom was comforting. It was nice to have a moment to myself, to let everything catch up. Unfortunately, since my bathroom was more like a glorified closet, thinking was about the only thing I could do easily. The beige sink was only an arm’s reach from the toilet, and I had to close the door to get in the shower. Sometimes it was good to be scrawny. A fatter Sam wouldn’t have been able to fit in my bathroom. I examined my face in the mirror and was surprised that Mrs. Winalski hadn’t called the cops on me anyway. Grease from the asphalt covered my shirt. What wasn’t greasy looked shredded, and my name tag was ripped clean off. Bruises were already surfacing on my face, and a wicked looking patch of scratches covered my cheekbone.

I tried to remove my shirt. Blood made it stick to my back, though, so I pulled it off with a quick jerk that I regretted instantly. I twisted a little so I could see my back in the mirror. Long,

bloody furrows went from my neck to the bottom of my ribcage, like I'd been pawed by a giant cat. I'm sure all the blood, dirt and bruises made it look worse than it actually was. Or, at least, that's what I was hoping.

I threw my shirt into the trash and crawled into the shower, letting the water run until it went cold. But getting clean didn't help much. Before the shower, I was scared, tired and confused. Afterward, I was all those things plus cold and wet.

I pulled on a clean pair of boxers and jeans and went out to rejoin the others. Frank was huddled over my computer in the corner, one hand on my skateboard, and Ramon was idly flipping through his biology textbook. All of the curtains were drawn, and they'd pushed my easy chair against the door. Welcome to a night at Casa de Sam, where our parties are legendary. I cleared my throat.

"Um, one of you is going to have to bandage this for me," I said. Between the two of them, the choice was simple. Ramon might have some idea as to what he was doing. Ramon took biology and had patched me up after the many, many times I'd crashed off my board. Frank was, Frank. I'm not quite sure what that qualified him to do.

Ramon went to the cupboard for my first aid kit while I took a seat at the kitchen table. Most guys my age didn't have first aid kits, and the few who did, didn't have one like mine. No Neosporin, aspirin or rubbing alcohol. My mom wasn't against western medicine per se, but it wasn't her first choice. Ramon had been around my family enough that he knew what the various jars and powders were. Frank, however, had not. He left the computer for a few moments to come watch, proving that even he felt the basic red-blooded male's attraction to gore and violence.

"That smells good," Frank said, gesturing at a jar Ramon had pulled out. "What is it?"

“Tea tree oil, cloves, whatever. They’re natural antiseptics. Sam’s mom’s a hippie.”

“She’s an herbalist,” I said. “She’s made the same bottles for you and your family.”

“Yeah, that just means she’s a good hippie.” Ramon finished cleaning my back and handed me the jar so I could get the scrapes on my front while he set about the bandaging.

“I’m a little worried about these scratches, Sam,” Ramon said. He’d been calling me Sammy since we were little, and he tended to only drop the Y when he was being serious, which was rare.

I wasn’t worried. We’d cleaned them well, and I didn’t think they would become infected. I’d just have to keep an eye on them. I was more worried about how I got them.

Ramon seemed to follow my train of thought. “Did either of you see a knife or anything?”

I set the bottle of salve down on the table harder than I meant to. “No.” I took a deep breath, trying to release some of my tension. “I was too busy getting my ass kicked.” My hands were shaking again. “How about you guys?”

Frank shook his head. Ramon ripped off a piece of tape and handed the roll to Frank. “I didn’t see anything, but he was moving fast. Real fast.” He placed the tape on my back, wrapping it around toward the front. “But if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were attacked by an animal,” he said.

“They look like claw marks, don’t they?” I asked. My voice was soft and shaky. I needed to snap out of it. Going into shock wouldn’t do me any good.

“We should call the cops,” Frank said. Ramon and I both turned and stared at him. Frank shifted his weight from foot to foot, seemingly uncomfortable with our full attention.

“No,” I said, shaking my head and wincing. You never fully appreciate how many muscles are attached to your back until you injure them. “No cops. Ramon is right. It looks like I was attacked by an animal.” I slowly moved out of the chair. “I don’t feel like getting laughed out of a police station. And I really don’t feel like pissing these people off anymore than I somehow have.”

Frank blinked at me.

“This was a warning,” I told him, “and I’d hate to see what they do when they’re actually mad.”

Frank looked a little crestfallen. “Oh.”

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t worry. I know you’re trying to help.”

“And you did,” Ramon said. “That was some mean getaway driving.”

Frank smiled.

Ramon collapsed into one of the chairs. “You sure you’ve never seen either of those guys before?”

“Nope.” I grabbed a beer out of my fridge and tossed one to Ramon and Frank. I leaned my side against the counter and popped the top.

“I mean,” Ramon said, taking a sip, “I’ve seen you piss people off, but usually you have to open your big mouth first.”

“I know. It’s a conundrum.” I drank most of my beer in silence, racking my brain. I didn’t recall seeing those guys before, and I think I would have remembered them. People that drag you around by the neck tend to stick in your memory. I also couldn’t remember saying anything to warrant any of their behavior.

My brain stalled. I was too tired to think anymore, and my body ached with every movement. What I needed was sleep. The rest of the mess I'd sort out in the morning. And if something attacked me again that night, well, then I guessed I wouldn't have to worry about anything else. But I was still going to sleep with my skateboard.

"You guys do whatever," I said, "but I'm going to bed." I checked the deadbolt on the front door and made sure the easy chair fit snugly against it. It didn't make me feel much better, but any little bit helped. The boys crashed here a lot, but they could undo my mini-barricade if they decided to leave.

I went to my room and shut the door. I'd never looked forward to sleep so much in my life. I turned off my light and crawled into bed.

Sleep didn't come as instantaneously as I'd hoped. The evening kept playing out in my head. I kept hearing Douglas' voice, his warnings and threats. They scared me a whole hell of a lot more than the guy who wiped the floor with me. Bullies are easy to understand and out-think. But Douglas, he was full of unknowns.

I reached over and turned the nightstand lamp on before sitting up and swinging my legs to the side. I swallowed a few Tylenol tablets with water from a bottle I kept by my bed. My mom may not have been a big fan of western medicine, but I sure as hell was, especially when it came to things like Tylenol.

I opened my nightstand drawer and dug around. That thing had to be around here somewhere. There, under a gaming magazine and next to a pack of slightly dusty condoms, was my protection bag. I think the actual term is medicine bag, or at least something similar to that. My mom made it for me when I was really little and kept having nightmares. I had been convinced that there were spirits in the house. Instead of dismissing my ideas like most parents,

my mom had gone into her workshop and come out with a small pouch attached to a thin hemp cord. She'd tied it around my neck, telling me never to open the pouch because that would let all the magic out.

"What's it for?" I asked.

She smiled and smoothed my hair back. "For protection," she said. "You leave that thing on, and you have nothing to worry about." She put me back into bed, tucking the blankets around me, her long strawberry blonde braid slipping over her shoulder. I gave her braid a little tug, like I always did.

Then I'd slept like a baby. I needed that kind of rest. That pouch hadn't moved from my nightstand in a while, but I took it out now. The hemp cord didn't itch anymore; it had been worn smooth with use.

I flicked off the light and rolled back into bed. After that, I knew only darkness.

I woke up to a sharp knocking noise. I jerked and fell out of bed. Quite a present for my aching body. I lay there taking deep gulps of air, trying to breathe the pain away. I moved slowly to my nightstand and swallowed a few more Tylenol. There were no windows in my bedroom, so I had to sit up to read my clock. Eight a.m. I hated whoever woke me up. The sharp knock came again, so I hauled my ass off the floor and went to answer it.

Ramon had slept on my couch while Frank had camped out on my floor. Their heads popped out of their blankets, but neither made a move towards the knocking. I checked the peephole, but no one was there. Was that good or bad? Ramon helped me move the chair, and I peeked out the door. Still no one. I looked down. A brown package about the size of a soccer ball

sat on my front mat. It was wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. There was no postmark or markings that I could see. Maybe it was a bomb. Not a good start to my morning. I picked up the package and went back inside, gesturing for Frank to shut the door and move the chair back.

I placed the package on the table, taking the seat in front of it. While I examined it, Ramon handled my coffeemaker with the harsh movements of someone who desperately needed caffeine. Technically, it was Ramon's coffeemaker. He'd bought it and set it up on my counter so he wouldn't have to walk to the nearest coffee place whenever he stayed here, which was all the time. Not that it was a far walk. You could pick any spot in Seattle, close your eyes, spin around, and odds were pretty good you'd be pointing at some sort of coffee place when you stopped. Some stereotypes were true. I left the package for a moment and grabbed a Coke out of the fridge.

I took a long drink before setting the can down and returning to the package. I still couldn't find an address, so the only clue I had was the brown paper and the string. Who wraps things like this anymore? And, with my extensive knowledge of bombs, since the package didn't tick theatrically, I ruled that out.

Ramon sat on the floor, back against the wall, waiting for his coffee to brew. I untied the string, pulled the paper back and stopped. The package felt cold. Not like refrigerator-cold, but cold like I felt last night. This box gave me the same chilly electric feeling that Douglas had given me. Not good. I didn't want to open the box anymore. Maybe I could make Frank do it.

"What's wrong?" Even half asleep, Ramon had noticed my pause. I shook my head at him.

"Nothing. Just paranoid, I think."

I opened the box, then quickly dropped it and scrambled up onto the counter. Ramon stared. Frank came into the kitchen just in time to see the box bounce onto its side, and its contents rolling lazily out of it. Ramon tried to back up, but he was already against the wall. Frank managed a quick hop back as Brooke's head rolled to a stop in the middle of the floor.

Nobody said a word.

Nobody, except Brooke.

"Ow, cut it out, you guys! That is so not cool." Her blue eyes popped open and swung around until they found me. "Really, Sam. You don't just drop somebody's head. Especially a friend's. Like being stuffed into a box and bounced around for an hour wasn't bad enough."

Frank hugged the back of my plaid easy chair. Ramon didn't move. I think he'd stopped breathing. I crouched there, unmoving, and stared at the head of a cute girl resting in the middle of the dirty linoleum of my kitchen floor. For some reason, I had the irrational thought of asking Mrs. Winalski whether or not this counted as having a girl in my apartment.

"Hey guys, show some chivalry here," Brooke said. "This floor is cold, ugly, and could seriously use a solid mopping."

I closed my eyes. Had to be my imagination, or someone had laced my Coke with LSD; all these things were more plausible than what I'd seen. There was no severed head on my floor. I opened my eyes. Brooke was still there, only now she looked disgusted with all of us. Frank began hyperventilating. Ramon hadn't moved.

"Frank." Brooke didn't yell, but used that sharp tone some moms get when they mean business. "Calm down and breath normally."

Frank's mouth snapped shut, but he still breathed heavy. His eyes bugged out a little.

"Stop it before you pass out," she said.

Frank stopped but didn't leave his spot from behind the chair.

Brooke turned her gaze back on me. "Get off the counter and get me off the floor, at least. This is humiliating."

Body or no body, it was still Brooke. Only Brooke could be so bossy at a time like this. I climbed off of the counter and reached down for her head, stopping to ask, "You're not going to bite me, are you?"

"In your dreams, slacker. Pick me up!"

I gently lifted Brooke's head and placed it on the kitchen counter next to the coffee maker.

"Ew, Sam, come on," she said, her tone full of exasperation, "I am not an appliance. Look, I know this visit isn't ideal, but I've had kind of a crappy night, so how 'bout taking me into the living room, 'kay?"

I picked her up again, trying to not poke her in the eye, and placed her head into the plaid easy chair. Frank skittered over to a spot on the floor, Ramon sat on the couch, and I took a seat on the coffee table.

Brooke's head had been severed cleanly at the neck. I couldn't see any blood. In fact, the wound looked cauterized, which didn't make it any more pleasant. It appeared so clean and straight that it looked like the rest of Brooke was hidden in my chair, like we had cut a hole in the plaid so she could hide in there for a haunted house stunt.

Brooke cleared her throat. The noise snapped me back into the moment. I had been staring like an ass.

"So, um, Brooke, can I get you anything?" I asked.

"A sip of water would be super, actually, thanks."

I got her a small glass of water, grabbing a Plumpy's emblazoned straw as an afterthought.

Brooke took a sip and thanked me. I resumed my seat on the coffee table, and set her water to the side. Where did the water go? Come to think of it, how did she clear her throat?

"So..." I drifted off because, honestly, I couldn't really think of anything to say. Next time a talking head ended up in my easy chair, I would have all sorts of points of reference, but at that moment I was completely at sea.

Brooke saved me from a very awkward pause. "Sam, I'm supposed to give you a message." She paused to blow a hair out of her face, which completely blew my mind. Where did the air come from? She had no *lungs*.

"Well, I was supposed to give you a message, but Jackass said he couldn't trust me to get the stupid thing right, and I was like, well, *duh*, like I'd want to do anything for you anyway. I mean, he cut off my head! What an ass. Like I'm supposed to turn into his little messenger girl just because he brought my head back. I mean, I would have been *all* alive if that ass hadn't killed me in the first place—"

"Brooke," I interrupted, "I don't mean to be rude, but what message?"

"Oh," she said, "it's in the box."

She kept talking to the boys as I went over and searched the empty container. Tucked into the corner was a piece of expensive looking stationary that had been folded in half. I opened it and began to read. All it said in a loose sprawling cursive was, "2 o'clock, Woodland Park Zoo, Asia Exhibit. Come alone, or I'll send another message." I flipped the note over. "There's no signature," I said.

"Not surprising," Brooke said. "That guy had no manners at all."

I collapsed down onto the couch next to Ramon and handed him the note. I closed my eyes and leaned back, head resting against the wall. "I am so fucked."

"What a baby," Brooke said. "Try being just a head for a little bit. Then you can complain."

-Chapter 5-

- Hold Me Closer, Necromancer -

I parked my car near the west entrance of Woodland Park Zoo thirty minutes before I had to be there. The promising weather this morning had made a bipolar shift to gray and cloudy on my drive, so I dug around the backseat for my blue zip-up hooded sweatshirt. If you've lived in Seattle for any length of time, you carry a jacket with you anywhere. You get used to the moody weather and give up on umbrellas. Umbrellas are for tourists. Natives know that the rain doesn't come straight down here like other places. Seattle's rain slips in, tricky, like a ninja, and attacks from all sides. I pulled on my sweatshirt and dug out my wallet so I could pay for a day pass.

I loved the zoo. I hated seeing animals in cages, but I still loved to walk around listening to the grunts of sea lions and the bloodcurdling shrieks of peacocks, getting closer to a polar bear than I ever would on the outside. My mother used to take me and my little sister Haley all the time. Haley's eight years younger than me, so she doesn't remember the way the zoo used to look. Before massive remodeling, many of the animals were in cramped cages smaller than my bedroom.

Once, when I was seven, I asked my mom if the zookeeper ever let any of the animals out to run around. My mom, tired from walking and carrying her pregnant stomach around, leaned into the railing in front of the tiger cage for support. She looked at my dad instead of answering me, a pleading look on her face. Haden had only been my dad for a few years, but he was the only real dad I'd known. Before he married my mom, he told me I could call him Haden if that made me more comfortable. Adults don't usually make those kinds of offers to kids. When they'd married, I'd asked if I could have his last name too. I didn't want to be the only Hatfield

in the house, a hazy connection to the past. LaCroix was my solid present. I had wanted to be a LaCroix so badly I would have asked Santa for it at Christmas.

My dad handed her a soda and fielded my question, giving her a much needed breather.

“No, Sam,” he said, “they don’t let any of the animals out. Why, you afraid the tiger’s going to get out and eat you?”

“No, it’s just...” I dug around for words. “The tiger is so big, and the cage is so small. Doesn’t he get bored?”

My dad eased his giant frame down to my level so I didn’t have to crick my neck up at him. I loved when he did that. It made me feel special.

He looked at the tiger pacing around and then back at me. The truth never seemed to be what I wanted when my parents had to think before answering me. It meant they were trying to figure out a nice way to explain something

“He probably does get bored, Sam. Real bored.” He scratched his beard. “Sometimes, we don’t treat other creatures like we should.” Dad pointed to the donation box by the cage. “That’s why the zoo has to go begging.”

The answer was ugly, which meant it was probably true. I was glad he didn’t lie.

“Can I give my money to the tiger?” I’d gotten five dollars for helping my dad stack wood.

“I thought you were going to get ice cream.”

“I was, but...” I twisted the bottom of my shirt. I wasn’t sure how to explain myself. Ice cream was good, but tigers were better. I looked at the ground. “I want to give it to the tiger.”

Dad nodded and stood up, pulling out his wallet. He handed me my five and a twenty. “Why don’t you put that in there, too.”

I shoved the bills into the box, and I felt better about the tiger. Surely he'd have a bigger room soon. Twenty five dollars was a lot of money.

My dad still bought me ice cream.

The animals now have a ton of room. You don't see bars and animals. Instead, they'd designed the cages to look like the animals lived together, all in harmony. The tiger looked less bored sunning in a field. It was a pleasant lie. He was still in a cage, but I could live with the compromise. At least the tiger wasn't being killed by poachers. Or Beemer-driving freaks. I'd put Brooke's head on the couch before I'd left so she could watch TV. She'd asked me to put a pencil in her mouth so she could change channels on the remote after I left. The thought made my stomach twist.

I wasn't sure exactly where Douglas wanted to meet me. The Asia exhibit was huge. Was he being difficult by not specifying? Testing me? Amused at watching me try to figure it out? Part of me was too pissed off to care. Another part of me decided I should be too scared to be angry. This guy had killed my friend just to send me a message. What would he do if I missed a meeting? Short answer—probably something I wouldn't enjoy, like kill me. I wished briefly for my medicine bag. I'd taken it off to shower and hadn't put it back on. Not surprising, since I only wore the thing at night. It wouldn't actually do anything for me now, but I still wished I had it.

I decided to pick a spot in the exhibit and stay there. When you're a kid, they tell you that sticking to one spot is the quickest way to be found by someone looking for you. I bought a freakishly overpriced cotton candy and parked my ass by the sign for the Asia exhibit. I almost bought the popcorn. You can look tough eating popcorn. Something about a pink fluffy ball

screams pansy to most people. I decided that pansy was probably a better look. That way there was no possible chance this guy could take me for a threat.

He showed up, bang on time, like he'd been watching me. Punctuality had never crept me out until now. Of course, I'd never been afraid of a man wearing khakis and a green polo shirt before, either. I think he could wear anything and still maintain an air of menace. He could probably pull off the cotton candy thing, too.

"You're early," he said.

I nodded, looking him in the eyes. Brown eyes rarely looked cold, but his held no warmth at all, flat and icy. But I stayed locked on them because it seemed like a good idea, to keep an eye on the danger. I kept my mouth shut because I didn't want to piss him off. Angering him struck me as a bad idea, and I had a habit of saying the wrong things. Maybe if I kept my answers short and sweet, I'd keep my own head attached to my shoulders. Maybe.

"Excellent, I like an eager soul. Sam, is it?"

I nodded again.

"Do you have a last name, Sam?"

"Yeah, I do."

He let out a barking laugh that made me want to cover my ears. Like his eyes, the sound was cold, with no joy to it, like he'd heard someone else make the noise and tried to mimic it.

"Cautious," he said, "that's a good trait, too. Perhaps you aren't a complete waste of my time after all." He motioned towards the exhibit with his head and started walking. "All right, Sam, this way. I have something to show you."

I fell in line behind him but not too close. Something told me that, as much as I didn't want him angry at me, I didn't want him interested in me, either. Oh, good, subtlety—one of my strong points. I might as well dig my grave now.

“Is there something I can call you?” I asked. Keeping my mouth shut might be a good survival technique, but I needed to try to get some information, too.

“You may call me Douglas.”

Douglas? Shouldn't psychopathic killer types have imposing names like Vlad the Impaler, Genghis Khan, or Vigo the Carpathian? As a name, Douglas was a let down.

Douglas looked straight ahead as he walked, hands in pockets, relaxed and calm, like he was on a Sunday stroll. “You were expecting something more sinister, perhaps?”

“Yeah, I guess I was.” I didn't think letting him know that he intimidated me was a bad thing.

No barking laughter this time. “Would it make you feel better to know that ‘Douglas’ means ‘dark river, or river of blood?’”

“Not really, no.”

We walked in silence for a few minutes, winding our way through small groups of children and animal displays. Douglas finally stopped in front of the panda exhibit, which maintained a decent crowd, even on an overcast day like this. Woodland Park Zoo normally didn't have pandas, but a zoo in China had loaned them in some sort of exchange program. The pandas had been at the zoo for a week. I had an affinity for pandas. Something about clumsy vegetarians struck a chord with me.

Douglas stayed back from the crowd, sitting on an empty park bench. I joined him, happy that I could still see the pandas from my spot.

“Why are you here, Sam?” He didn’t look at me but kept his eyes on the crowd.

“You invited me, Douglas.” I wasn’t trying to be a smartass, but sometimes the truth comes out that way.

“I meant in Seattle, idiot, not the zoo.” He frowned, apparently exasperated already. I think I’d lost whatever points I’d gained in his mind. I tried to keep my eye on the big picture—that this guy was dangerous—but I was also getting tired of all the cloak and dagger crap.

“Hey, watch the name calling,” I said, “And what do you mean? I live here.”

“Yes, I know, but you should have appealed to the Council when you moved into the area.”

“I didn’t move into the area. I told you, I live here. I have always lived here.” I paused, took a deep breath. “And what Council?”

“Your guide should have told you all this.”

“All of what? What the hell are you talking about?” Anger leaked into my voice. I couldn’t help it. Having someone constantly point out your ignorance gets old.

“Drop the act, Sam. It won’t do you any good.”

My desire to yell nearly overwhelmed me. Deep breath, count to ten. Then, through gritted teeth, “There is no act. I have no guide, and I don’t know what you’re talking about. What don’t you understand about that?”

Douglas turned and really looked at me then. His face remained flat, but I saw a little twitch of surprise around his eyes.

“You really have no idea what I’m talking about.”

“No,” I said, “I don’t.”

“But surely...who taught you to control,” he paused and regrouped. “What did you do then, when you got your powers?”

“What powers?”

“This denial is bordering on ridiculous.”

“What powers?”

Douglas swore and closed his eyes. “I saw my first spirit when I was a child, Sam. You can’t tell me that you haven’t had some sort of experience. Your aura isn’t that weak. Even if you can’t accomplish a full raising, you must have seen something by now.”

“Full raising?”

“Of the dead, Sam. Necromancy. You are a necromancer, like me.”

“I’m nothing like you.” I guess my ‘keep my mouth shut policy’ had gone out the window.

Douglas sighed.

“Yes. Yes, you are.” He scanned the crowd, which was thinning out a little as the weather continued to lean toward the worse. “Look at me, Sam.”

“I am looking at you.”

“Not with your eyes.” He turned to me and grabbed my chin. His hands were cold and dry, and I didn’t like them on my skin one bit. “Now, close your eyes.”

I closed my eyes. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t think of another option.

“Now *look*.” He let go of my chin.

Douglas’ order didn’t make any sense at all. Not one bit. And yet, my mind automatically obeyed. Something in my head opened up and spilled out, which sounds gross, but it wasn’t. Whatever had just happened felt good, like my mind was a man stretching after a long plane ride

cramped in a seat where a kid was kicking him from behind. My sight poured out and spread. I could see, really *see*, like echo location but with a boost. I cast around with it. I could see a kid walk past me with a balloon, the balloon a bare outline, but the kid was a walking kaleidoscope of shifting colors. His father held his hand, and I could see him too, but his colors didn't shift as much as the child's did. The father's color bled slowly from one to the next and with less diversity. I wondered what that meant.

My eyes still closed, I shifted my head to the right. The flowers and bushes burned green tinged with orange, and the pandas shifted colors like the kid with the balloon. Wait. Not all the pandas.

"There's something wrong with one of the pandas," I said, eyes still closed. I watched, but the panda didn't shift colors at all like anything else. He was cast entirely in shadow except for one small spark of incandescent blue in the upper left of his chest. There's no way that could be a good thing. Next to the flowers, the bushes, the passing people, the panda looked...wrong. Like a tear, an empty hole into space.

"Yes," Douglas said, "I know."

My head turned toward Douglas, like in a horror movie. You shout at the screen 'Don't look there! Run!', but no one ever listens. Douglas didn't look like the panda, but I could tell one was linked to the other. Douglas glowed that same icy blue, but instead of all that empty dark space, his blue was broken up with shifting, swirling lines of blacks, grays, silvers. What the hell?

I felt like I might throw up if I kept looking, so I tore my vision away and put my head in my hands to reorient and slow things down—to regain myself. Big freaking mistake. My hands, my arms, my legs, were all coated in that blue, like a layer of radioactive dust. My gut tightened

and my jaw clenched. Why wasn't I like all the other freaky tie-dye people that kept walking past? And where the hell were my other colors? Once past that initial layer of blue, there was nothing. Not even the darkness. Just a hazy blur that blocked out the colors of the bench and the flowers around me. Like the panda, it felt wrong. Not the same kind of wrong, but wrong nonetheless.

I opened my eyes. Light, colors, sound, all came back in a blaring wave. My head hurt from the sudden onslaught, and I felt dizzy. I never wanted to close my eyes again.

"What the hell just happened?" I kept my eyes directed toward the ground while I tried to regain myself.

"You looked into the heart of things, into the pulse of the world."

I bit back a retort. Telling Douglas that he sounded like the deep voiced announcer from a day time soap opera wouldn't help anyone.

"Why don't I look like everyone else?" I asked.

"Because you're not like anyone else, Sam. Necromancers are linked to death. The underworld, the spirit world, which ever particular appellation you choose to give it, you are one of the ties that binds this world to that."

"But I don't look like you, either."

Douglas didn't answer. The silence stretched out, and I figured he wasn't going to answer that. Okay. Try again. Douglas got up and walked over to the enclosure. I followed until I leaned up against the railing. The area had cleared even more so that only a few stragglers were looking at the pandas.

There were three pandas in the enclosure. Two of them ambled about, stopping to gnaw on the occasional clump of bamboo. But the third sat on his own in the far corner, and I couldn't

help but notice that the other two wouldn't go near him. And that he wasn't eating bamboo. He held some in his paw, and he stared at it, but he didn't eat any. "What's wrong with the panda, Douglas?"

"He's dead."

A kid had wandered up behind Douglas and, after overhearing him, started to cry. The kid ran to his mother, grasping onto her slim waist. She glared at us and walked away. Douglas didn't seem to notice.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The big male, Ling Tsu, died his first night here. The zoo panicked. They had promoted the exhibit for weeks and Ling Tsu did not even belong to them. Someone gave them my number as a...temporary solution until they can sort things out."

"So, you're telling me the zoo commissioned you to make a zombie panda," I said.

"In a nutshell, yes."

"And I'm supposed to believe this because?"

"Because you've seen it, Sam."

He said my name like I was a disobedient child. I got the feeling that Douglas wasn't used to people doubting his word.

"Sorry, but the thing sounds a little far-fetched for me. And why the hell are you showing me this anyway? Here, kid, an undead panda. Enjoy? What the hell, Douglas?"

"You insolent—" Douglas cut himself off and took a deep breath. He turned those cold eyes on me, and I stepped back, just a fraction, but enough for him to see how much he scared me. Fine, let him see.

“I brought you here to make a deal, Sam. The panda is just an example of a larger idea. People die inconveniently all the time, too. Senators, heads of state, CEO’s, and sometimes other people need to keep them around just a little longer. The right people with the right money have my name. They could have yours, too.”

“I don’t follow.” Why would I want politicians to have my name? Politics gave me a rash.

“Power, Sam. I’m offering you power and wealth. I could teach you, if you want. Your power isn’t great, but I can show you how to make the most of it.”

Before the zoo, I thought Douglas was a run-of-the-mill psychotic. I was wrong. The guy must have been completely bat-shit nuts.

“You.” I stopped and licked my lips, trying to get a handle on my anger. Count to ten. Fuck it. “You killed my friend, and now you want me to work with you?” My words came out in a whisper.

“I had to get your attention,” he said.

“You want my attention, hire a sky-writer. Send a candy gram. Don’t decapitate people.”

Douglas shrugged, like all of my options were the same.

“Think of her as your first lesson,” he said.

“Her name is Brooke.”

Not even a shrug this time. “I will keep this simple for you, Sam. Join me and live. Defy me, and I will take you, your friends, and your family down one by one, and I will get the Council to sanction it. No recourse, just death.”

“What council?” I asked, exasperation leaking into my voice.

“You have a week. Use it wisely.” And he left. The jackass just walked off.

A week to figure everything out. That didn't seem like a lot of time. Especially if the week was anything like the last twenty four hours. My system couldn't keep taking shocks like that.

I leaned down and folded my arms on the bar, resting my chin on top of them. I watched the pandas and tried to see them as before, like I hadn't looked at them in my head, but it didn't work. My eyes kept being drawn to that third panda in the corner. Ling Tsu now had two chunks of bamboo, one in each hand. His eyes moved back and forth between them before he threw down the handfuls of bamboo in what I imagined was the panda equivalent of disgust. What must existence be like for him? He must know that something was wrong. When your whole life was eating bamboo and suddenly that was taken away from you, what did you have? Ling Tsu got to live again, but for what? He couldn't eat, and his fellow pandas wouldn't go near him. He was alone, and I couldn't help but think that Ling Tsu would prefer to go back to that great bamboo forest in the sky. I don't care how much money whoever had thrown at Douglas, this felt wrong. Brooke at least understood what had happened. I didn't know if that made her existence better or worse.

I threw away my cotton candy and headed for my car.

- Chapter 6 -

- The Future's so Bright, I Gotta Wear Shades -

I got back to my apartment in time to see Ms. Winalski fishing around for her keys.

“Looks like I’m not the only one who had a late night,” she said. She waggled her eyebrows at me suggestively.

“I just got back from the zoo.”

“You disappoint me, Sam.”

I did my best to look apologetic and gave her a shrug as I opened my door. I like Ms. W., I really do, but I didn’t feel like talking. All I wanted was to go into my quiet apartment, sit down, and try to sort everything out.

Ms. W. gave me a parting wave, and I slunk into my dim living room. Brook looked asleep. Did she still need to sleep? Frank had positioned her as best he could in the chair, wrapping a blanket around her neck for added balance. I tried not to imagine her stump of a neck or that clean, sharp cut that looked like it’d been made with a hot knife. Too late. Already the vision of it surfaced in my mind.

I didn’t bother to turn on any lights. Instead, I flopped down on my couch and closed my eyes. Blessed silence, blessed darkness.

“How was the zoo?”

I didn’t have time to measure, but I think I jumped about twelve feet. My eyes popped open. Brooke stared back at me from her perch on my easy chair. Either she was a light sleeper, or she hadn’t been napping at all.

“Sorry,” she said, “didn’t mean to startle you.”

I gave myself a mental shake. As uncomfortable as I felt, Brooke had to feel way worse. “No, my fault,” I said. “I guess I’m a little wound up.” We sat for a minute in an uncomfortable silence.

“He’s scary, isn’t he?” Brooke’s voice was quiet, serious. I had never heard her voice like that.

“Yeah. Yeah, he is.” I shifted a little in my seat. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s it like? You know…” I trailed off, waving vaguely at her head.

“Being a head? What do you think it’s like?” Her voice took on an edge.

I imagined it would be horrible, but I waited for Brooke to continue. I needed to hear it from her, and I thought she needed to vent.

“It’s weird, Sam, really freaking weird. I’m dead, but I’m not. I’ve been stuck in your apartment all day watching the news to see if they’ve discovered my body yet, and if I see one more commercial about Restless Leg Syndrome, I’m going to scream, and I can’t tell if it’s because the commercial is annoying or if it’s because I’m jealous of their legs, restless or otherwise.” She paused to blow a hair out of her face. “And I just blew a hair out of my face. Something totally normal, but now I have to wonder ‘how in the hell I did I do that?’ All of the simple things are suddenly complicated.” She frowned, but it quickly morphed into Brooke’s beatific smile. “On the upside, I no longer have to work.”

I looked away, staring at the blank TV. Even in her position, Brooke was trying to stay positive. I wanted to be positive for her too, but I felt sick inside. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Brooke—Brooke’s head—staring at me. I wanted to reassure her, but I didn’t think I could be very convincing. I wanted to crumple in on myself.

“Sam, this isn’t your fault.”

I laid back against the couch, not really seeing anything. I closed my eyes. “In what way is this not my fault?” I asked. “He killed you as a message to me. Without me, you would still be alive.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t kill me,” she said, eyes intent. “He did. You can’t take the blame for every psycho in Seattle.”

“But I can try.”

Brooke laughed, and I felt a little better.

I heard the rattle of keys and the lock tumble over. Ramon entered, keys in one hand, a pile of books in the other, and a paper bag in his mouth. The keys went into his pocket, and he tossed the bag at me. The bag felt hot, and I could hear the crackle of tinfoil inside. A familiar, and delicious, smell floated up it.

“For you,” he said. “My mom’s afraid you aren’t getting enough to eat again. Something about vegetarians, never getting enough to eat.”

Despite all the turmoil, I dug into the bag. Ramon’s mom is an awesome cook, and my stomach practically cheered at the sight of one of her meals. Rice, beans, oh dear god, she’d sent some of her homemade tortillas. My day was looking up.

Ramon tossed his books on the coffee table and flopped down on the couch. “I checked out a few books that I thought might help you.”

I nodded at him, focused on my food. A fork, I needed a fork. I got up and grabbed one from the kitchen then returned to my food.

Ramon sat forward. “I wasn’t sure if you’d want any, Brooke.”

“Thanks, Ramon, but I’m on a diet,” she said, her face completely serious.

“Yeah, you could stand to lose a few more ounces, chica.” He nodded towards the TV.

“They find you yet? I was in class, so I couldn’t hear anything.”

“No, not yet. But my parents aren’t due back until this afternoon.”

Brooke tried to be brave, but I could see her eyes well up. I put down my food and grabbed a paper towel. I wouldn’t just sit there and let her cry.

“Hey,” Ramon said, “don’t cry, okay? We’ll get him, won’t we, Sam?” Ramon looked at me, face grim, and even if I hadn’t planned to already, I knew we were going to do something about Douglas. I hoped Ramon had a plan, because I could certainly use one.

Brooke stopped crying and hiccupped a little. “The cops won’t be able to do anything about it, will they?”

They both looked at me. I guess I was the expert. I thought for a minute before answering. “No, I don’t think they will.”

“But they’re probably going to question us, huh?” Ramon asked.

“Yeah, we were the last to see Brooke, um, intact. But I don’t think we should tell them anything beyond what they can discover from the surveillance videos.”

“Why not?” Ramon asked. “We know the bastard who did this. Why shouldn’t we sick the cops on him?” Ramon sat hunched forward, his ears getting red.

“Sam’s right,” she said. “All you’d be doing is pissing off psycho-man. And then he’d kill one of you. I want him stopped, but not at the expense of you guys.”

I pushed back the errant strand of her hair so she wouldn’t have to blow at it anymore. “We’ll get him, Brooke. Promise.”

“I know you will,” she said.

I rocked back on my heels and sat on the floor. “I just wish I knew how to get some more information.”

“Yeah, I had an idea about that,” Ramon said. He pulled a slip of paper out of his back pocket and handed it to me. I opened the paper, which turned out to be a long list of fortune tellers, palm readers, occult shops, whatever Seattle had to offer in the area of the supernatural. Ramon nodded at the paper. “I figure, if one phenomenon, you know, Brooke, is real, then maybe some of this other stuff is, too. And maybe if we go and talk to some people, we can find someone who can actually help us.” He reached over and stole one of my tortillas. “I mean, there have to be others, right?”

“Ramon,” I said, “if it wouldn’t confirm Mrs. W’s suspicions, I would kiss you right now.”

“Lay off. My mug is only for the ladies.”

Frank knocked and walked in, already in his Plumpy’s uniform and carrying a large paper bag.

“Hey guys, Brooke,” he said, shutting the door and walking over. Frank set down the bag and opened it. “I was getting ready for work and remembered I had this!” He pulled a large wooden box out of the sack. It glinted with plastic jewels as Frank spun it around by the handle, letting us all revel in its square glory. I wish I knew why Frank seemed so excited about his fancy box.

“You remembered your Halloween costume?” I asked. We had all gone to a costume party, me as Pee Wee Herman, Frank as Jambi the genie, and Ramon as Cowboy Curtis. Frank had dressed all in black and wore the jeweled box on his head. He’d been very proud of it. Ramon had spent a lot of time swinging the zigzag-cut doors shut, claiming that was his wish.

“Yeah,” Frank said. He swung the doors open, revealing the swirled purple velvet inner lining. “See, I figured Brooke could sit in here. The hole I cut for my neck will help her stay upright, and then I added some more velvet to, um, well, hang down and cover the stump. No offense, Brooke. I figure this will be more comfortable. We can take her places, and no one will know.”

We all sat in silence, soaking it in.

“It’s a dumb idea, isn’t it?” Frank sagged and sat down. “I knew it.”

“Actually, Frank, it’s kind of genius,” I said. “We’d just have to make sure no one else looked into the box.”

Frank smiled, sitting up straighter. “Really? I figured we maybe make a stand for the box with something to help hold up books or remotes so she won’t be bored, but I’ll need Ramon’s help with that.” Frank stopped and looked over at Brooke. “I mean, if you want, Brooke.”

Brooke beamed at him, tears back in her eyes. “That would be fantastic.”

Frank blushed.

“So, how did your meeting go?” Ramon asked, changing the subject.

While Frank went about setting Brooke up in her new handy-dandy carrying case, I filled them all in about Douglas, tie-dyed kids, and a panda named Ling Tsu.

A few hours later, Ramon, Brooke and I were back at my apartment. After Frank had gone to work, we’d spent some time going through the people on Ramon’s list, but the whole thing had been a bust. I think most of the people we’d visited were fakes. A few denied that they knew what we were talking about but had shooed us out of their shops pretty quick. One palm reader

even pretended she didn't know English anymore. I'd left my number with a few of them but didn't expect calls anytime soon. So now we all sat, quiet and dejected, in my apartment. Except Brooke, since I'm not really sure what she does can be called "sitting." But whatever you call it, that's what she was doing in her box.

Brooke cleared her throat, which I don't even want to get into. "Hey, guys, it was a good idea. Really. It just didn't work, that's all." She smiled at both of us. "But we'll figure it out."

The phone rang, and Ramon answered when I made no movement to get it. Self-pity and guilt had shut me down, and I was too busy thinking about how nice it would be to crawl into my closet for a week and hide until Douglas came to kill me. I heard Ramon hang up.

"Telemarketer?" I asked. "Someone else threatening my life?"

"Nope. An appointment with Maya LaRouche. She got our number from somebody, thinks she might be able to help." He smiled and picked up Brooke's case. "So get your coat. We're going to Ballard."

Ballard is one of those little areas in Seattle that I don't go to unless I have a reason, and once I'm there I always wish I went more often. A lot of good restaurants, bars, and clubs that I don't visit simply because Ballard's a pain in the ass to get to, no matter where you're coming from. Unless you're downtown, and I rarely go downtown. And anywhere that's a pain to get to in Seattle, I avoid, because traffic sucks to begin with, and I don't want to deal with it. But that's where my appointment was, so I drove, and I dealt.

Ramon directed me to a small residential street and a little yellow two-story with a garden. We parked and walked up, looking around for any sign that this was the right house. I

checked to make sure my medicine bag was hidden under my shirt. I needed all the comfort I could get. Pouch in place, I caught up to Ramon, who was already at the door.

The door opened on the second knock, and any greeting I had mustered died unsaid. My mouth stalled at the sight of the girl holding the door, and my brain lumbered to get it running again. Gorgeous with a capital “G”. She looked like an Egyptian queen—all high cheekbones and golden brown skin. But the intelligence in the brown eyes that stared back at me told me she didn’t skate on her looks. She held her hand out. “Dessa LaRouche.”

She shook my hand firmly, confident enough not to put my hand in a vice grip, but no dead fish, either. “Sam LaCroix, right? What happened to your face?” Before I had a chance to explain away the bruises, she’d angled slightly towards Ramon. “And you...I know you.”

My head snapped over to Ramon, who had gone uncharacteristically silent.

“You were in my biology class,” Dessa said, “Ramon something.”

“Hernandez,” Ramon said.

I vaguely remember Ramon mentioning a Dessa, though he’d mostly referred to her as “girl of the goddess body.” If Dessa kept Ramon this quiet, I might need to hang around with her more often.

Dessa paused, frowned at Brooke’s box, then waved us in and closed the door.

I could see Ramon glancing around and trying to take in as much of her house as he could. All the walls I could see were done in varying earth tones, warm browns and greens interspersed with photos and paintings. The house looked nice, not in an overly stylized way, but in a lived-in fashion. Dessa lived in a home, not a house. There’s a difference.

We walked through a set of French doors to a small room that looked nothing like an office to me, except for the two heavily laden bookshelves. Lace curtains billowed from an open

window, and the walls were what my mom would call ‘a pale, but soothing, lavender.’ I didn’t see a desk or a computer, just a small glass coffee table, a teapot, and a handful of overstuffed chairs arranged around it. In one of the chairs sat a woman calmly drinking tea from an old china cup. Her smile hovered just over the rim of the cup, and she gestured for us to sit. Maya LaRouche looked like a leaner, slightly older version of her daughter, with one exception. She had eyes like a new copper penny. Those eyes shifted her from beautiful to striking and surreal.

She put down her tea and poured cups for Ramon and me without asking as we sat down. “I’ll need my daughter to remove your friend before we start.”

I looked at Ramon. “Why can’t he stay?”

She shushed me. “Not that friend.” She pointed at the box. “That one.” Maya smiled at the look of panic on my face. “It’s okay,” she said, “I know what she is. I’d welcome her, but she’ll screw with my reading.”

Dessa picked up the box.

Maya motioned at her to open the doors. “You understand, dear?”

“Yes, ma’m,” Brooke said.

Maya nodded kindly and Dessa took Brooke out of the room. Maya waited patiently for her daughter to return.

Once she came back into the office, Dessa didn’t sit down until her mother nodded at her. More out of respect, I think, than subservience.

“Dessa tells me that you may have a problem that I can help with,” Maya said. Her voice rolled with a hint of an accent that I couldn’t place.

I looked at Ramon. I didn’t know what he’d told Dessa over the phone, or how much I should tell them now. He shrugged at me. I guess he didn’t know how to handle this, either.

Maya followed our back and forth with those new-penny eyes, assessing us. “I see,” Maya said. “Why don’t I do what I do while you boys think it over a little?” She leaned in to put some more sugar into her tea. “But first, boy, you’re going to have to take off your juju bag. That thing is messing me up as bad as your friend was.”

I blinked at her. “Me?”

“Do you see another boy in this room with a medicine bag around his neck?”

“No, but how did you know?”

“I’m a Seer, boy, not some third-rate carnival psychic, and right now I can’t see anything with your juju blocking me.”

“You can’t?” I pulled my necklace off and set it on the table. “I’m sorry, I’ve had it forever. I didn’t realize that it actually did anything.”

“Makes you invisible to me is what it does, and probably other things.” She closed her eyes and sat back. I didn’t know what to do, so I took a sip of my tea, which turned out to be chamomile. Any action seemed like a good idea, really. It’s a little unnerving, being focused on like that.

A few minutes stretched out, filled with the tiny sounds people make when they’re trying to be quiet. I kept my eyes on Maya, examining her face for any hint of what she was thinking. Her brow creased a little, and then went flat.

“There you are,” she whispered, mostly to herself, I think. Her eyes opened, and she tilted her head towards me.

“Who bound you, boy?” she asked.

“What? I didn’t. I don’t. A guy told me I was good with dead things, but other than that—”

She waved a hand, dismissing my words. My mind seethed with unanswered question. I hadn't gotten used to one thing, and now Maya was telling me there was something else? I didn't know what she meant by 'bound,' but it didn't sound like a positive thing.

"I know you're a necromancer, Sam," she said, "that's not what's troubling me."

"You do? It's not? Wait." I took a deep breath and tried to relax. "Look, Mrs. LaRouche—"

"Maya."

"Maya, this week's been full of people who seem to know a lot more about what's going on than me, and it's getting old," I said. "So, if you could just pretend that I have no idea as to what you're talking about and start over, I would really appreciate it."

She patted my hand sympathetically and took a sip of her tea. She cradled the cup in her hands, resting them her lap.

"I know what you are, Sam, because I can see signs of it all around you, and because I've seen them before. What I find strange is that only the outline of your aura is visible. That's not normal. It's as if someone has bound you, and all I'm seeing is what's leaking out." I opened my mouth, but she stopped me. "It's exactly what it sounds like, dear. Someone has tied up your magic. A binding is usually done on a person to keep them from, or from causing, harm." She frowned at the teacup in her hands. "I've never seen it used to harness like this. It's as if part of you has been locked away."

Ramon cleared his throat, drawing Maya's attention. "Could that be why he didn't know until now?"

Maya nodded at him. "Yes, it very well could be. Especially the way he's been bound."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

“You’ve been bound twice, Sam, and from what I can see it looks like from two different kinds of practitioners.” She closed her eyes again and concentrated. “A witch, I think, and another necromancer of some kind.” She sighed. “I wish I could tell you more, but the bindings...” She shrugged.

“Sam,” Ramon said, “I think you should tell her.” His face seemed very serious. So unlike Ramon.

“All of it?” I asked. He nodded.

“All of what?” Dessa asked.

“I think we’re going to need more tea,” I said.

Ramon filled everyone’s cups as I told the two women about the last twenty-four hours. Filling them in seemed risky, but like Ramon, I trusted them, and we needed help from someone. Since they hadn’t tried to kill anyone I knew yet, they were at the top of my list. Halfway through the recount, Dessa got up and pulled a bottle of whisky out of a drawer. Dessa poured a little into all of our glasses, giving her mother a little extra after she saw Maya blanche at the mention of Douglas’ name. The two didn’t strike me as heavy drinkers, so I took a little pride in the fact that my story drove someone else to drink, too.

“You’re fucked,” Maya said when I stopped.

That wasn’t a good sign.

“Tell us something we don’t know,” Ramon said.

Dessa reached over and grabbed her mother’s hand, who said, “As bad as it may seem, Ramon, I don’t think either of you know exactly how bad your situation is.” Maya’s strong voice sounded tired. She stood up and leaned on her daughter. “Let me think this over, Sam, and I’ll

see what I can come up with. In the meantime, I'll make some calls. There is someone that I think can help you."

I thanked her and made sure Dessa had my number as they escorted us down the hall. At the doorway, Dessa handed Ramon Brooke's box before giving me back my medicine bag. I didn't want it around my neck until I knew what was going on, so I shoved the small pouch into my pocket. Yeah, it made me sort of invisible, but what if it did something else I didn't know about yet?

Maya touched my face with her hand. "I wish I could be of more immediate help."

"That's okay," I said.

"In the meantime, take care. And Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"I'd go talk to whoever made that pouch for you."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"Because whoever it is, they also did one of the bindings."

We said our goodbyes and more thank yous before walking down to the car. I studied the darkening sky as we walked to my Subaru, both of us now silent. Ramon didn't speak until after we had both buckled our seatbelts.

"We're going to see your mom now, aren't we?" he asked.

"Hell, yeah, we are," I told him, turning the key in the ignition. I steered the car toward the highway that would take us to my mother's house. Tia LaCroix, my mother and maker of protective pouches, had a lot of explaining to do.

-Chapter 7-

- She Loves Me Like A Rock -

My mother is not a big fan of the straight path. She says you don't learn anything by toeing the line. "Do you think," she says, "Little Red Riding Hood would have learned a damn thing if she hadn't wandered off to pick some flowers?" Very popular at PTA meetings, my mother. Good thing they give her the willies, or she would've had to make a lot of strained small talk.

You don't have to really speak to her to discover her preference for the curvy trail. You just have to walk from her gate to the front door. My mom's cottage sits back from her fence, nestled in the shade of several large pine trees. Sitting between the slatted wooden gate and her welcome mat lies a lot of space that most people would make into a pleasant green lawn. Not Tia LaCroix. She can find no use for lawns—she thinks they are bland ornaments. You can bet you won't find a single eggshell white wall in her house either. In lieu of a lawn, she planted a garden. But the word "garden" doesn't really give a person the whole picture. You can't fully grasp it until you open the gate and walk on the cobblestone path through what one mailman described as the "forests of LaCroix." The mailman would've probably disliked her because of the extra walk, but she always made him cookies on the holidays, or when she decided it was a holiday, and very few people can resist that kind of bribery.

Simple, her garden is not. But beautiful, well, that goes without saying. Mom has a green thumb and perhaps a few other people's as well.

There seems to be no design to the forests of LaCroix. At least, I've never been able to figure one out. When I tried to tell my sister Haley that, she looked at me like I'd lost all my brains. "Of course there's a design, stupid." I'd watched my mother wander around, seeming to

plant at random, stopping here and there to touch soil and adjust the vegetation. Maybe Haley can see things that I can't.

I can say one thing: I think Mom built the path for more reasons than to teach life lessons. Walking the path gives you time to calm down, marshal your thoughts, and center yourself.

Currently, I decided that 'pissed' would be my center. I marched up the path, ignoring the fleeting smells of basil, lilac, pine, rosemary, and a thousand others that met us in the night air, and held firmly onto that anger. Ramon carried Brooke's box and kept his mouth shut. For the most part anyway. "Just don't go in all yelling," he said.

"I'm not stupid." Only stupid people yell at my mother. Or Ramon's, for that matter. They were very different, but they were both the kind of woman you said "yes ma'am" to and meant it.

Ramon glanced at me. "I'm just saying, you know, watch it." We'd reached the porch, and Ramon stopped to adjust his clothes.

I reached up to knock, but the door swung open before I had the chance.

"Oh, it's you," Haley said, tilting her head a little to the side. "Who kicked your ass?" She reached out to touch the bruise on my cheek, but I batted her hand away.

Haley had gotten all the looks in the family and seemingly all the talent, too. She was one of those annoying people who seemed to excel at everything she tried without actually trying. Since she was my little sister, that made me proud. A little envious too, but mostly proud. Her looks just made me nervous. I trusted my sister to be smart, and she could definitely take care of herself, but I didn't trust fifteen-year-old guys. I'd been one. They weren't trustworthy creatures.

She looked down at the box Ramon was holding, her long black ponytail shifting with the movement. “Did you bring me a present?” She reached for it, but Ramon moved his hand out of her reach.

“Sorry to disappoint, and no,” I told her. My sister didn’t really mince words. It’d gotten Haley into a lot of scuffles growing up. Then she developed a mean sucker punch, and the fights stopped. “Feel like letting us in anyway?” I asked.

Haley gave me a lopsided grin and stepped back, managing a mocking half bow at the same time. I ignored her and walked in.

My mom was fixing a cup of tea when I entered the kitchen. I’ve always been amazed by how my mom and sister could look so alike and yet be so different. They were about the same height, and they shared the same freckles, but that’s where the similarity ended. My mom was calm, slender and blue-eyed with strawberry-blond hair that she usually pulled back in a braid. My sister was slender but curvy, with black hair, steely eyes, and no compunction about getting in your face. Both were confident and smart, and both fiercely loyal, but my mom will get you to do what she wants and make you think it was your idea. Not in a mean way, but very sneaky.

“Hey, honey, cup?” she asked, offering me an empty mug. My mother had never once been surprised to see me show up. I didn’t know how she did it. “What happened?” She reached for my cheek.

I shook my head. “A fight, but that’s not what I want to talk about. I’m not really here for a pleasant social call.”

She turned away from me and grabbed up an extra mug anyway. “Then you must be here on an angry social call. I’ll make us some hot chocolate then.” My mom believed in the universal

healing powers of a cup of hot chocolate, especially if the wound was an emotional one. She felt that, while herbs and medicines were great, hot chocolate was the best therapy.

I opened my mouth to protest, but my mom talked over me. “You want any, Ramon? I have real whip cream.”

“Yes, please,” Ramon said, coming in the doorway. He kissed her on the cheek and set Brooke’s box on the table.

I scowled at him, trying to remind him that we were angry, but Ramon ignored me.

“How’s your mother?” My mom poured hot chocolate into several mismatched mugs, adding a dollop of whip cream to both.

“She’s doing great,” he said. “She wanted me to thank you for that ointment you gave her. She said it’s working real well.”

My mom smiled and nodded.

“Mom, c’mon, we need to talk.”

She frowned at me. “What is so important that we can’t be pleasant?”

I crossed my arms and leaned against the pantry door with my shoulder, trying to avoid putting pressure on my back. All the riding in the car had irritated it. I nodded at Ramon. “Just open the box.”

Ramon reached for it, but when Haley entered, he hesitated. He glanced from her to me, questioning.

Part of me thought I should keep Haley out of it. She was still young, and if today was any sort of measurement, this whole thing was dangerous. Yet keeping secrets hadn’t really helped me so far, and something told me that the more Haley knew, the safer she might be. She’d probably figure it out anyway. “Go ahead,” I said. “No more family secrets.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see my mom look sharply at me, but I didn't look over. I kept my eye on the box. Ramon reached over and flicked open the clasp.

"Oh, thank god," Brooke said. "Do you know how stuffy it can get in there?"

I watched my mom and Haley very carefully. Neither seemed as shocked or as freaked out as I had anticipated.

Haley crouched a little and looked in the box. She smiled brightly. "Oh, hey Brooke. Sorry about, well, you know." She drew her finger swiftly across her throat.

"Thanks." She smiled at my sister. "How's school?"

"It's okay. You know, the usual. Hey, so what's it like?"

I kept an eye on my mom and watched as she paled a little. She saw me watching and looked over. "Haley, why don't you take Ramon and Brooke into the living room? Your brother and I need to talk."

Haley shrugged and grabbed Brooke's box. As she followed Ramon into the living room, she shot me a look that clearly said that I'd better fill her in later.

My mom sat down at the table and sipped her hot chocolate, leaving a mug full for me on the counter. I stayed standing. She closed her eyes. "Oh, Sam, how could you?" she whispered.

Out of all the things I thought she might say, that was not on the list. "What do you mean, how could I?" I said, voice rising. "You think I did this?"

She blinked at me. "You brought me your friend's head in a box, honey. What did you expect me to think?"

"I expect you to know that I'm not a killer."

"I didn't think that." She shifted a little in her seat. "Not really. Unless it was an accident?" She raised her eyes to mine.

“Yeah, I slipped and accidentally sliced off my friend’s head. Mom, I did not kill Brooke,” I said firmly.

“Okay,” she said, “but you still need to explain why you brought her back. Brooke’s head is evidence. Not to mention the trauma the poor girl has gone through.”

I gently tapped the back of my head against the pantry door and closed my eyes. “I didn’t bring her back. Somebody else did. I had nothing to do with Brooke.” I turned away so all I could see was the stove. Looking at my mom was making me angry, and I needed to get past that. I let go of some of my anger and softened my voice. I was still mad, but yelling wasn’t going to get me anywhere. “But you might want to explain why you immediately assumed I had something to do with Brooke’s mini-resurrection.” I tossed my protection bag onto the table. “And you can start by explaining what is in that bag and why you bound me.”

My mom’s shoulders slumped like I’d taken all the air out of her. Part of me delighted in the sight, happy that I’d gotten a little revenge. A larger part of me felt like crap. Nobody likes to see that look on their mom’s face and know they caused it. I sat down and joined her at the table, grabbing my hot chocolate on the way. “I’m sorry. Not for being mad—I think I have a right—but I could have been a little nicer about it.”

The smile she gave me was a little watery. “No, honey, don’t apologize. I’ve earned it.” She squeezed my hand. “I’ve earned it and more.” My mother took a shuddering breath. “Your father was late to your birth.”

Tia woke up when the nurse brought her baby in. The nurse, a robust woman with no-nonsense shoes and curly hair hovered, no doubt expecting Tia to ask for some guidance. After all, she was

all alone in the hospital room. Instead, Tia smiled and held out her arms for her son before giving the nurse a dismissive smile. Tia had assisted in several home births as a child and had done her share of babysitting for her mother's coven. Most witches preferred their children to be watched by other witches. It prevented complications. So while this was her first baby, she wasn't new to the baby game.

The nurse left, closing the door behind her. Samhain was sleeping, his squished, old man face thoughtful. She used one finger to stroke the small amount of blond hair he'd been born with. She pulled open his blanket a little at the top to reveal his small hands. Tia examined his tiny nails, the crook of his elbow, memorizing every feature. To her, babies were a miracle of small scale production, tiny and perfect.

Tia sighed and tucked the blanket back around him. No use putting it off any longer. She glanced at the door, making sure it was still shut. The curtains were open a touch, but she was high enough up in the hospital that no one would be looking. She grimaced. Tia hated hospitals, but Kevin had insisted. No child of his would be born using what he called "hippie methods." He'd reduced thousands of years of her family's traditions to a two-word phrase. She'd wanted to have Samhain at home with a midwife, just like her mother, but she couldn't tell Kevin that. She couldn't tell him about her family at all. Her stomach tightened as the sorrow filled her. It was a hurt that was old and growing. Tia didn't like to keep secrets.

She'd planned on telling her husband what she was after a while. But then she'd met his brother briefly and realized what kind of man she'd married. Kevin Hatfield was a bigot. A supernatural bigot.

Tia had already been four months pregnant when she met Nick. He was taller than his brother. Leaner, his hair a rich brown to Kevin's dirty blond. His eyes were brown and weighted,

like he'd already seen a lot for someone so young. They didn't look much alike, but Tia immediately knew that Nick was Kevin's brother even though Kevin had never mentioned him. He seemed surprised to see her.

"Looks like we're both surprises to each other," she said.

"Kevin and I don't talk, well, ever," he said with a small smile. "Nick Hatfield."

She stepped back and waved him into the house before shutting the door. "Can I get you anything?"

"No, ma'm," he said. "I was just stopping by to let Kevin know that I was moving. Just in case he decides he wants to talk to me again." He smiled another time as if to make levity of his own pain.

Tia instinctively reached out to touch his hand, to comfort him. The minute she did, his head snapped up, and he looked at her. His eyes lost their focus, just for a second, before he cursed under his breath. He closed his eyes.

"Does he know?" he asked.

Tia fidgeted a little. "Does he know what?"

He reopened his eyes, and they were kind, with no hint of reproach. "Does he know that you're a witch?"

She felt her own eyes widen. She shook her head. "I'm going to tell him. I—"

"Don't."

"Excuse me?"

He grabbed both her hands in his, squeezing them gently. "Listen to me carefully..."

"Tia," she offered.

“Tia.” He gave her hand another squeeze. “This is going to sound harsh, but you have two choices. If you want to stay with him, you’re going to have to hide what you are.”

Tia sank into the couch behind her. “I can’t.” She smoothed her skirt over her knees. “I don’t want to live that way.”

Nick sat down next to her. “I don’t blame you. The other option is to leave. Take that baby and go your separate ways.”

Tia felt the blood leave her face. Then panic fluttered in her chest, her fear of losing Kevin tangible.

Nick scanned her eyes. He leaned back into the couch, rubbing his chin with his hand. “I’m sorry. I come in here and scare you, and in your condition.”

Tia was confused. She hadn’t told him she was pregnant, but he’d known. She’d begun to show, but only a little. Most strangers didn’t know she was pregnant when they saw her. “How did you know?” she asked.

He looked away and blushed. “When I accidentally read your aura, I could tell.”

She folded her hands in her lap. “I hate to be so abrupt, but it seems to be that kind of day. May I ask?”

He nodded slightly but didn’t look at her. “I’m a necromancer.”

Tia became still.

Nick turned his head back toward her. “That scares you?” He made it a question.

It did scare her. Not a lot, but enough to send a small shiver up her spine. In her head, she knew necromancers were just a different kind of creature, much like herself. That it was a power given by the goddess. But the rest of her could only see its attachment to the darker side of things.

“No,” she said, “it doesn’t scare me.”

Nick laughed, surprising her. “So sweet of you to lie,” he said when he recovered.

She sighed. “Fine, a little.”

“Most people are.”

“Some of your kind have given us reason.”

His eyes narrowed. “There are bad apples in every bushel.”

She felt herself flush. “You’re right. I’m sorry.” Tia smoothed her skirt again even though it didn’t need it. A frightening thought came to her. “Nick.” She felt her mouth go dry. She started again. “Nick, is it...dominant? I mean, does Kevin?”

“You’re worried about the baby?”

She didn’t trust herself to speak. She nodded.

“Kevin never manifested,” he said. “It’s not like lycanthropy, where every kid gets it.”

She felt the tension in her loosen a little.

“But that doesn’t mean he’s not a carrier.”

She blinked. “So there’s a chance?”

“Yes.” His eyes flicked back and forth, searching her face. “Don’t take it like that. Who knows? Maybe witch trumps necromancer.”

He responded to her smile, but it faded quickly.

“If not, Tia, you might need to move.”

“Will Kevin take it that poorly?”

“No. Kevin is...angry. If he finds out, he will most likely cut the baby out of his life and move on, but he’s not dangerous. Douglas Montgomery is.”

“From the Council?”

“Yes. Look, Douglas is territorial, paranoid and strong. And his vote goes a long way.”

Nick’s gaze landed briefly on her stomach before it returned to her eyes. “If your baby manifests...” Nick sighed and rubbed the crease where his shoulder met his neck. “Let’s just say you don’t want Douglas paying attention to him.”

“Why not?”

“Best case scenario? You’re invited to leave, like me. Douglas doesn’t like to share space. I’m not enough of a talent to interest him right now. And I don’t want to hang out until I do.”

“Worse case scenario?”

“There are rumors as to how he got his power. Like I said, you don’t want Douglas Montgomery taking interest in your talent.”

She raised her eyebrows. “You’re suggesting that a member of the Council can steal talent?” She frowned. “Even if that is possible, the karmic debt alone...it’s unthinkable. The Council is supposed to protect us.”

“Yes, it is. But I suspect Douglas has all the other members in check.”

“The very idea is frightening.”

“I know. Humans complain about their corrupt legal system, but even the most crooked cop can’t take your soul.” He scratched his chin. “Look, I didn’t mean to scare you. Like I said, worse case scenario.”

They sat silently for a minute.

“I should go.” He stood up.

“Don’t you want to wait and see Kevin?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, but he won’t want to see me. I know that. Can’t help but keep trying.” He smiled, but it was weak, sad. She was pretty sure that smile was the one Nick used the most.

He pulled a notebook and pen out of his pocket. He scribbled on it and handed the piece of paper to her. “My number,” he said. “Just in case.”

She folded it up and stuck it into her pocket.

He turned to the door.

She reached out her hand and then pulled it back. “Would you like a blessing?” she asked.

He turned to her and blinked. Without a word he dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

She whispered the spell under her breath and used both hands to lift his chin. She kissed both of his eyelids before drawing a symbol of good fortune on his forehead.

He stood up and gave her a gentle hug. “Thank you.”

“It’s weak,” she said. “I haven’t been practicing.”

“It’s still more than I had before.”

He let go of her. She opened the door for him. “Nick, why don’t you challenge Douglas if he is so bad?”

Nick examined the sky as if he’d find his answers there. “Because I wouldn’t survive it.”

She shut the door behind him. Tia watched from the window as he walked to his car.

Kevin pulled into the driveway before Nick could leave. Kevin got out, his handsome face fligid with anger. She couldn’t make out what he was saying, because even in their own driveway, Kevin would be afraid of making a scene, afraid of the potential embarrassment. But his body

language was loud. He jabbed his finger at Nick. Jabbed, but didn't actually make contact. As she watched, she noticed that he never once touched his brother.

Tia watched as Nick backed off, hands up, and walked away. He glanced back at the house once Kevin had turned around. She nodded at him.

Nick was right. She could never tell Kevin.

Tia kissed her baby. Then she reached over to the table to get to her overnight bag. She felt for the small inner pocket. Once she found it, she pulled out the bag of dried herbs that she had prepared at home. Mumbling the words of the spell, she sprinkled them on her tongue. The taste was pleasant, a sweet, green flavor. She placed a few on Samhain's tongue. He grimaced. She smiled and took a steadying breath. Then she placed her lips against his forehead, knowing that the sensitive skin would get her the more subtle read, and she closed her eyes.

At first she saw nothing. Perhaps she'd done the spell wrong? But then she felt it, the whisper of arctic chill. The cold died for a second, replaced by the green smells of early spring, the taste of sunshine and growing things. But the cold came back a second later.

Samhain would take after his uncle.

Tia pulled back and opened her eyes. With a finger, she wiped the herbs out of her son's mouth. She curled up with him on the small bed and held him close in her arms.

When the nurse came in a little later, she brought a clipboard. She handed the clipboard to Tia, taking the baby at the same time.

"I'll bring him right back," she said. The nurse looked at the clipboard in Tia's hand. "You want to wait a little while to fill those out? See if your husband gets here?"

Tia shook her head. For all his talk about wanting a family, Kevin had been surprisingly detached from her pregnancy. It was like he was waiting to find out what the baby would be before he decided to love it, the way some dads hold a baseball mitt all through the delivery, only to throw it away when they discover their bouncing baby boy is really only the first two Bs. He didn't say any of this to her. As far as she could tell, he had no idea that she knew. The idea that Nick would easily tell her something that Kevin found so shameful wouldn't occur to him.

The nurse left with Samhain, and Tia started writing. An uncharacteristic flare of anger burned through her. If he couldn't get here in time, then he'd just have to deal with the consequences. She filled out the first and last blanks easily: Samhain Hatfield. Kevin wouldn't like the first name, but then he wasn't here to argue. But what about the middle name? Tia had brought a list of possibilities, feeling that she really couldn't choose the name for the baby until after she'd met him. Names were important, and nothing on the list fit.

Tia took a sip of her water and turned to gaze out the window, thinking. A crow sat on the window ledge and stared back at her. Crows were ambiguous creatures. Many saw them as ill omens, some as omens of change. Others saw them as messengers to the gods or guides to the other world. Everyone seemed to agree that they are sacred in some way, either to positive deities or negative ones. Tia wasn't sure about any of that but felt in her heart of hearts that the goddess left evil out of most creatures besides humans.

This particular crow, however, gave her a bit of the heebie-jeebies. It just kept staring. Tia focused back on her paper, but out of the corner of her eye she could see the small black blob of crow waiting patiently.

The nurse brought Samhain back in, cooing at him and making faces.

"He sure is a cute one."

Tia smiled at her in thanks and took the baby back from her. The nurse glanced at the clipboard.

“Need a few more minutes?” she asked.

“If you don’t mind.”

The nurse seemed to support Tia’s indecision.

“Take all the time you need,” she said. “Name’s an important thing. Nothing more disturbing than people just filling out these forms without hesitation. Child’s going to carry this for the rest of his life. Some thought should go into that.” She reached over and gave Samhain’s nose a little tug. “You take all the time you need.” She said goodbye and shut the door behind her.

Tia set the clipboard aside and held Samhain instead. She caught the blur of black out of the edge of her vision and looked back at the window. The crow had brought friends. Many, many, friends. The ledge was cluttered with them, and they were all staring at Samhain. Most people would have made excuses or ignored the birds. Tia was not one of those people. The birds were an omen; whether they were of good or ill nature, she couldn’t know. She would pray to the goddess that they were good, but in the mean time, she wouldn’t ignore them. Ignoring them might anger them, and Tia didn’t want that. Samhain was already starting out at a disadvantage, and he certainly didn’t need angry omens on top of that. She settled the baby into the crook of her left arm and filled in the form with her right. When she finished, she read it over. It felt right. She rang for the nurse and handed the clipboard to her. If the nurse found the name strange, she didn’t say anything. Either they’d gotten used to odd-named babies, or they’d developed the manners to hide their dislike.

After the nurse left, Tia turned the baby to the window. The crows continued to stare, unmoving. Tia stared back. "I'd like you to meet my new son, Samhain Corvus Hatfield." She said the words softly, but she knew the birds heard her because once she was done, they took flight. All except that first crow. He let loose a loud caw, then settled down to watch over the baby.

- Chapter 8 -

- I Put a Spell on You, Because You're Mine -

“What did Kevin do when he finally showed up?” I got up and poured what was left of the hot chocolate into her mug without bothering to ask if she wanted it. She seemed calmer, but I could tell that this was hard for her.

She wrapped her hand around the newly warmed cup and thanked me. “He hit the roof.” She smiled sadly at her cup.

“You don’t have to tell me this all now if you don’t want to.” I knew it would be better if she did. Right now, any clue as to what was going on would help. But I couldn’t force anymore out of her. Even though I was angry, I didn’t want to intentionally hurt my mother, not when I could help it.

“No, it’s best to get it all out now.”

Kevin was tapping at the glass when she walked up. He’d loosened his tie and taken his jacket off, but she could tell he’d just come from work. She watched for a moment as he grinned at Samhain through the window. Tia hadn’t seen a genuine smile from him in a while. He smiled hello to the neighbors and his boss, but those weren’t made of true joy. But on those rare occasions when he let a true smile come out, the effect was almost heart-breaking. His blue eyes lit up, his teeth flashed and, you couldn’t help but notice how handsome he was. But sometimes handsome doesn’t cut it.

“You’re a little late.”

Kevin jumped and turned towards her. “Sorry, honey but work—”

She held up a hand. “I don’t really want to hear it,” she said. “And we’re fine, by the way.”

“I know,” he said, “I asked the nurse. Didn’t want to wake you.”

Typical Kevin, he always gave her a reasonable excuse so she couldn’t get mad, even though she knew he was weaseling his way out of trouble. If she did, she became the shrew of a wife. “I wasn’t sleeping.”

He shrugged and gave her a kiss on the cheek. “Didn’t want to chance it.” He knew just how to play it. He brushed her hair back with one hand before resting them on her shoulders. “So everything went well? Nothing...abnormal?”

“Nope.” The answer came out a little too quickly, and she saw his mouth tighten around the corners.

“What is it?” he asked.

She racked her brain for something to feed him. He knew something was bothering her, but she couldn’t tell him the real reason, and she didn’t want to lie either. “I had a little problem with the name.”

One eyebrow went up, but she could see his shoulders relax. He’d been expecting worse.

“But we had a name all picked out,” he said.

“No, you had a name all picked out.”

“What’s wrong with Edward? It was my grandfather’s name.”

She had a mental list of all the things wrong with Edward. “He didn’t look like an Edward.”

“What did he look like?”

Tia pulled her copy of the paperwork out of her pocket.

“What the hell—” His voice rose in the middle, but he brought it back down to a harsh whisper when he saw a nurse look over— “is a Samhain?”

Which is why she’d chosen to tell him here. He wouldn’t want to make a scene, and by the time they were alone, he’d have gotten over it. She knew how to play it too.

“It’s pronounced *Sowin*.”

“What kind of hippie shit is this?”

She crossed her arms and glared at him. “It happens to be a traditional name in *my* family, thank you very much.” Tia felt this wasn’t a total lie. Samhain was a tradition in her family, just not as a name per se. “And if you’d been here on time, you could have cast a vote.”

He started to open his mouth but clenched his jaw instead. He shook his head and shouldered back into his jacket. “I’ve got to get back to work.” He held the piece of paper up in her face. “We’ll talk about this later.” He kissed her absently on the cheek and left without a second glance at Samhain.

Tia watched her baby from outside the glass for a few minutes before the nurse suggested she get some more rest. Then she shuffled off to her room.

It was late at night when she woke up again. She threw back the sheet and slid out of bed. The floor felt cold on her feet. She slid into some slippers and pulled her robe tighter around her.

The hallway was quiet except for a few rustling noises from the nurses’ station. Tia avoided the station and went straight to the nursery. She should have been surprised to see Nick there, but she wasn’t.

“How’d you get in here so late?” She smiled to soften the question. “Visiting hours are long over.”

He turned toward her, shoulders relaxing when he saw who it was. “You’d be surprised what talking can accomplish. One quick story about driving all the way from Portland to see my only nephew, and I’m right in.” He ran a hand through his short black hair. “I guess I’m just not very threatening.”

“I’m sure it helps that the story is true.”

He nodded. “That it does.” He looked her over quickly. “How you holding up?”

She walked up to the glass and looked in at little Samhain, sleeping, one fist shoved into his mouth.

“I’m okay,” she said.

“Now, why don’t I believe that?” He shoved his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “He takes after me, doesn’t he?”

Tia didn’t trust herself to speak. Her eyes filled, and she let the tears come. They answered for her. Nick pulled her into his arms, squeezing her against him. She should have protested. After all, she didn’t know him well, but she was tired of facing this alone, and at that moment she needed that small gesture. She listened to his strong heart beat and thought only of the rhythm of it, the warmth of another person, and closed her eyes. He smelled like trees, cloves and sweat. It wasn’t unpleasant.

Nick loosened his arms and stepped back but kept his hands on her shoulders. He leaned down to look her in the eye. “Hey, it’s not so bad.”

She couldn’t help it; she laughed. “Not so bad? You can’t even live in the city because of what you are, and your brother has disowned you. He will do the same to the baby if he knows.” Panic suddenly gripped her. “And what about the man you told me about? We have to do something.”

He gave her shoulders a squeeze. “Calm down.”

“No, I can’t. He’s in danger. What if I can’t protect him?” She eyed Nick’s face, searching for any solace. She found none.

“Tia, he’s going to be in danger his whole life. Even if he was normal, you’d feel this way, I’m sure. Your baby’s just going to have...more specific problems, that’s all.”

She pulled away from him. “How can you be so cavalier?”

He went back to looking through the window. “What do you want me to say? Your baby is doomed? That there’s nothing you can do?”

“Isn’t that what you’ve done to yourself?”

Nick shrugged. “So? Doesn’t mean I can’t have hope somewhere else.” He placed a hand against the glass and smiled at her son. “I want to believe that change is still possible.” He waved at Samhain with his index finger. “You know what the great thing about babies is? They are like a little bundle of hope. Like the future in a blanket.” He stopped waving and shoved his hands in his pocket. “Maybe your kid will turn things around.”

Tia made a decision. It coalesced in her chest and hardened there like an unpleasant pearl. Nick was right. Babies were hope, a blank slate for the future to write on. But he had to make it there first.

“We need to hide him,” she said softly.

“How do you mean?”

“You said you could recognize me by my aura?”

“Yeah...”

Tia could tell he didn’t like where this was going. She didn’t care. It was the only chance she had. “Well, if we bind him from his powers, his aura might be too weak to notice, right?”

“Tia that’s dangerous. Dangerous and hurtful. You might as well remove one of his limbs.”

“But will it work?”

He crossed his arms, frowning at her. “Theoretically. As long as he doesn’t come into physical contact with another necromancer they won’t notice him, but—”

She touched his elbow. “We can undo it later, I promise. When he’s old enough to protect himself.”

Nick’s eyes on her grew heavy. For a brief moment, he looked like Kevin. Except Kevin’s eyes wouldn’t have softened a fraction of a second later. Apparently, Nick couldn’t hold onto his anger the way his brother could. “I can’t help with this, Tia. I understand your reasoning, but I can’t in good conscience be part of a binding like this.”

“I understand,” she said. She tightened her robe around her. “Would you like to hold him before you go back?”

Nick straightened up. “Do you, I mean, is that okay?”

She nodded and gestured towards her room. He went in to wait for her while she fetched her baby.

Nick sat on the edge of the hospital bed awkwardly. “Are you sure I’m holding him right?” Nick had Samhain cradled in his arms. He’d taken off his jean jacket and pulled back the long sleeves of his shirt. Tia tried her best not to notice the curve of muscle in his arm, or the fact that Kevin hadn’t even held his own son before taking off.

“For the third time, you’re doing fine.” She took the chair by the bed, adjusting her robe to get comfortable.

Nick gave her a school boy grin. “He’s beautiful.”

“Thank you.”

He turned back toward the baby, hiding his face from her. “What did Kevin say?”

“That I gave him a hippie name. And no, he didn’t notice,” she said, answering the unanswered question.

Nick sighed. “He didn’t even hold him, did he?”

Tia picked at the tie of her robe but didn’t answer. She didn’t need to.

Nick tugged off the small blue knit hat on Samhain’s head, smoothing the thin baby hair back with his hand before cradling the baby’s head in his palm.

Then Nick’s lips parted slightly. “Oh, wow.”

“What?” She jumped up and examined the baby. Nothing seemed wrong. The baby stared myopically at his uncle, but that was normal.

Nick put the hat back on the baby’s head, making sure his ears were covered. “Sorry, little guy.”

“What? Is there something wrong?”

The baby grabbed his index finger, and the sad smile returned to Nick’s face. “No, nothing’s wrong. But I changed my mind. I’ll help you bind him.”

Tia sat back down, thinking. “Not that I’m ungrateful, but why the sudden change of heart?”

Nick wagged his finger, but Samhain held on. “I thought maybe if he was like me, he’d be okay.” He pinched the end of Samhain’s nose. “Why couldn’t you have been like me, little guy, huh?”

Tia bit her lip. “I don’t understand. I thought he was like you. Unless I did the test wrong?”

“No, you did it right. I was just hoping he’d be, you know, weak. Like me. Not worth the hassle.”

“What exactly do you mean?” She asked the question even though she feared she knew exactly what he meant.

“I was hoping his power would feel like a trickle, but instead it feels like a river. A big, icy river, and he’s just a baby.” He kissed the baby’s knuckles. “No, you’re right. He needs to be hidden, and now.”

She felt the fear grip her heart, making it trip in her ribcage. “What if I moved? Took the baby with me?”

Nick shook his head. “Wouldn’t do any good. Maybe you’d move into a district with a nicer Council, maybe not. Either way, Douglas Montgomery would hear. No, we bind him. We bind him now and hide him right under Douglas’ nose.” He looked sadly down at the baby. “I’m sorry, little guy. I truly am.”

I stared at the swirling wood grain of the table while my mom cleared the dishes.

“So Uncle Nick bound me, and that was it?”

She ran water for the dishes. I got up and grabbed the dishcloth so I could dry. “No, the first one, mine, didn’t work,” she said. “Not really. So Nick had to do another binding. Even that one wasn’t perfect.” She washed the inside of her mug and set it in the sink.

“What do you mean?”

“You kept...leaking,” she said.

“Leaking? I’m not a container, Mom.”

She added a dish to the mug. “In some ways, all humans are. We contain organs, blood, emotions, and our power. In your case, even with the extra barriers, a little kept slipping out.” She absently washed another dish and handed it to me. “Do you remember when I made you that pouch?”

“Vaguely. I’d been having nightmares.”

“No, honey, you were seeing spirits. Even with the bindings in place, the ghosts were finding you, seeking you out. You were terrified. Your uncle wasn’t around, so I did the only thing I could.”

I rinsed the mug and dried it, placing it up on its shelf.

“I made your medicine bag. Most medicine bags protect. Yours was more like a shield. As long as it was on, you wouldn’t show up on the spectral radar, so to speak.”

“Did I have to wear it all the time?” I didn’t remember having problems during the day, only at night, but that was a long time ago. I might have been blocking some of it out. “I know that day and night doesn’t seem to bother Brooke, but was it different with the ghosts?”

“At first, I had you wear the bag all the time. But a lot of times, they either seemed to leave you alone during the day or were frightened off by all the people you were around. Eventually, you seemed to start blocking them out on your own. You started to leave the bag off some nights.” She handed me a soapy cereal bowl. “I didn’t want to ask you how things were going and bring it all up again.”

I rinsed and dried for a moment, letting everything soak in. I could see why my mom had done what she’d done, that it all stemmed from good intentions and a need to protect me. That didn’t stop me from being a little angry. She had just postponed the inevitable. I still had to deal with Douglas, only now I had zero knowledge and even less training.

I put away the cereal bowl. “Why didn’t you tell me all this? Especially after Kevin left. Unless Dad made you hide, too?”

Glancing over, I could see her mouth crook up a little. “Haden never made me feel ashamed of anything. He found out what I was and didn’t care. In fact, he seemed delighted.” She handed me the last dish and pulled the plug out of the sink. The water gurgled out noisily. “We argued about telling you. He said you needed to know. But I was still so afraid. I think part of me hoped you would never know. I felt guilty about what I’d done, how weak I’d been.”

I handed her my towel so she could dry her hands. In the switch-off, my fingers met hers, and I felt my vision open up like it had in the park. The difference was that in the park I’d had to close my eyes and work at it. This felt like a wildly spinning rolodex in my head. It spun madly before clicking abruptly to a spot. I could see a lot on that page. I knew that my mom was a witch, and I could really understand what that meant. By the greens and browns, my guess was that her specialty was earth magic, if that was a specialty a witch could have. I could feel emotions spilling over me: relief that she was telling, worry about my reaction, love for me and Haley, sadness.

Most surprising was her fear. I blinked at her and pulled back my hand. “You’re afraid of me.”

“Sam—”

“No, don’t. I saw it. You’re afraid of what I am, what I can do.” The idea that my mother, the one person supposed to love me without reservation, could fear me sickened me. I wanted to step away, to look away, but I kept myself planted. “Please,” I said, “please don’t argue.”

She dried her hands and hung the towel on the stove. “You have power over the soul, son, and if that isn’t a power to be feared, I’m not sure what is.”

I shook my head. “But I was born with it. You always said nothing is born bad. How can the gift be given to me by nature and be inherently evil? Seeing the dead is freaky, but—”

“I didn’t say the dead. I said the soul.” I saw her eyes fill with pity as she looked at me. “From what I saw Nick do, and from what I’ve seen you do, my guess is that necromancers have more than a connection with the dead. You have some connection to the human spirit as well. Otherwise how could Nick read me when he met me? How could you read me just now?” She straightened my hair like she used to do when I was little. “I’m not afraid of you, Sam. But the power inside of you, I believe, is worthy of my fear.”

I felt her cold dread wash over me and understood. She feared the power would corrupt me, that it would get out of hand. Perhaps someone else would use me for evil. For the first time, I felt afraid of the thing inside me. But that emotion wouldn’t do me any good. Right now, Douglas was the thing to focus on. I could freak out about that other thing if I survived whatever Douglas had planned.

I pulled my mom in for a hug. Even though I knew I was taller than her, it surprised me that I could see the top of her head when I hugged her. I don’t think I’d ever really felt like a grownup around my mom. “I know you’re afraid for me,” I said, “and I understand, but I can’t believe that my gift is evil. When I look at Brooke, I don’t see darkness except in what Douglas did to make her dead in the first place. You have to have faith in me. You raised me to do the right thing.”

“I do, but I can’t help being afraid of it.”

“I know.”

“You’ll just have to be patient with me until I grow stronger,” she said.

I hugged her a little tighter. “You’ve been saying that since I was a kid.”

“And it’s always been true.” She pulled back from me. “Are you still angry with me?”

I’d never been much good at lying to my mother and now didn’t seem like a good time to try, even if the answer was painful. “Yeah, a little. I understand your reasoning, but the short of it is, even if I wasn’t ticked that you’d lied to me for so long, you and Uncle Nick put me in a lot of danger. Douglas still found me, and now I have no idea how to defend myself.”

“I didn’t mean it to go this way.”

“I know,” I said, “but you’re just going to have to be patient while I grow stronger too.”

“That,” she said, “is all I could ask for.”

I hugged my mom good bye, arms half full of snacks, some new jeans she’d picked up for me, and a container full of teas and things to help me sleep. I didn’t think I had much time to sleep, but my mom pointed out that I’d be next to useless if I didn’t rest. The body is much like a battery, she said, and if I didn’t recharge it, I might as well just hand myself over to Douglas now. I took the tea.

Haley walked us out to my station wagon. “So, you see the dead and stuff, huh? Pretty cool, big bro’.”

I unloaded all my stuff into the back of the car. “Yeah, I guess. Surprised?”

Haley made a scoffing noise. “That you’d get the super weird gift and be a freak even among freaks? Not really. I’ve always known you were a weirdo.”

“Thanks,” I said. I shut the back of the car and walked back up to the front.

“No problem.”

“I suppose you want me to stand out here on the street and tell you all about me and Mom’s conversation?”

“Psh, no,” she said. “I listened at the door. What do you take me for, an amateur?”

“That’s my girl.”

Ramon waved goodbye to Haley and got in the car, placing Brooke’s head gingerly into the seat next to him.

Haley leaned against the side of my Subaru and crossed her arms, the picture of teen angst. I was about to get a mini-lecture.

“Spill it,” I said.

“You have to forgive her.”

“I will. I just need a little time to digest.” I zipped up my sweatshirt. “I’ve sort of had a lot thrown at me lately.”

“So?” she said. “That doesn’t give you an excuse to forget everything else she’s done for us.” Haley got up in my face and stared me right in the eye. I’m always surprised by the amount of force and confidence there is in her eyes. I shouldn’t be. I think it’s been there since she was a baby.

“She screwed up,” Haley said, jabbing me in the chest. “Deal with it. If anyone should get a free pass, it’s Mom.”

I nodded. She wasn’t really telling me anything I didn’t know. “I just need a little time.”

Haley pulled herself up straight. “Don’t take too long. Things start to fester when you do that.”

“Yes, Mom.”

She punched me in the shoulder as she left. “If I was Mom, I would have tore you a new one a long time ago,” she said, walking back towards the gate.

“I love you, too.”

She waved without looking back and went inside.

- Chapter 9 -

- With a Rebel Yell: -

- More, More, More -

By the time we got back to my apartment, I was ready for bed. I was emotionally wiped out, confused, a little angry, and my back still felt like fresh hell. I probably should have shown it to my mom, but she would have freaked, and I'd had enough for the evening. That didn't change the fact that I needed a new dressing.

I pulled the first aid kit out of the drawer slowly, hissing as the muscles on my back burned from the twisting motion.

"Should have had your mom look at that," Ramon clucked at me sarcastically.

"I know. Help me, okay?"

Ramon didn't press the issue but tore off the old bandage with little in the way of care.

"You hate me, don't you?"

Ramon didn't answer. He prodded a few sore areas, ignoring my complaints.

"It doesn't look infected," he said. "Not yet. And it does seem to be healing." Ramon picked up the antiseptic and poured some onto a gauze pad. He wiped the long scratches carefully with the gauze before smoothing on the ointment. "If it starts to get nasty, I'm calling your mom."

"Duly noted," I said through clenched teeth. I'm not a super wuss, but my whole back felt like one solid bruise, and though the ointment soothed the scratches, it still hurt.

Ramon finished with the salve and taped on some new padding. "We're going to need to get some more supplies soon, too."

I grunted in reply and grabbed a mug out of my cabinet. I heated water in a pan on my stove. I popped some ibuprofen and stared at the water while it heated up. I know, watched pot,

blah-blah-blah, but staring at the water was something to do. So I stared. I'd learned a lot since yesterday, but I felt no closer to understanding what I needed to do. I'd run out of ideas. I couldn't join up with Douglas. That was suicide. Running wasn't much of an option. He'd either find me and kill me, kill someone else if he couldn't find me, or do some as yet undiscovered, horrible third option. And even though I now knew why I was bound, that didn't change the fact that I was bound.

When the water finally boiled, I made some of my mom's sleep-aid tea. I handed Ramon his mug so he didn't have to leave the couch, before I sat carefully in the chair, leaning into the armrest to try and stay off my back. Ramon had turned on the news for Brooke. Sandwiched between a story on the Seahawks and the weather was a thirty second blurb on Brooke.

"Hey, that's my house!" she chirped.

The newscaster didn't reveal her name or picture. Thankfully, they didn't have any shots of Brooke's family, and they hadn't managed to interview them, either. I hoped her parents were getting a little time to mourn.

After it was over, we flipped to the other stations to see what they had to say. Nobody else had information, either. It appeared as though the cops were managing to keep a tight lid on it. The newscasters must be foaming at the mouth. Seattle wasn't a mecca for violent crime, and once they saw a prom photo of Brooke, it would probably make a gigantic splash.

Ramon and I sat in awkward silence as the news cycled into a story on the salmon population. I think he wanted to comfort Brooke, too, but wasn't any more sure of what to say than I was.

"I'm sorry, Brooke," I said. It was a lame thing to say, but I needed to break the silence.

"I know," she said with a sniff. "Do you think we can change it now?"

Ramon changed it to one of the cartoon networks. I didn't know the name of the anime that was on, but we all grew tired of the blood and violence and had to change the channel. Ramon clicked onto a cooking show, and we left it.

Once my tea was done, I said good night to both of them and went to my room. In my drained state, I wouldn't be much of a help to Brooke, so I left her to Ramon. He had better people skills anyway. I pulled my medicine bag out of my pocket and put it back on. It seemed kind of futile now, but it made me feel better.

Even though I was tired, I couldn't fall asleep right away. My brain wouldn't turn off, and I kept wondering how Brooke's family was doing, when the cops were going to question us, and if anyone at the zoo had noticed that one of the pandas wasn't eating his bamboo. It also took a while to find a comfortable spot where my back wasn't bugging me. Later, I had a nightmare where I was trying to get to the ferry docks downtown while being chased by man-eating pandas. Some dreams don't need Freud to figure them out. My next step was going to involve the ferry boat and something I dreaded worse than a panda with a thirst for blood.

For the second day in a row, I was startled out of a deep sleep by knocking. I jerked, rolled, and fell out of bed, trying not to scream while I considered how long it was going to take my back to heal if I kept waking up this way.

Ramon came running into my room. "Sammy, get off the floor, now."

"Can you just tell them we don't need Jesus, girl scout cookies, or whatever the Mormons worship, and let me lie here in peace?"

"It's the cops."

An image of Brooke's head on my armchair flashed in my mind. "Don't just stand there, help me up," I said, holding a hand out to him. With Ramon's help I quickly pulled on a sweatshirt. "Ramon, Brooke's head—closet."

Ramon went running out of the room. He came back in, whispering explanations into Brooke's box as he hid her in my closet.

I thought that might be the first place they would look, but for all I know, the number one place for finding severed heads is under the kitchen sink. I was kind of new at this. Either way, we had no time for anything else.

The detective was polite, asking if now was an okay time to talk. He looked large in my doorway, but as I ushered him in, I was surprised to see that he was about average size.

"Can I get you something?" I asked as I waved him to the easy chair.

"If you have coffee made," he said, "I wouldn't say no."

Ramon went to fetch some while I sat across from the detective. He looked to be entering his forties in better shape than I ever hoped to be. His brown hair short, and his jaw line clean, he didn't have to rely on a mustache to intimidate like some cops did. He wasn't big, and he wasn't showy, but I wouldn't want to get in a fight with him. Instead, I sat on a couch facing him, hoping my hands weren't shaking, as Ramon handed me a cup of coffee. The detective took a cup as well and was he-man enough to drink it black. I can do without sugar, but I at least need cream, damn it.

The Detective took a sip and thanked Ramon.

"You boys know why I'm here?" Dunaway, apparently, was not a word waster. He set down his cup without taking his eyes off us.

Out of habit, my eyes flicked over towards my skateboard, the usual reason for me to talk to the cops. He followed my gaze, and the hard look on his face lessened.

“Nope,” he said. Then he sighed and leaned back into the recliner, facing both Ramon and me on the couch. “Either of you call in to work today? Stop by? Talk to a co-worker?”

Ramon shook his head.

“No,” I said. “We don’t really go by work unless we have to, and the only people we ever really see outside of work are Frank and Brooke. Not that we saw them this morning,” I added hastily.

“When’s the last time you saw Brooke?”

This morning, in my closet. I pretended to think on it, but I already knew the last time I could say I saw Brooke. “Tuesday night,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck with my hand. “We saw her to her car, then took off. Not really a place I like to hang around.”

He pulled his notebook out and started writing in it.

“Why,” Ramon asked, “is she in trouble?”

“You could say that,” Dunaway said, eyes still on his notebook. “What happened after she left?”

“We went home,” I said.

Dunaway flipped through a few of his pages. “Does it usually take you half an hour to get home? I talked with a...” He stopped and checked his notebook. “...Mrs. Winalski, who says you came home thirty or so minutes after the time I have you clocking out.” He let go of the paper and stared at us. I felt my hands go cold against the coffee mug. “She also said you looked a little roughed up.” His eyes went to my face.

Of course she did. Mrs. W would want to protect me, so she'd tell the nice policemen all about how beat up young Sam looked.

"You don't live that far," the detective prompted.

"We had a little problem after work," I said.

"A problem with Brooke?"

"No," I said, "with some cracked-out dude. He thought I was someone else, and when I tried to correct him, he got a little rough. Brooke was already gone."

Dunaway tapped his pen against his pad. "He do that to your face?"

The bruises on my face had yellowed a bit, and the scratches were healing. Luckily, they were more like abrasions than anything else, otherwise Dunaway might mistake them for defensive wounds. Brooke had strong nails.

"Yeah," I said.

"That all he do?"

I hesitated, but figured what the hell? For all I knew they'd picked up the fight on a mall surveillance camera or something. No, better to be honest now than come up later as hiding something. I showed Dunaway my back.

Dunaway didn't comment or ask if I was okay. I guess as a cop he'd seen worse. "You pick a fight with Freddy Kruger?"

I shook my head and pulled my shirt back down. "I don't know what he used."

Dunaway leaned forward in his chair, squinting. "I'd say a dog or something did that, but I don't think there's a breed big enough. You mind if I take some pictures before I leave?"

"Suit yourself."

"Can I ask why you didn't come to us?"

I shrugged, a movement I instantly regretted as the pain shot up my back. “With what?” I said. “Some crazy guy jumped us? We didn’t see much,” I lied, “and, no offense, but most of our exposure to cops involves problems with us and our skateboards.” I kept myself from shrugging again. “We just wanted to go home and lock the door, you know?”

To my surprise, it looked as if he did. “Have you seen this guy since then?”

“No.”

“Why,” Ramon asked, “this guy hurt Brooke or something?”

Dunaway suddenly let out a breath that made him look five years older. “Your friend Brooke was murdered sometime late Tuesday night.”

I closed my eyes and leaned into the couch, ignoring my back. Of course, Brooke’s death wasn’t a shock—her head was in my closet—but now that the news was finally out, it felt like a release of sorts. My muscles let the secret go, and in its place I found a bone aching sadness. Brooke was gone. Not completely, sure, but a talking head couldn’t fill the girl-sized hole in my life. I would never see her at work. I would never see her change and grow into the devastating girl we all knew she’d be. Ramon and I had both held a secret pride knowing that someday Brooke would be unleashed on the bar scene and that she’d take no prisoners. Our own little heart-breaker. And now that would never happen. Anger burned away the sadness.

“I’m sorry,” Dunaway said, and I could tell from his tone that he meant it.

I nodded with my eyes closed. Weren’t we all?

Dunaway took a few snapshots of my face and my back before he left. He also took what was left of Ramon’s skateboard. He told us he’d probably talk to us again. Ramon, Frank and I held

the dubious honor of being the last to see Brooke intact. Luckily, Mrs. W alibied us coming home. Though we could have left after she did, I think Dunaway suspected that the killer had been waiting at home for Brooke. I suspected he was right.

Ramon went to class, promising Brooke he'd be back with Frank to keep her company. I called in to work. Going into Plumpy's was the last thing I wanted to do right now. Brooke's death made a pretty good excuse. I didn't have time to waste at work anyway. Douglas' deadline ticked away in my brain, and I felt nowhere near a solution. But I did have a destination.

I had to drive onto the ferry because I didn't want to muck about with the bus system, if there was one, on Bainbridge Island. Bainbridge is a fancy place, chock full of natural beauty and the kinds of people who can afford natural beauty. The kind of people who don't really need bus systems. Besides, I wanted to get in and out and on the next ferry as soon as possible.

I hadn't talked to my biological father since the divorce, which was fine by me. He got a new wife, and I assumed new kids, and started over without so much as a backward wave in my direction. My mom doesn't bad mouth him; she thought I should form my own ideas about people, so she'd stuck to the old 'if you don't have anything nice to say, don't say anything at all' routine. The fact that she never had anything to say about him told me that Kevin Hatfield was not a nice man.

A lot of people would be angry at the abandonment, and maybe on some level I was, but the fact was, I didn't really remember him. I was young when they split up. All I really remembered was that Mom cried a lot. Then we got an apartment, just the two of us, which she hated because she hated all apartments. But in the apartment she cried less. Then she met Haden,

and she was happy. I was one of the few kids I knew growing up who didn't want their biological parents to get back together. As far as I was concerned, Haden was my father. End of story.

In the last twenty years or so, I hadn't once entertained the thought of going out to visit Kevin Hatfield. I hadn't needed to. Today, I needed to. I had to find my uncle Nick, and my biological father's house was the way to start. It was the only way I could think of to get my bindings removed.

The Seattle to Bainbridge ferry is a short one, only about thirty minutes. I spent the time above deck watching the ferry cut through the water. I've lived here my whole life, and I've never gotten sick of looking at the ocean or the Cascades. The day so far was clear and chilly as I leaned against the metal railings. It probably wouldn't stay clear for long. Washington weather is fickle, spring weather doubly so. By the time the captain gave the five-minute docking warning, I was frosty on the outside and leaden on the inside. I really, really did not want to get off the ferry.

Arriving in Bainbridge is the opposite of arriving in Seattle. When you got in your car and waited to unload off the ferry in Seattle, you saw the Needle, cars, and a mound of urban construction. Once you leave the ferry terminal in Bainbridge, however, it's all trees. Pine as far as the eye can see until you hit Poulsbo twenty minutes later. Well, pines, firework and coffee stands, and a casino. You drive through the Port Madison Indian Reservation on the way. I couldn't help but smile as I went past the casino. I didn't understand gambling on the whole since I'd never had money to throw away, but as I passed through all the beautiful countryside that I'm sure once belonged to the tribe, I sort of hoped they would rob the white man blind. Perhaps not politically correct, but the feeling was there all the same.

I found the Hatfield residence fairly easily. They were in the phone book. I couldn't help but whistle a little as I drove up the straight driveway. Kevin's house was huge. The stained wood seemed to grow right out of the forest around it. He had to be a pretty good architect. I wondered if he built the house himself.

I knocked before I could talk myself out of it. The woman that greeted me must have been his wife, though she was younger than I expected. Elaine Hatfield couldn't have been a day over thirty. Hell, I could date her. And if the thought of dating my theoretical stepmother hadn't made me want to vomit in the bushes, I'd do it, too. Elaine was hot in a soccer mom kind of way: curly blonde hair, body hugging sweater and smile so white it could only have come from the dentist. Mrs. W was right. I needed to get out more if I was finding Kevin's wife attractive.

"Can I help you?"

I had to clear my throat to get the reply out. "Is Mr. Hatfield home?"

"Not at the moment," she said. She left it sounding like he'd be back in five. Probably in case I was a psycho.

"Actually, you would probably be the one to talk to," I said, like the idea had just occurred to me. Elaine had been the one I wanted to see. I figured Uncle Nick would probably have introduced himself to her just like he had my mom.

She arched a shaped brow at me.

"I'm looking for Nick Hatfield," I said, "his brother."

Her blue eyes widened and she invited me in.

* * *

The inside of the house was like the outside: tasteful, natural, expensive. Elaine offered me coffee, but I politely declined. I hoped I wouldn't be there that long. I sat across from her in what she called the breakfast nook and what I would have called a dining room. This house could eat my apartment and still be hungry.

"When's the last time you saw him?" I asked.

"I've only seen him once," she said, "a little after Kevin and I were married." She smiled briefly, a quick flash and then gone. "My husband doesn't talk about his family much. Just that he had some falling out with his brother."

"That's it?"

"Kevin doesn't like to talk about the past," she said. "I probably wouldn't have even known he was married before me if I hadn't stumbled across the divorce paperwork."

"And that didn't bother you?"

"We all have our flaws," she said. She seemed to snap back into herself. She smiled again, this time pulling out all the watts. "Like you came for any of this. I swear, staying home with the kids is great, but sometimes you get so starved for adult conversation you'll talk telemarketers to death."

She got up and opened the recipe box. She pulled out a faded white envelope. It was still sealed.

"Every once in a while, Nick sends one. Kevin always sends them right back. I started to keep them a few years ago. Just in case the girls wanted to know their uncle one day." She turned the envelope around in her hands. "Is Nick your father?"

The question startled me, and it must have showed.

“You look like him here.” She ran a finger along her jaw. “And around the eyes.” She took my silence as a yes and kept going. “When I asked Kevin about his first marriage, he said they didn’t fit.” She traced the stamp with her thumb. “Irreconcilable differences,” she said, “A nice phrase with so many meanings.”

Things began to tick in my head. Little puzzle pieces slipping neatly into place. I’d had conversations like this before, where halfway through you realize that you’re both talking about different things. Elaine thought I was the irreconcilable difference. Kevin had led her to believe that Nick was my father. And since my mom never sought child support, that probably just strengthened the lie. Somewhere deep down, Kevin Hatfield had known that I was marked, so he pawned me off on his brother. I would just as happily tell everyone that Nick was my dad, but I didn’t like how the lie made my mom look. Mom takes oaths very seriously, and that’s all marriage really is, a promise. Elaine probably wouldn’t believe me, though. Why would she? I was a stranger.

I held my hand out for the envelope. The paper felt warm from her hands as she placed it in my palm. “Thank you,” I said.

“That’s the last letter I got, and it’s been quite some time. He might not even be there anymore, but it’s a start.”

I folded the envelope and tucked it into my back pocket.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I can’t believe he just abandoned you. It’s unforgivable. He seemed so nice when I met him.”

“I’m sure he had his reasons,” I said. Sometimes it’s easier to just let people think what they want to. I shook her hand and let her escort me to the door.

As we walked toward the foyer, the weight on my shoulders lifted and I relaxed, knowing that I'd soon be back on the ferry and that I wouldn't have to come back here again. I'd gotten what I needed from this place, and it no longer held any ties for me.

If only I'd left thirty seconds sooner.

A small girl, probably around five-years-old, padded down a set of stairs and into the entry way. Her black hair was braided, as sober as her expression.

"Quiet time isn't over yet," Elaine said.

"I know," the little girl said. "Sara wet her bed."

"Oh," Elaine said. She turned to me, holding up her index finger. "Excuse me." She ran up the stairs, leaving me with the girl.

The girl was small with dainty features like Elaine. Unlike her mother, the girl seemed to hold a natural strength and authority. The look on her face right now reminded me a lot of Haley, when Haley was in a rare and completely serious mood.

She stuck out her tiny hand. "I'm Lilly," she said.

"Sam." I took her hand to shake it and stopped. Lilly's palm felt cold in my hand, just like Douglas' had felt. Probably just like mine felt to her. Lilly's eyes popped like saucers.

"You're like me," she said.

I could've lied, told her I didn't know what she was talking about, but it seemed both distasteful and useless. Kevin Hatfield was creating his own little version of hell by having children and surrounding himself with the exact kind of people he despised. Part of me laughed at that. The rest of me worried for her.

"Yes," I said.

She frowned at me, an adult expression of concern that seemed at home on her face.

“Something’s wrong with your inside, did you know that?”

“Yeah.”

“You should get that fixed,” she said.

“I’m working on it.”

“That’s good,” she said. “Would you like to meet them?”

“Meet who?”

Lilly pulled me into another room, some sort of play area covered in pastels. To me, pastels are like a compromise between white and real color.

Yanking me over to a small easel, Lilly began to flip pages and tell me about her friends. She introduced me to them like they were important, like she didn’t get to talk about them much. I took a good look at Lilly’s friends. Something seemed off. When Haley was little, she’d draw our pets, our family, and her friends, which were usually kids we knew or stuffed animals. Lilly’s friends all looked like adults.

I tapped the paper on one in particular. “Lilly, who is this?”

“I don’t know his name,” she said. “I can’t understand him. He talks different.”

She flipped the page and showed me another picture. “He’s nice though. He talks to me with his hands. I think he used to live here, but his house was like this.” She pointed to a sketch on her paper. Lilly had drawn a pretty decent rendition of a longhouse.

I didn’t know what kind of curriculum kindergartners got, but I’m pretty sure most of them didn’t know what a longhouse was. Maybe they did, but I thought Lilly knew what it looked like because her friend was a long dead Native American, which would explain why she couldn’t understand him.

“Lilly, can your mom see your friends?”

“No,” she said, “and she doesn’t like to talk about them. It makes her uncomfortable. She calls them imaginary.” Lilly looked me in the eye, her expression pleading. “The Shadow People aren’t imaginary, are they?”

I could tell her they were. I could give Lilly a normal life. A normal life where she constantly questioned herself and thought she was crazy. A life where she not only had to hide from everyone around her but also from her own mind, her own senses.

“No, Lilly, they aren’t imaginary.”

She grinned. Something told me Lilly didn’t do that very often.

Elaine came back down with another little girl after that. She thanked me for staying and entertaining Lilly. I told her Lilly was a great kid, the expected response, but that didn’t make it not true.

Elaine introduced me to little Sara, only three. Her hair was brown, pulled up in pigtails, one of which was pressed into her mother’s chest as Sara rested her head there. Although shy, Sara’s expression was more open than Lilly’s. I wondered how long it would stay that way. I didn’t shake Sara’s hand. I didn’t need to. From the way Lilly hovered over her baby sister, I knew I’d get the same response, and I didn’t want to scare Sara by touching her. Instead, I said goodbye and thanked Elaine for her time. Before I left, though, I wrote down my number on a scrap of paper and handed it to her.

“Just in case,” I said, looking at Lilly as I handed the paper to Elaine.

Elaine was too polite to ask ‘in case of what?’ to my face, but I could tell she wondered. I didn’t really care. I hadn’t done it for Elaine; I’d done it for Lilly. Even if she never needed it, or if her mother threw that scrap of paper away, it would be enough for Lilly to know that I’d made

the effort. That I was there. That someone out there believed her, and would listen to her, even if he hadn't been dead for a hundred years. It was all I could do.

- Chapter 10 -

- Strangers in the Night -

“That,” Ramon said, “might be about the funniest thing I’ve ever heard.” He shoved a spoonful of Chunky Monkey ice cream into his mouth, chewing as he talked. He offered the next bite to Brooke, who was positioned on the edge of the kitchen table so Frank could brush out her hair.

“Which part of my screwed-up life amuses you?” I asked. “The bastard child of my uncle part, or the two new little sisters part?”

“Usually, I’d say both,” he said, “but I don’t like anything that besmirches Tia’s honor.”

“Big word,” I said.

“I know,” he said, digging his spoon around the bottom of the container.

Frank paused, mid-brush. “You don’t think your uncle is really your—”

“No,” we all said in unison.

Frank huffed and went back to brushing. “Okay, just asking. How am I supposed to know if I don’t ask?”

“It’s okay,” I said.

“I mean, your mom didn’t tell you about the whole necromancy thing, and that makes your uncle being your dad seem kind of small. You know, in comparison.” He stopped brushing and contemplated Brooke’s long blonde hair. “What do you want me to do with this, Brooke?”

“Can you braid it?” She asked.

“I could try,” Frank said, “but I can’t make any guarantees. So, it might be messy.”

“Here,” Ramon said, handing him the ice cream and taking the brush. “French sound good?”

“You can French braid?” Brooke blinked in surprise.

“*Chica*, I got three little sisters that I used to help get ready for school. Three *picky* little sisters. A French braid is nothing.” He stuck the end of the brush in his mouth and started to braid. “Hell,” he said around the handle, “any real man can French braid a girl’s hair.”

Brooke closed her eyes in contentment. I hadn’t really thought of it, but this was probably the first prolonged contact Brooke had gotten since she’d died. People, even reanimated ones, need to be touched.

Frank finished the last bite of the ice cream and threw the carton away.

“You owe me a thing of Chunky Monkey,” Ramon said.

“But I only had, like, two bites.”

“You know the rules.”

“C’mon.” Frank looked at me in appeal.

“Them’s the breaks, Frank.”

“You guys are assholes,” Frank said, digging into his pockets and pulling out a wad of dollar bills. He threw them onto the table. “There’s your blood money. Happy?”

“Very,” Ramon said.

Brooke sniggered. “It’s blood monkey money.”

Even Frank laughed at that.

My phone rang, so I quietly excused myself. I didn’t want to interrupt their good time. It was nice to hear Brooke laugh.

I didn’t answer until I’d shut my bedroom door.

“Hi,” the woman said, “I’m looking for Sam LaCroix?”

“May I ask who’s speaking?”

“No, but I was given his name by a seer in Seattle.”

I guess I wasn't the only one playing the cautious game. "This is Sam," I said.

I could hear a little laughter in her voice when she said, "And this is June Walker. My sister, Maya, tells me you've been having a bit of trouble up there."

"You could say that."

"Want to tell me what's going on, exactly?" Her voice was soothing, but I felt like I couldn't give into it just yet.

"What do you know about Douglas?" I asked. I needed to know what she knew, but I also wanted to know where she stood.

"I assume you mean Douglas Montgomery." She paused. "I know enough to move away from my sister and my only niece. That me leaving them on their own is better than me being up there."

I mulled this over for a second. I didn't know this person, and I didn't know her sister much, either, but Maya LaRouche had been the only person so far who'd really helped me. I needed someone in my corner.

"Are you..." I pulled at a loose thread on my blanket. "I mean, do you know anything about necromancy?"

June laughed. Not really the reaction I'd been expecting. She had a nice laugh, big and full, like she wasn't afraid of anything.

"Honey, down here they'd call me a voodoo queen. I can raise the dead so fast, your head might spin clean off."

I relaxed. She hadn't called me crazy and hung up, and for some reason I believed her when she said she was like me.

"You better start at the beginning," she said, "or we'll be here all night."

I held the phone in one hand, lying flat on my stomach to take some of the pressure off my injured back. Then I told her everything. The whole thing came in a rush like a torrent, leaving me shaking at the end. June had to ask me to slow down a few times, and she asked me a few questions along the way, but mostly she listened and let me get it all out.

The line went quiet when I was done. I heard a click and an intake of breath, the sound of a cigarette catching flame. “Sounds like you have a bit of a knack for trouble, Sam.”

“Not usually,” I said.

No booming laugh this time, just a dry chuckle. “I think in this, like in many things, you’re just a late bloomer.”

“So, can you help me?”

“I think you know that’s not an easy answer,” she said. I heard resignation in her voice. She’d given up fighting when she’d moved, and she knew it. That didn’t mean she liked her choice.

“I’m hobbled here,” I said. “Basically, I am the proverbial lamb to the slaughter. What I need is a little help.”

“What you need is a teacher, and I can’t see a way to do that. I can’t come up there. You can’t come down here, and no one there will risk helping you.”

“Please,” I begged, “I just need a little help. Anything.”

The line was silent for a long time.

“I’ll see what I can do, Sam. In the mean time, I’ll send what I can your way.”

She hung up without a goodbye. I placed the phone on my nightstand then let my body go limp, enjoying the comfort of my bed. What did she mean, she’d send what she could my way? A week ago, I’d have assumed she meant good wishes, but now I wasn’t so sure.

* * *

Ramon and Brooke were watching the news when I came out. Frank sat at my kitchen table hunched over his laptop. I peeked over his shoulder. He was Googling ‘necromancy.’

I clapped him on the shoulder. “Thanks, Frank.”

He flushed. “I’m not really doing anything,” he said.

“You’re trying.” I grabbed my hoodie and slipped into it, zipping it up and stuffing my black knit watch cap in my back pocket. Best to be prepared for any weather.

“Where you going?” Ramon asked.

“I need to get out for a bit,” I said. “Clear my head.”

Frank looked up nervously from his laptop. “Are you sure you should go out by yourself?”

Ramon nodded. “Want company?”

“No,” I said, “you guys hold down the fort. If they really want me, they can just as easily kill me in this apartment as they can out there.” I pointed at the screen, which was showing more news reports on Brooke’s death. “Let me know what they’ve found, okay?”

“You got it, Sammy.”

I grabbed my skateboard and left.

I bumped into Mrs. W on my way out.

“Face is healing nicely, my boy.” She opened her purse and pawed around for her keys.

“What’s on the schedule for tonight? A little skullduggery, I hope.”

I pushed the elevator button and laughed.

“I don’t even know what that means, Mrs. W.”

She tsked as she pulled out her keys. “What are they teaching the youth these days?”

“Not enough, I guess.” The door dinged and opened. “Catch you later.”

“Do me a favor, will you?”

I put my board in front of the door, keeping the elevator open. “Sure.”

“Meet a nice girl and do some not-so nice things, okay?”

I let the door go. “Sure thing, Mrs. W.”

“Make me proud, son. That’s all I ask.”

The streets were bone dry, which made me happy. Too much water and all you have is a warped board and wet feet. I can’t skate like Ramon can. I can’t do any fancy tricks, but getting from point A to point B was enough tonight. I walked out of the parking lot, let go of my board, and chose the hill to my left, more for its smoothness than the direction. I didn’t have anywhere to go.

Even though it was spring, the air still held a little of winter bite. I felt the cold nip at my face, and I focused on it. I felt the cold. I heard the sound of cars and people. I watched as neon and lights slid by. I kept my focus on the city at night and let everything else go. I didn’t want to think about anything. I just wanted to feel.

The last thing I felt was someone grabbing me as I slowed down at a crosswalk.

Then darkness.

- Chapter 11 -

- Don't Rock the Boat, Baby -

The van door hissed as it slid open. Douglas watched, keeping his face a bland mask as Michael tossed Sam unceremoniously into the back seat. Michael jumped in and shut the door behind him, plunging the interior of the van into darkness. Douglas shifted the van into gear and pulled away from the curb.

"Please remember to buckle him in. It wouldn't do to kidnap him only to let him die in a random mishap," he said. Douglas heard a grunt from Michael and a thump as he pushed the boy's inert body to the floor. "Or," Douglas said, his voice flat, "I guess you could just do that."

"I've done this before, you know."

Douglas glanced into the rearview mirror, catching Michael's unpleasant grin in the flash of the passing lights.

"You really don't like him, do you?"

Michael frowned. "Do you?"

Douglas changed lanes, keeping a wide berth between the van and the car in front of them. "My personal feelings toward people are not a component that I consider." His sight returned to the review mirror again. "It's one of the many reasons I'm able to stomach you as an employee."

Douglas cringed inwardly at the bark of laughter from the back seat. He supposed it was a good thing that Michael assumed he'd been making a joke. Douglas didn't doubt his superiority over Michael even for a second; still, a fight with Michael would be inconvenient. Douglas found werewolves to be a mercurial bunch on the whole, as close to their beastly sides as they were. Still, in this day and age, they either developed an iron control early or learned to

enjoy rural life. Having Michael in Seattle was a bit like having a cat and an aquarium. One day, the cat would either get bored or hungry, and there would be one giant splash and a lot of dead fish.

Still, Michael had come to him, and he was a tool Douglas could use. Douglas wouldn't have gotten this far if he'd been afraid of risk or potentially dangerous allies. In fact, one could say he'd become quite adept at using both.

Back at the house, Douglas peeked under Sam's eyelids, checking the pupils for reaction to light. Sam would be in pain, but Douglas didn't see any permanent damage. He supervised as Michael put Sam into the cage with the girl, making sure to keep an eye on Bridin. She had a knack for pushing all of Michael's buttons, and Douglas had an interest in keeping everyone intact. For now, at least.

Michael tossed Sam at Bridin's feet. The boy only warranted a cursory glance from her.

"What's this?" she asked.

"Lunch," Michael said.

Bridin made a face that was a maturity half-step from sticking out its tongue. Michael gave her the finger.

"Children, please," Douglas chided.

Bridin looked away. "I'm just saying, you guys keep up at this rate, I'm going to run out of sitting room." She gazed sideways at Sam. "Who is he, anyway?"

"Nobody," Michael said, "that's who."

Douglas thought she'd have to be dead to not catch the tone that plainly said Michael didn't care for Sam. He watched as she eased over to Sam and smoothed his sandy hair.

"I don't know," she said as she pushed back a tuft of hair, revealing a little of Sam's face, "he's kind of cute."

Michael made a sound of revulsion. "You wouldn't." He looked Bridin up and down, his lip curling in disgust. "Then again, maybe you would. What's a half-breed care, huh? Blood's already watered down, why not thin it again?"

Bridin continued to run her hand through Sam's hair in speculation. "You know, Michael, it's that kind of thinking that's made your family so inbred."

Douglas reached out and put a hand on Michael's chest, stopping him before he moved forward. Michael didn't advance, but he continued to glare at Bridin. "My family," he spat, "is not inbred."

Bridin ran a finger down Sam's jawline. "Oh, really?" she said. "Because before my father took over, there weren't that many wolves in your pack. And you didn't keep the best of records. You'd probably rut your own sister if she were in heat."

Douglas grabbed onto the back of Michael's neck, exerting his will, letting it flow over Michael's anger. The inner wolf bucked once, then relaxed.

"That is quite enough," Douglas said. Bridin had a good mask, didn't let much emotion get through that she didn't let through. Still, Douglas could tell that she'd noticed his control over Michael. A control he shouldn't have. He left before she could ask any more questions, but he could feel her eyes on him as he walked up the stairs. He watched her out of the corner of his eye as he pushed Michael through the door. Douglas could almost hear the whirling of her thoughts as she dealt with all the information she'd just gathered. He'd underestimated her and

would have to be a little more careful in her presence. Finally, a bit of a challenge. The door clicked as he secured the locks.

Douglas opened the window in his study so he could feel the breeze coming off Lake Washington. He heard the gentle *pat pat* of James' feet before he saw him. Douglas was wise enough to know that he only heard the sound because James wanted him to.

"Perhaps," James said, "it is time for a trip to one of your vacation homes. The coast of Oregon, I think."

Douglas didn't turn but continued to take in the night air. "What makes you suggest Oregon?"

"You seem unsettled."

"I feel unsettled."

James leaped up onto the window sill, his tail flicking back and forth in a lazy fashion. "But why? Little hiccups have happened, but nothing you can't handle. Everything seems to be flowing your direction."

Douglas made a noncommittal sound in his throat. "Does it?"

James' tail flicked again, this time more sharply. "They have found the body of the girl but they have nothing in the way of evidence. You have the boy. You have the *tanaiste*." James turned his head from the view of the water to Douglas, his eyes like liquid mercury in the moonlight. "Your power base grows every minute."

"You think I am being foolish."

"It is not my place."

“When has that ever made you hold your tongue?”

James arched his back and resettled. The twitching of his tail would have told Douglas how agitated he was if his tone hadn’t already told him the same thing.

“You are worried?” Douglas said.

“Yes.”

“You never worry,” Douglas said, amused despite himself.

James kept his face pointed toward the lake. “You’re a powerful man, Douglas. But I am afraid.”

“That I will lose?” Douglas smiled. “Do not fret my friend; I have made arrangements for your upkeep.”

“I do not think you will lose.”

“That I will win, then?”

“I don’t think you’ve thought the repercussions through. Right now, the other Councils are happy to let you puppet-master your people. But if you topple it completely, if you establish rule, they cannot let that go. It will be war, Douglas.”

“And I will win it.” Douglas breathed in the scent of lake and pine all around him. A boat cut through the water, causing a wake that broke upon the shore.

“If you are so sure,” James asked, “then why do you feel unsettled?”

Douglas tapped the window pane with his thumb. “Maybe I’m beginning to feel my age. Or perhaps I’m in need of a change in scenery.”

“Perhaps,” James said, jumping down from the window sill. His tail swished as he sauntered toward the door. “I’m going to make a sweep of the perimeter,” he said from the hallway. “There’s a strange smell on the breeze.”

Douglas listened to him leave. The water swished around the rocks until the wake died down. He settled into an old overstuffed chair in the corner of his study. Hands on the warm feel of the fabric, head back, eyes closed, Douglas listened to the night around him. All he needed was a little rest.

- Chapter 12 -

- Kickstart My Heart -

I didn't want to open my eyes. My week so far had consisted of some pretty nasty wake-ups. Between the cold floor against my cheek and the pain in my head, I didn't think this one was going to go any better.

I opened my eyes only to shut them immediately when it felt like the light was slicing into the back of my skull. This wake-up sucked already.

I hate it when I'm right.

"Try putting your shirt over your head, and then open your eyes," a female voice said. It was a nice voice, young and light. I held onto the slim chance that I might have been captured by friendly but possessive nymphets. I needed something to hope for, and that scenario seemed as likely as anything else pleasant.

I moved to pull my T-shirt over my head.

"Slowly," she warned.

Slowing down helped, and soon the shirt blocked some of the light. I enjoyed the relative darkness, trying to ignore that the inside of my mouth felt thick and cottony. If it's not one thing, it's another.

"Now open," she said. "Once your eyes have adjusted to that, you can start to remove the shirt."

"Thanks," I said.

I lay there quietly for a moment and tried not to think how stupid I probably looked with my Batman T-shirt cocooning my head. I needed to figure out where I was and what was going on.

“You smell odd.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I’ll change deodorants.”

“No,” she said, “the deodorant is fine. It’s something else.” I could hear the soft whoosh of breath as she breathed in and out. “Spices,” she said. I could hear the amusement in her voice.

“Did they season you for me, or do you work in a kitchen?”

“Both are fairly possible, but it’s probably the ointment on my back. Where am I?”

“A basement.”

“I don’t suppose it’s the kind of basement with popsicles and an old Nintendo or something?”

“No such luck,” she said. “How you feeling?”

“Horrible. But in comparison to a few minutes ago, better.”

“Try lifting up the shirt.”

I tugged the shirt down. Too fast. The light stabbed, and I rolled to the side out of instinct, which was a mistake. I passed out before I could throw up. Lucky me.

This time, when I woke up, my head was on something soft. Which is good because someone was smacking me.

“Sorry,” she said, “but I think you have a concussion. You need to stay conscious.”

I grunted and looked towards the voice. I saw a single dusky thigh, the color some fair-skinned people turn when they get sun. The lucky few who don’t burn. I came from fair stock, so I was well versed in sunburns. I tilted my head and looked up. Slim shoulders and a pointed chin.

And naked. No way. I had to still be unconscious.

“This is my favorite dream.”

She laughed. The girl had one of those laughs that made you feel lighter inside, like you have to join in. Infectious.

I felt my face burn. “I’m not asleep, am I?”

She shook her head, still laughing. Her auburn hair swayed with the movement. She’d cut it short in the back, letting it hang down to her chin in the front. Strips of green and purple intertwined with the red, a curtain she hid behind when she stopped shaking her head. But I didn’t get the idea that she was shy or nervous by hiding. It made me think of a lion’s eyes or some other predator, peeking out through the bushes. Looking at her hazel eyes made me feel like a bunny.

I needed to say something cool. If I could be smooth now, then the stupid thing I’d just said might be forgotten. Nothing came to mind. Typical.

“How do you feel?” Her mouth still twitched from laughing.

“Like an idiot.”

“I meant physically.”

“My head hurts, and I think the cuts on my back tore back open.” I pushed my tongue out of my mouth a few times. “And my mouth tastes like a grease trap.”

Her brow knitted into a tiny V. The effect was devastating. “Grease trap?”

“It’s the thing that catches the fat, grease and whatever’s left over on a grill. I always thought it smelled like someone threw up in a bag full of pennies.”

She nodded slightly, thankfully not grossed out at all by what I’d just said. “I see.” She leaned back, palms on the floor, ankles crossed, completely unconcerned with her nakedness.

She caught me staring, and I quickly looked away. And smacked my forehead right into a metal bar.

She laughed again. "I'm glad you're here. You're very entertaining."

"Thanks," I said rubbing my forehead, "I aim to please."

"Sorry," she said. "It's not nice to laugh at a stranger's pain."

"So, if they're not strangers, they're fair game in your eyes?"

"Of course," she said. She leaned forward and dusted off her hands. "Sit up. I'll look at your back."

I sat up and ignored my head. I held my back straight and waited. Her fingers were soft as they traced the long lines of scab from shoulder down. She poked when she needed to without apologizing. When she paused, I thought she was done examining, but then she slid her fingers down the marks again, each tip caressing a separate wound at the same time.

"Who did this?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"I'm sorry." Her voice held true regret. I'd just met her, but she was taking responsibility for my injury. Strange.

"You didn't do it." I stared at my socks, wondering why they'd taken my shoes. Were shoes somehow dangerous? "Or is this something you do, take responsibility for things you didn't do?" I grimaced. "Sorry, that came out rude."

"Still." She moved in front of me, pulling my chin up with her hand. I noticed how tiny her hands were, and how her lips, when closed, made a firm little bow. "What's your name?" she asked.

“Sam,” I whispered. Between my dry-mouth and her soft hands, that was the best I could do.

“Brid,” she said, and she smiled. It sounded like “Bridge” when she said it.

“Is that short for Bridget?” My brain clacked like a broken hamster wheel, and my breaths were too short and shallow.

“Bridin,” she said, “*taniste* of the Blackthorn pack.”

“I don’t know what that is.” Then I let my eyes relax so I could take in the real Bridin. She glowed like copper wire wrapped around an emerald core. It was like her soul was on *fire*.

I swallowed, hard.

“It means that I am next in line to rule my pack,” she said, very matter-of-fact.

“Pack of what?” Few good things come in packs, except inanimate objects, like a pack of cards or a six-pack. Brid was far from inanimate.

“Wolves and hounds, mostly,” she said with a shrug, like it was no big deal. She could just as easily have been talking about the weather.

I stared, and I breathed, and it was all too much. “Look, Bridin, you’re probably the prettiest girl I’ve ever seen, and between that and what you’ve just said, I think I’ve blown a circuit.”

She arched an eyebrow.

“On top of all that, you’re naked. And while I’m going to hate myself for this later, could you put on some clothes? At least just for a little while, so I can think. Then you can go right back to being naked. All the time. With my full blessing.”

She gestured around with her free hand. “And what, exactly, would you like me to wear?”

I looked around. The cage we were in was totally empty. “Ah, hell.”

Bridin ended up in my T-shirt and boxers. It seemed only fair since she couldn’t get into my pants. I mean fit into my pants. Whatever.

“So,” she said, pushing her bangs behind her ear, “I’ve shown you mine, now you show me yours.”

“If you wanted to see that, you should have peeked when I was undressing like any normal person.”

“Of course I peeked. That’s not what I meant.”

“You lost me, then.”

She placed her hand over her heart. “Were-hound.” She gestured towards me.

The light bulb clicked on in my head. “Oh, right. Necromancer. Or at least that’s what people keep telling me. I don’t seem very good at it.” I stretched and looked around the room. Bookshelves crammed with old books, walls of solid concrete, a single but expensive looking wooden chair in the middle of the floor. The floor itself held an unpleasant stain that I didn’t care to think about. The whole thing had the effect of a tidy little dungeon. “I feel kind of stupid saying necromancer.”

“Why is that?”

“I don’t know. I can’t tell if I’m just not used to it, or if the term seems too Dungeons & Dragons.” I slid my hands along the bars. I don’t know what I was looking for. I’m not Macgyver. I can’t break out of a steal cage using bubble gum and a shoelace. Not that I had any

bubble gum in the first place. A cold spot under my palm made me jerk my hand back. It felt like dry ice.

Brid sprawled on the floor. “And what else would you call yourself? Ghost master? Dead wrangler? Dean of zombies?”

“You might have a point. Dead wrangler isn’t half bad, though.” I held my hand over the cold spot and closed my eyes. I saw a symbol traced on the back of my eyelids, like when I used to draw something with a sparkler over and over and then shut my eyes. I didn’t recognize the symbols. I hadn’t expected to. “Do you know what these mean?” I asked without opening my eyes.

“No, but I get their intention.”

I opened my eyes; nothing could be gained by keeping them shut. I pulled my hand back into the cage and rubbed it on my jeans. When Brid didn’t follow up, I asked her what she meant.

“This cage is built out of iron. Cold iron inhibits any fey, and I’m half fey.” At my blank look, Brid grimaced. “Fairy,” she explained.

“Then why not just say ‘I’m half fairy’?”

“Because,” Brid said dryly, “most Americans picture Tinkerbell when they hear fairy. I am not Tinkerbell.” She leveled a glare at me until I held up my hands in surrender. Once I had apparently gotten her point, she continued.

“The cold iron wouldn’t be a problem, but the runes are done in silver. Weres have an allergy to silver.”

“So this cage is killing you?”

One of Brid’s eyebrows quirked up in an amused fashion. “Do I look like I’m dying?”

“Touché.”

“The iron effectively blocks out any spells I could do as well as it gives me a bit of a rash. The silver runes keep me from bending the iron. This cage was built specifically to neutralize all my strengths.”

I tapped my finger between two bars, back and forth. “So they’ve been planning on getting you for some time.” At least long enough to build a cage. I had no idea how long that took. “I’m probably just here as an afterthought.”

“Probably.”

“Good to know I’m expendable.”

“You must be worth something; otherwise, they’d have killed you already.”

“Anyone ever told you that you’re a very reassuring and positive person?” I asked.

“Nope.”

“I can see why.” I paced along the corner of the cage. “Earlier you said were-hound. What does that mean exactly?” I paused mid-step. “If you don’t mind. I have no idea if that’s a rude thing to ask. I’m just tired of not knowing anything.”

“That’s okay,” she said, “I appreciate directness. I’m a hybrid. My mother was a werewolf, my father a fey hound. The local werewolf pack was falling apart. The leader, my grandfather, was getting old, and he had no direct heir.”

“It’s a hereditary position, then?”

“Not exactly.” She rolled herself up and sat cross-legged. “Not all packs handle things the same way. Ours practices a kind of blood tanistry, although we don’t follow the gender specifics of it. The most talented son or daughter will be the next in line. Sometimes, it will even be a cousin. If there is no one strong enough out of the chieftain’s line, then someone else out of the pack is chosen.”

“I see.”

“My grandfather had a daughter,” she said smiling faintly, “my mother. Smart, but not physically strong enough to lead. Grandfather’s brother wanted the position, but—” A sour look flitted across her face. “He was a narrow-minded brute. If he’d been chosen...” Bridin shook her head. “Grandfather waited too long to deal with it.”

“I take it that’s a bad thing.”

“Very. The pack was beginning to fall apart,” she said. “So my mother proposed a political marriage. The pack needed strength, more numbers, and my father’s people offered that.” She half-smiled when she said it.

“It worked then?”

The smile faded. “Not entirely. Many agreed with the marriage. They could see the wisdom in my mother’s choice. Others didn’t like the idea of...blending two different creatures.”

“Racist werewolves. Great.”

“They saw it as a weakening of the species,” she said.

“But, biologically speaking, the more varied a gene pool, the stronger the species. Hybrids are usually genetically superior.”

“I knew I’d like you.”

I quit my pacing and sat down across from her. “So, what happened?”

She hugged her legs to her chest, resting her chin on her knees. “Eventually the pack came around.” She grinned. “Babies tend to do that, and my mom had a lot of babies.”

“How many?”

“I have four older brothers.”

“Wow. And you’re next in line?”

“Turns out I’m the most qualified candidate,” she said. “Not that I mind, but it’s a lot, you know?” Brid sighed. “Anyway, once the pack saw that the children were healthy, more of the wolves married hounds. Especially when they saw the benefits as the children grew older.”

I raised an eyebrow at her and waited.

“When a werewolf changes, it takes some time. How much depends on the wolf. It also hurts. A lot. For fey hounds, however, the change is instantaneous; it’s also painless. There’s other stuff too. I have a partial immunity to silver, for example. But, of course, there are drawbacks, too.” She patted the floor with one hand. “I can’t change in here. A wolf would be able to, no problem. It was those kinds of things that the remaining hold-outs latched onto.” She tightened her grip on her knees. As I watched, her hazel eyes became dim and shadowed. “My grandfather’s brother, the one who wanted to be next in line, attempted a coup.”

I didn’t like to see that shadow. If I’d known her longer, I’d have put my arm around her or something. “Unsuccessful coup, right?”

“Yeah,” she said, “but it cost us. A few died, including my mother.”

“I’m sorry.”

Brid hid behind her bangs. “It’s okay.”

“What happened to the rebels?”

“Their leader was executed. The rest.” She pushed her bangs back, tired of hiding. “My father took pity. I think he’d decided enough wolves had been killed. So he shipped them off to other packs if he thought they were able to be rehabilitated. Some of the children were allowed to stay if they chose.”

“You look like you don’t agree.”

When Brid looked at me, the shadow had passed from her eyes. A small fire burned there instead. “I understand his choice. Some of it I even agree with. But since one of them now has us in a cage, I can’t say I’d do it again.”

“What, you’d kill them all?” I phrased it like a joke, but Brid didn’t answer it as one.

“I would do what it took to keep my pack safe. If that meant killing them all, then yes, I would.”

Brid went quiet. I guessed she was all talked out. Which was okay. I’d already heard enough to know that, while I was probably okay right now, I didn’t want to ever endanger Brid’s people. She’d meant it when she said she’d kill them all. And with a bit of a shock, I realized that I understood how she felt. Douglas had come into my world, endangered my family and my friends, and he’d taken someone close to me. Would I be able to kill him if it meant ensuring the safety of my people? The answer came a little too quick. Yes. Absolutely. The fact that I didn’t have to even think about it scared me. Maybe my mom was right. Maybe something truly dark and scary lived inside me. Something evil.

I glanced at Brid. I tried to imagine her turning into something large and bloodthirsty. Did she morph into the Hollywood wolfman or something else? I tried to picture her out of control, killing everyone in her way. If I didn’t look at her eyes, it was hard. She appeared so tiny, so gentle. But when she looked at me, I could see the monster surface. I could see steel and determination. Did I look the same way—a wrapping of scrawny muscle and innocence covering an inner core of evil and violence? Only time would tell. Unfortunately, locked in a cage isn’t the best venue for trying not to think about something. The only thing I could do is think.

I nudged Brid with my toe. “Maybe you should go back to being naked.”

* * *

Brid did not go back to naked, not because of modesty, but because the temperature in the basement plummeted. God, if there was one, hated me.

No one came down to give us blankets. As it got colder, I pulled Brid into my arms without asking. Her body went stiff at first. When I didn't try anything, she relaxed into me. I don't know how long she'd been stuck in the cage, but from the way she nestled into my chest, I think it had been a few days. Despite our talk earlier, I still didn't know that much about her kind. If they were anything like real wolves though, she had to feel attention-starved. I put my chin on her head and rubbed her back absently with one hand. She shook a little, like she was either trying not to cry or trying to keep me from noticing. I ignored it, either way. Brid just needed to let go for a moment. I'd had a bad couple of days. I could feel everything roiling inside of me, and I'd have given a lot to have someone come in and tell me it was okay and to just let it all go. Brid's week had probably been worse. She got to go first.

We must have fallen asleep like that, despite the dim basement light. All I know is that I woke up later when locks clicked open on the basement door. Brid woke up too and pulled back from me enough so that she could look up.

Douglas walked down the wooden steps, heels making hollow sounds on the boards.

"Sam," he said, "how pleasant to see you again." He got a curious look on his face as he took in Brid and me. "And I see you've met Ms. Blackthorn."

"I thought you were going to give me a week."

“Yes, well, I didn’t like the look of things. You did not, to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, look like you were going to go gentle into that good night.” He rolled up his shirt sleeves, slowly and methodically, keeping an even cuff. “And don’t insult me by lying that you were.”

“You’ve been keeping an eye on me.”

“Of course, my boy. You didn’t think I’d let you go with no leash at all?” He pulled the single chair near the cage back against the wall, baring the stained floor.

“I guess I did.”

Douglas got out a few odds and ends from a box I hadn’t seen on the bookshelf. He selected a large piece of chalk and stood before me like a professor. Just another day in the office for Douglas.

“I’ll give you a choice,” he said. “Become my apprentice.”

“Or?”

He shrugged. “Or I can kill you now.”

I mulled over that little offer of joy. “What if it doesn’t work? What if you try to teach me and I fail?”

“I can just as easily kill you then. I believe in motivating my pupils.”

“Right. Apprenticing sounds fantastic.”

Douglas walked forward, muttering, reaching for the cage door. He gave Brid a meaningful stare. “No funny business now.”

Brid held up her hands. I got up and walked toward the door. Douglas mumbled something else, and I felt the power of the cage shut off. It was sort of like the low-level whine of a VCR or a stereo when they aren’t playing, but you realize when you shut them off that they’d been emitting a small amount of noise. You just hadn’t noticed it until it was gone.

Douglas handed me the chalk. "Draw a circle."

I looked around for a second before Douglas pointed downward.

Ah.

While I did my best to go back to my kindergarten days and produce a decent circle, Douglas lectured.

"There are many levels of necromancer, ranging from weak to strong. At the weak end, the end you are probably at, you are more of an antenna. You draw whatever spirit or ghost is around you towards you, but you have no real control. The next level up has that as well as the ability to broadcast. Essentially, you can communicate with various low level entities as well as summon. After that, things become interesting."

He reached into a box and threw a rag at me. "Too small," he said. "Do it again."

I wiped away most of the circle and started over. Brid came to the edge of the cage to watch.

"A necromancer with sufficient power and proper training can act as an ambassador between this world and the next. He can summon larger creatures, read living human souls and potentially influence them. He can raise the dead." Douglas examined my circle and nodded grudgingly. "Passable."

"You mean like that panda?" I stood up and stretched. I stood outside my circle and examined it. Not bad. My kindergarten teacher would have been so proud.

"Yes," he said, "like the panda. However, the form of the creature is entirely dependent on the raiser. I do not mean that you can mold it into a different creature." He wiped his hands on another rag. "That's a completely different realm of magic. Still, you can bring it to varying stages of reanimation."

“You mean like the difference between the zombies in the *Thriller* video and the ones in *Resident Evil*?”

Douglas considered this. “Yes and no. The *Thriller* example isn’t bad given your limited realm of experience, but the other end of the spectrum is much more life-like. Ling Tsu looked like the rest of the pandas, did he not?”

“I guess.”

“What are the differences, then, between Ling Tsu and the creatures in *Resident Evil*?”

“They didn’t look like they were covered in bar-b-que sauce?”

Douglas casually backhanded me. He hadn’t even looked in my direction. The effect on my bruised face was phenomenal. I cradled my jaw with one hand and tried again. “Differences, right. Well, he wasn’t trying to escape the enclosure and eat everyone; I guess that is a difference. I also didn’t see any hanging flesh or blood. You know, evidence of his undead state. Of course, that might have to do with the way he died.”

Douglas nodded as if he hadn’t reached out and backhanded me a second ago. “Better. Yes. Although Ling Tsu has the ability to function and make decisions on his own, his primary will is controlled by me. That is one of the main skills you need to cultivate as a necromancer. Each time you raise or summon something, you are betting that your will is stronger than theirs. If yours isn’t, at best they will leave; at worst, they will tear you to bite-size pieces. Depending on the creature, naturally.”

He pulled a small case out of the box. He flicked the clasps and opened it slowly. “Incidentally, even if Ling Tsu had suffered from external wounds, I could have smoothed them out.” He pulled what appeared to be a small silver dagger out of the case. “That’s what one is

able to do with both talent and education.” He put a small stress on the last word, somehow making it threatening.

It took a lot to not take a few steps back. I wondered if I could run past Douglas, dodge his knife, and make it to the top of the stairs. But that would leave Brid in a cage she couldn’t get out of. Plus, Douglas wasn’t stupid. Something would be at the top of the stairs to greet me. And all of that was based on whether or not I could dodge that knife. The situation was definitely not in my favor.

Douglas swept his arm out, slicing the air with the knife. “Another basic skill is the protective circle.” He gestured towards the floor with the knife. “You can draw it out of anything: chalk, salt, blood. In the dirt if need be. The choice depends on what you are summoning, the materials at hand, and the immediacy of the situation.” He looked at me. “Bottom line is, the stronger the circle, the better. Especially if you are trying to raise one of those nasty things that might eat you, like I mentioned earlier.”

“Bite-size pieces?”

“Exactly. The circle can be modified for the practioner to include important symbols or what have you. A simple one like this is fine, as long as you activate it correctly.” He made a small slice in his arm and stepped into the circle. The blood dropped, hitting the concrete. The air rippled out until it hit the edges of the chalk, and then the circle lit up in a blue flash. Douglas pulled a piece of gauze out of his pocket and tied it around the cut in his arm without setting down the dagger. He’d had some practice.

“Does it always flash like that?” This time I did take a small step back.

“Yes, though this circle was a trifle enthusiastic. A lot of old blood can do that sometimes. That is why most practioners have a permanent circle. Enough power in one place

can leave a memory.” He straightened his shoulders. “Now that I’m in the circle, and it’s been invoked with blood and my will, I am protected.” Douglas closed his eyes, mumbling softly to himself. The temperature in the room dropped some more, and I had to wrap my arms around myself. I couldn’t help but wonder, if he was protected inside the circle, shouldn’t I be in it, too? Would it actually be safer to be closer to Douglas? I moved towards it, but Douglas waved me off without even opening his eyes. I frowned. My understanding had been that the inside of the circle was good, and the outside bad. I kept thinking of the phrase “bite-sized” while I hoped that Douglas was summoning something that wouldn’t want to eat my face.

Douglas stopped mumbling, and his eyes snapped back open. They were filled with a blue fire. He looked creepy as hell. He shouted a final word. I tried to hear what it was, but I couldn’t make it out.

Ghostly forms began to crawl out of the floor and float through the walls. I could see faces, clothes. People of various ages, various shapes. The single unifier seemed to be a violent death. Their throats were slashed, or they were sliced open like a gutted fish. Some of them had what appeared to be burn marks. Most of the wounds could have been made with Douglas’ knife.

I counted ten people in all. And they were headed my way, each going out of their way to avoid the circle. I couldn’t tell if they were afraid of it or of Douglas. I backed up until I smacked into the cage, and I couldn’t go any further. Douglas watched, eyes still that eerie blue, his face otherwise expressionless. He made no movement to help me.

The spirits converged on me then crowded onto me in one solid mass. People say ghosts can’t hurt you. Those people lied.

The spirits poured into me, hands grabbing, slicing, hurting. The pain drove me screaming to my knees. I shut my eyes and tried to curl up into a ball. I don’t know how long I

screamed or how long I huddled there on the floor. All I know is that when Douglas finally called them off and the pain stopped, I couldn't get up. I could only lay there, gasping, my face wet with sweat and tears, my whole body a constant tremor. I could only watch as Douglas walked through the circle, breaking it. He took his time getting over to me. His black dress shoes held a beatific shine, even after all he'd just done. I could see a small spot of blood on them.

"You have blood on your shoe," I said through chattering teeth.

Douglas absently wiped his shoe on my jeans. He leaned down so I could see his face. His eyes were back to a chilly brown. "I think you've learned enough for tonight."

I didn't say anything.

He straightened back up. "Get up."

At that moment, I would have loved nothing more than to stay curled up on that floor forever. Instead, I pulled myself up slowly and got myself back into the cage. Odd how earlier I wanted nothing more than to get out of the cage, and now I couldn't wait to climb back in. Any Douglas-free place looked good to me. I crawled to the other side of it and collapsed. Brid came over and put my head in her lap.

Douglas left without a word.

"Why didn't they come after me?" Brid asked. She sounded mildly curious, but the tightness in her muscles told me Brid was angry.

"Because it was my lesson," I said with a chatter. "He had complete control, and he sent them after me."

Brid ran a hand absently through my hair. "No," she said, "the lesson was for both of us. And I think we learned it well."

"My mom will be so happy to see my report card."

Brid laughed softly, relaxing, and I felt better. If we could both laugh at it, then maybe we'd be okay after all.

A minute later, a big guy brought down a blanket. I couldn't see who it was, but I felt Brid stiffen at the sight of him. When he left, Brid tucked the blanket in around me and curled around my back, protective. I stayed in a ball. The blanket smelled of lavender, something I wouldn't have expected of Douglas' linens. I didn't find it particularly relaxing. Brid shifted, moving the blanket up, right under my eyes. She slipped an arm around me. Then, over the lavender smell, I could smell outside—sun on the earth, wind through the trees, green things growing, the smell of life. Brid. I let sleep take me.

- Chapter 13 -

- C'mon, Baby, Don't Fear the Reaper -

We were woken up a few hours later. A big lug of a guy escorted us up to a bathroom. My whole body ached, and I was groggy, so I didn't notice much about the house we were in, except that it seemed very bright to my eyes. It took me a minute to register that the brightness was because we were in sunlight. Morning, then.

The guy let Brid go first. I leaned against a wall and waited. He looked familiar. After a full minute of staring, I realized I'd seen him before. Tuesday night, he'd wiped the floor with me. "Oh goody," I said, "it's you."

The guy actually grinned at me, baring a lot of very large, very white teeth. "How's the back?"

"Fantastic," I said. "Much better than the rest of me."

His grin faltered. The guy looked surprised. He shouldn't have been. Sure, he could kill me, but it would be fast: a quick snap of the neck, a blow to the head. Douglas would kill me slowly, one excruciating slice at a time. I'd seen the ghosts to prove it. If this guy hadn't picked that up by now, then he had a head full of sawdust. He needed a reminder, if only on the chance that it might drive a wedge between Douglas and his lackey.

I crossed my arms over my chest. "I hate to break it to you, but you're not the king of the wild things around here."

The big guy came at me then, only to halt in his tracks when a cat sauntered into the hallway. The cat was mostly white, with a big black spot on his head, chest and tail. He had big silver eyes that he trained on the man. The cat parked itself in the middle of the hall, tail flicking. The man relaxed and resumed his original position, leaning on the wall across from me. Weird.

I slid down the wall and reached out to pet the cat. Both the cat and the man seemed startled by this. When the cat didn't bolt, I scratched his ears. He took it with quiet dignity, like a king letting his subject kiss his hand. Cats always look like that to me. After everything else, I expected something strange. I'm not sure what: a man-eating cat, a cat that shoots lava from its eyes, something. I scratched under his chin. He felt and looked just like any other cat I'd seen, except for his eyes.

After Brid came out, I took my turn in the bathroom. Surprisingly, the guy let Brid come in after a few minutes to help wash me up. She ran a small washcloth under warm water before using it to wipe all the dried blood off me from yesterday's new cuts. "You're starting to look a bit battered," she said.

I looked past her into the mirror. The bruises on my face had yellowed, and the scratches were scabbing and falling off. I had a few small fresh cuts on my forehead, arms, and chest. I couldn't see my back, but I'm sure it looked yellow and scabby too. They let Brid put a little Neosporin she found in the medicine cabinet onto my back. I guess they were happy to kick the crap out of me, but they were worried I'd get infected.

After that, we were escorted back into the cage. The big guy brought me a paper plate with a few slices of cheese, some brown bread, and a chunk of ham. Brid got a hot bowl of what looked like stew. It was a pretty big bowl. We each got a plastic cup filled with water. I guess glass was too dangerous.

After the big guy left, I started to eat, putting the cheese on the bread and ignoring the ham. "I'm kind of surprised they aren't starving us."

Brid swallowed a large spoonful of the stew. I don't think she even chewed.

“They want you healthy enough to endure Douglas’ lessons, or to at least not die until he wants you to. And I guess they don’t want me to eat you.”

I looked at her.

“I’m kidding,” she said. “Well, kind of. I don’t normally eat people.”

I ate slowly, watching Brid devour down her stew. “Not that I want your food, but what gives?” My plate was tiny compared to what they gave Brid.

“I have a faster metabolism,” she said. “I need more food, and much higher levels of protein. Besides, it’s easier to hide drugs in stew.”

I paused mid-chew. “You know they’re drugging you, and you’re still going to eat it?”

Brid shrugged. “They aren’t trying to kill me. It’s a sedative. Keeps me docile. And I don’t have much of a choice. If I don’t eat, I grow weak, and then I die. I’d rather be drugged and strong,” she said.

I tossed my ham onto her stew.

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t eat meat,” I said.

She snatched the ham and gobbled it up in three bites. The girl was a machine. “I can’t believe it,” she said. “They locked me in here with a vegetarian.”

“I know,” I said, finishing off my cheese. “A lamb among wolves.”

Brid snorted and kept eating.

After a while, the big guy came and took our plates, surprisingly without incident. I waited until he left to talk.

“What’s the deal with Happy, there?”

“Happy’s name is Michael Tannis,” she said.

“And I take it Mr. Tannis has nothing to do with your pack.”

“He is dead to us.” Her tone was flat. No love lost there.

“Charming,” I said, “and what, exactly, does that mean?”

“It means that he is rogue. We no longer acknowledge him as one of our own. If he needs help or protection, we don’t give it. If he asks to join another pack, we don’t recommend him. In our eyes, he is dead.”

“His choice or yours?”

“Both.”

Brid didn’t seem too keen on talking about it, so I let it be. I still felt tired, so I grabbed the blanket and leaned against the bars to rest. After a few minutes, I felt the blanket lift and Brid slide in next to me. Without opening my eyes, I held my arm up so she could get comfortable, and then crooked it around her shoulders. She felt hot against my side. It was nice, like having a heater under the blanket with me. For the first time since I got there, I actually felt warm. I hadn’t slept next to a girl in a while. I’d missed it. But as good as it felt, I didn’t push it. If we weren’t stuck in a cage in Douglas’ basement, it’d be another story. I wouldn’t, however tempting, take advantage of my situation. After we got out, if we got out, she’d better at least give me her number.

* * *

Some time after another bathroom break and what might have been lunch, my lessons continued. If yesterday had taught me anything, it was to keep the lip to a minimum and to pay attention. Oh, and if he made me draw a circle, to get into it as soon as possible.

Douglas let me in the circle, but I think that was only because he wasn't summoning anything. At least, I didn't think he was going to. But the knife never left his grip, and he made me draw the circle, of course. Several times. Then I spent the next hour learning how to close a circle.

The blood part was easy. Douglas cut my arm. I bled. Easy. The will part, well I had will in spades. But the rest of it? Not so good. I couldn't get my power to cooperate. I assumed this was because of the bindings. I didn't tell Douglas that. If he couldn't figure it out, I wasn't going to tell him. The downside was that he thought I was being stubborn. After a couple more stinging slaps to the mouth, I got my power chugging enough to close the circle. I'd never consciously used my gift before. It felt like that first big breath after being underwater for a long time. When I closed my eyes, I could see the circle in my head. If I stretched out my fingers, I thought I would have been able to touch it. Elation surged through me at my success.

Douglas was less impressed. As soon as he decreed it good enough, he made me release it. After that, I went back to the spectator roll. As long as I got to stay in the freaking circle, I didn't care.

Michael came down into the basement, his hands full of something covered in a sheet. Michael handed the thing off to Douglas and then went quickly back upstairs. I guess he'd seen the show before.

Douglas pulled back the sheet, revealing a gray dove in a cage. There were a lot of scenarios of what could happen to that dove, and none of them were pleasant. I doubted that

Douglas wanted to feed it or release it. As far as I could tell, Douglas only took things out of cages for a reason.

Douglas closed the circle after telling me, “I don’t trust yours yet.” He handed me the bird.

“What do you want me to do with this?”

“I want you to hold it so I can slit its throat,” he said. “I can do it myself, but it’s easier if someone else holds it.”

I hesitated. I don’t like to kill things, one of the many reasons I’m not a carnivore. As much as I didn’t want to be instrumental in the bird’s death, I didn’t think Douglas would give me another option.

Grabbing a fist full of hair, he yanked my head back. “Problem?”

I tried for honesty. “I don’t want to sit here and watch you kill a dove. I don’t like killing things.”

He gritted his teeth. “You kill every time you eat.”

“Yeah, plants. Not animals.”

“You’re vegetarian?”

“Yeah.”

He laughed.

“I fail to see why that’s so funny.”

He backhanded me then, which made me release the bird. I might have let it go on purpose. Douglas retaliated by hitting me in the face so hard that I fell to my knees. Usually, when someone goes to hit you, you can catch some indication of their intent in their eyes. Not Douglas. His eyes stayed the same flat brown the whole time.

Michael trooped back into the basement and caught the bird with a net. It took him all of two minutes. I stayed on my knees. It seemed like the best place to be.

Douglas once again shoved the bird into my hands. He placed the tip of his dagger under my chin, raising my head up to look in his eyes.

“Listen carefully. When we summon, when we raise, we are trespassing in death’s domain. For that passage, we must pay.” He annunciated each word, speaking slowly and clearly, like I was a child. “When we pay, we must use death’s coin. Flesh, blood, sacrifice, these are tender that death understands.” He pressed the knife into my flesh, enough so that I felt it, but not enough to cut. “I can either take that payment from the bird or you. Choose.”

The bird struggled in my hands. I tightened my grip around it.

“Just be quick,” I said. I held out the bird.

A quick slash, and the bird was dead. Blood spilled directly onto the ground. With each drop, I could feel Douglas’ power rise. I really didn’t want to see what he needed all that power for.

In the movies, zombies just seem to appear. They shamble in from off screen and try to eat your brains. Or they are the newly dead that sit up and try to eat your brains. They never show what happens if a zombie is buried safe and snug in the ground.

Since we were on solid concrete, it took a minute. The floor made a cracking noise as it split open, revealing a few inches of dark topsoil beneath. Bones inched up out of the dirt, each sliding right back into place as if they’d never left. The small bones of the hand came together, joining with wrist, arm, elbow. Muscles and tendons attached, twisted and inched their way back onto the bones. Flesh reassembled, shaping the body into something recognizable. Hair sprouted and grew. The eyes went from dried out husks to liquid filled orbs. A rumpled suit came last,

sliding onto the flesh of the man. I wondered if clothing it was Douglas' choice or the zombie's. It was like watching time lapse photography of a body decomposing, but backward. I couldn't take my eyes off the spectacle.

The finished body was a man, maybe mid-forties, with a receding hairline. His suit looked a little dirt-stained, but all in all he looked like your average American business man. Except he was dead. And not just soul-dead like most cubicle workers, but actually dead.

"Go ahead," Douglas said, "ask him a question."

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

Douglas glared at me. I heard Brid stifle a giggle from inside the cage.

"Sorry, it was all I could think of," I said. I tried to sound apologetic.

"You have to ask it something that it knew when it was alive. People don't become omnipotent just because they keel over."

"Um, sir?" The man stared at his hands, confused. I snapped my fingers and he looked up. "Yeah, hey, how's it going?" The zombie blinked. "Hey, can you tell me your name?"

"Robert Jonathan Williams."

"How old are you, Robert?"

"I am forty-three years, eight months and sixteen days."

"Are they always this literal?" I asked Douglas.

"No."

"Is there something specific I need to ask him, or can we put him back to sleep now?"

Of course, Douglas wasn't content sending Robert the zombie back. First, he had to order Robert around. Make him sweep the stairs, lift heavy things, do some jumping jacks. Poor Robert got put through the ringer just so I could learn a few things about zombies. As grateful as

I was for the lesson, I think it could have been carried out in a more dignified way. Robert used to be a living being, after all. Again I felt like Douglas was giving me a dual lesson. Sure, he was showing me how to raise a zombie, but he was also showing me exactly what he was capable of. I could just as easily become the one doing the jumping jacks.

Finally satisfied, Douglas put Robert to rest. He ordered him back into the ground by his full name and waited until the floor completely resealed itself before he broke the circle.

“How come you needed his name to put him down, but not raise him?” I asked.

“I used his name to call him; I simply didn’t shout it the first time. The name is unnecessary, though it makes things infinitely easier.” Douglas opened the cage and gestured me back in. I went quietly. “If you know the name, it’s easier to locate the soul. Without the soul,” he said, “we are nothing.” He locked the cage, acknowledging Brid with a nod, and then left without another word.

Brid lay on the floor, stomach down, kicking her heels and looking the picture of the 1950’s teenage girl. Except Brid was in a cage instead of sprawled on a fluffy, heart-shaped rug and talking into a princess phone. And, hopefully, she wasn’t teenage either.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty,” she said, batting her eyelashes.

“Stop that.”

“Fine.” She took her chin out of her hands, using her arms to brace herself up instead.

“And what have we learned today?”

“Zombies are strong, they don’t feel pain or tire, and Douglas is a tool.”

“We already knew the last one,” she said.

“Yeah, but I felt like we needed to go over it again.” I sprawled on the floor next to her.

“Oh, and if I control the zombie completely, I can order it around.”

“And?”

I scratched my head. Man, I could really use a shower. “And what?”

Brid nodded down at the floor. “Where’s the blood?”

The floor, though still stained, appeared to be empty of even the slightest drop of blood.

Interesting.

“The floor opened up and the blood dripped down?”

“No,” she said. “I watched. The blood sort of...oozed into the floor before that. Kind of creepy, really.” She ran her fingers through her bangs, hand-combing them. “What was it like?”

“Awesome,” I said. “Terrifying. Nauseating.”

She eyed me from beneath her hair. “So you aren’t going to go out and start your own undead slave business?”

“No.” The answer came without hesitation.

“Not even tempted a little? Raise a math wiz and get him to do your homework for you? Have a zombie architect design your house?”

“No way,” I said. I thought of Brooke, sitting at home in her plastic bejeweled box. “No one deserves to be treated that way.”

“There might be hope for you yet,” she said, leaning over and nudging me with her shoulder.

* * *

Dinner was a repetition of the last meal, except they added an orange. Either Douglas had forgotten I don't eat ham, or he left it in an attempt to teach me a lesson. Of course, Michael could have prepared the meal and done it trying to piss me off. I had a lot of time on my hands to think about these things.

I gave the ham to Brid and went about peeling my orange.

"At least now I won't get scurvy," I said.

Brid finished the ham, licking the juice off her fingers. "I'm glad you're looking on the bright side of things."

"Of course, with no sun, I'll eventually get rickets."

"No, you won't," Brid said.

"But I'm not getting enough vitamin D."

"I know, but in adults they don't call it rickets. It's called *osteomalacia*." Brid took another mouthful of her stew, smiling at my surprise. "I take a lot of biology classes and study under the pack doctor." She took another bite. "We do have some medical personnel scattered about the pack, but I want to be able to do basic stuff."

"Surely you don't have to worry about osteo-whatever," I said, popping a piece of orange into my mouth.

"You never know when knowledge might come in handy, so I try not to limit myself. Besides, I liked the word. Rickets," she spoke the word clearly and slowly, biting off each syllable.

I pushed my legs out, stretching them. "Do you guys heal fast? Or is that just a movie thing?"

“We do, but it still does take some time. If you bleed out too fast, all the healing in the world won’t do you any good. And if you’re choking, you still need the Heimlich. We need air just like anything else.”

I folded my cheese into my bread. “Don’t need a silver bullet to do you in, huh?”

“No, but it certainly helps.” Brid’s gave me a wicked grin as she licked her spoon.

I choked a little on my makeshift sandwich and had to drink some water to stop my coughing fit. I didn’t want an overenthusiastic Heimlich from Brid. I didn’t know what was fact or fiction yet about werewolves, but I didn’t want to find out about super-strength the hard way.

After a final bathroom trip, we were escorted back to the cage for the night. Michael flipped the switch, and we were thrown back into darkness. Brid, used to far more physical exertion than me, began to pace back and forth. There wasn’t enough space to do sprints. Even walking, she pinged back and forth like an angry bee.

“You okay?”

“This freaking thing is driving me crazy,” she said, continuing to pace.

“You claustrophobic?”

“No, but I can’t change and I can’t run.”

I listened to her feet as they patted back and forth, reminding me of the tiger at the zoo, pacing his cage.

“We need to change frequently, Sam. I can put them off by burning off energy, but if I wait too long, I’ll start to go a little wiggy.”

“Wiggy is bad.”

“And I don’t know if they did this on purpose, but I can’t change in here!” She shouted the last part, and I heard her fists bang into the bars. Brid continued to scream, loud and angry, banging her fists in counterpoint.

I scrambled to my feet and went to her. I didn’t want to get between her fists and the cage, but I didn’t want her to hurt herself either. I made soothing sounds and touched her shoulders, giving her a second to acknowledge my presence behind her. You never want to spook an already freaked-out animal. The same goes for people. I slid my hands down her arms until I got her wrists. Taking hold of them, I pulled her arms in toward her chest, hugging her. I let her scream until she got it all out, making soothing sounds until she finished. Her body quaked and shook.

“We’ll think of something,” I whispered into her ear. “Don’t worry. I’ll help. I promise.”

“Something,” Brid mumbled. “Thanks.” Her voice sounded slightly hoarse.

I placed my chin on the top of her head.

“Something,” she repeated. Her shaking slowed. “Thought of something.”

I didn’t even get out a full *what* before Brid spun around and grabbed my chin, pulling my head down and gluing my lips to hers. Her lips were soft, and she tasted a little of beef stew, something I hadn’t found to be particularly erotic until just now. One of her hands slid back into my hair while the other sneaked around my waist, pulling me closer to her. Her hands were soft and hot. I grabbed her waist, the tips of my fingers sliding under the T-shirt, finding the soft skin at the small of her back.

“Wait,” I pushed back, reaching for air.

“What?” I could hear the tinge of exasperation in her voice.

“Are you?” I stopped. “Is this.” Taking a deep breath, I continued. “I don’t want this to be something you feel pressured into, something you’ll regret later.”

“You said you’d help me. You promised.”

“I know.”

What felt like my T-shirt hit me in the face.

“Good,” she said. “Now take off your pants and shut up.”

I only have so much restraint. I didn’t get undressed as fast as Brid, but I was close.

Brid lay on top of me, naked and sweaty, her head tucked under my chin.

“Thanks,” she said, “I feel much better.”

“Any time. When you feel restless, hungry, bored. Literally, any time.”

She laughed softly. “I take it you enjoyed yourself, then?”

“Hell yeah. In fact, I plan on recommending werewolf sex to all my friends.”

“So that’s it, huh? You’re going to pawn me off on your pals?”

“No, they’ll have to find their own.” I gave her a squeeze. “Except for the girls. My mom always told me to share and play nice with girls.”

“Ew,” she said, sliding off me but cuddling up to my side. “I can’t believe you just mentioned your mom.”

“You started it.”

I heard a thumping noise, like somebody had just run into something, and then a mumbled curse come from somewhere outside the cage. I froze, and Brid went rigid beside me.

A young girl's voice piped out of the darkness. "Son of a bitch! Honestly, who the hell puts furniture in the middle of a room?" Her tiny voice crackled with indignation. "And in a room with no windows. This is turning out to be such a huge pain in my ass—"

She stopped mid-tirade, and I heard a small clicking noise. A bright ball of light suddenly burst into existence above the head of a young girl. She blinked at the light, satisfied, and then turned her eyes on us. Tiny ebony eyebrows shot up, and her mouth quirked into a wicked little smirk. Gray eyes flicked to the cage and back to us.

"You guys have quite the interesting little lifestyle here." The girl looked about ten, though her manner of speech and facial expressions made me think she was older. But she looked ten and innocent otherwise, with two soot-black pigtails, freckles and a black and red catholic schoolgirl uniform. She even wore knee socks and saddle shoes.

I grabbed my jeans and turned away, trying to pull them on.

"Please," she said, "like I haven't already had the full tour." She whistled when she noticed my back. I assume because of my injuries. I mean, my ass just isn't that spectacular. "Who's been kicking the crap out of you?"

"Everyone." I zipped up my pants. I threw my Batman T-shirt at Brid along with my boxers when she made no move on her own to get them. She gave me an amused smile before slipping them on.

"Right," the girl said, "business." She whipped out a BlackBerry and began hitting buttons. "Please tell me one of you is Sam LaCroix."

I raised my hand.

"Finally." She walked up to the bars, pointing an accusing finger in my face. "You are a rather troublesome young man to find." She hit a few more buttons on the BlackBerry. "I

freaking hate nicknames. I tell people, give me the whole name, its easier. But noooo.” Her brow furrowed, and she focused her attention back up on me. “Usually Sam is easy though. Samuel, Samwise, there are only so many things a shortened Sam could be. So why were you so difficult?”

I poked my chest. “Samhain.”

The girl snorted. “I should have known. New age Celtic-loving hippies, making my life hell.” She continued to type, her face brightening. “Right, there you are. Samhain LaCroix.” She looked back up at me. “You think you can get yourself out of that creepy love cage you’re in and talk to me? I’m on a tight schedule.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Little girl, do you think we *want* to be in here?”

“You seemed to be happy to be there when I showed up.”

“Touché,” Brid murmured.

I glared at her. “Hey, how ‘bout you both stop with the smartass remarks, and maybe we can get out of here?”

The girl studied the cage door, her gray eyes tight with concentration. “No can do,” she said.

“Of course not,” I said, resting my forehead against the cold of the bars. The symbols buzzed in my head, sharper and more in focus than they had been before. Nothing else had been easy lately, so why should this be?

“Why not?” said Brid.

The little girl pointed at the symbols. “These wards have been drawn by a necromancer,” she said.

“And?” Brid and I said in unison.

The girl rolled her eyes. “Duh, a necromancer’s power kind of handles all the death stuff, right? You know, power over souls and all that business.”

I rolled my hand in a motion to continue.

“Well, I’m a Harbinger. You can’t get more death and soul than me.” She flicked the bars with her finger. “So I can’t open this.”

I banged my head once into the bars. “I have to ask. What’s a Harbinger?”

“I guide souls from this plane to, well, I can’t tell you where to.”

“You’re death,” I said, “in saddle shoes.”

“Kinda,” she said. She looked at Brid. “I like your shirt. Batman is my favorite.”

“Thank you.”

“Not to be rude,” I interrupted, “but can you maybe tell me why you’re here since you can’t get us out of the cage?”

“June called in a favor. Wait, I better do this right.” She straightened her skirt and adjusted her blazer. Then she pulled herself up to her full height. “Hi, my name is Ashley, and I’ll be your Harbinger today. I will be acting as an interim instructor for all your necromancy needs.” She flashed her best stewardess smile.

“Ashley, as delighted as I am to meet you, don’t you think it might be hard to teach me? I’m in a cage that you can’t get into. Oh, and—” I grabbed onto the bars with both hands, “I’m a little distracted right now by the fact that *I’m being held by a psychotic killer*,” saying the last part through gritted teeth.

Ashley cocked a single eyebrow in a graceful inverted V. “Geez,” she said, looking at Brid, “is he always this big of a drama queen?”

Brid grinned at her but didn’t answer.

- Chapter 14 -

- Make a Little Birdhouse in My Soul -

Ashley hovered cross-legged in front of me, ignoring the empty air beneath her, rapt as I caught her up on the last few days. I had just finished with the bit about going to my mom's and learning about being bound.

"Man," she said, "I really wish I had some popcorn for this." She made a face. "That sounded a little insensitive didn't it? I just meant, you know, you've had a lot going on."

Brid lolled on the floor next to me. "That's okay," she said, her chin in one hand, "he doesn't mind."

I looked at her.

Brid snorted. "If I don't offend you, then I know she never will."

"Anyway, then I talked to June—"

"Who then talked to me," Ashley added.

"And then I got jumped." I leaned back on my elbows.

Ashley chewed on her lip. "You said you got it from your father's side?"

"Yeah, turns out my dad's side is just lousy with it. I got two half-sisters that have it too." I needed to concentrate on getting out of there, but I couldn't pass up a chance to help out Lilly and Sara. If I did, Lilly's big, serious eyes would haunt me. "Ashley, do you think you could look in on them? Make sure they don't..."

"End up like you?" she offered sympathetically.

"Yeah," I said. "I would just feel better knowing someone was looking out for them."

“No worries,” she said. “It’s my job.” She flipped open her BlackBerry and made a few notes. “Anything else? You didn’t get attacked by head hunters or fight a sea monster or anything, did you?” Her little glowing orb swam lazy circles around her head.

“Nope.”

“Good,” she said, “because you’re screwed enough as it is.”

“Thanks,” I said, “and I wish everyone would stop reminding me.” I sat cross-legged on the floor. “Let me ask you a question. Do I always have to kill things to use my gift? I mean, assuming I ever get to use it?”

“No,” she said. “Every necromancer has their own slant on things. Some parts of the ritual can’t, or shouldn’t, be skipped, though. For safety reasons you should always do the circle. Does it have to be invoked with your blood? No, but that does make for a very strong circle. Your will should be enough.” She scowled at the light ball, which had begun to do figure eights in the air. Chastened, the ball resumed its original circle.

I turned my head, trying to hide my smile.

Ashley cleared her throat. “Hell, even spit works to strengthen, just not as much as blood. To call spirits? No. Again, sometimes a symbolic offering speeds things up. As for raising the dead, yeah, that kind of takes a big payment.” She scratched her nose. “But, that depends on the necromancer. A strong one can get by with very little blood. They don’t need as much of a power boost, but the offering should be there. The amount of blood also depends on the quality.”

I felt relieved that I wouldn’t have to start slaughtering bunnies to get things down, but the last thing she said worried me. “The quality?”

“How powerful,” she said. “Here, think of it this way: Douglas is a hybrid car, and you’re an old scooter.”

“Thank you for that.”

Ashley glared at me until I pantomimed shutting my mouth and throwing away the key.

“You both need gas to run, but the hybrid wouldn’t need as much because it can draw from its internal power source, the electric battery. The old scooter has less power to start with. It can get to the same place as the hybrid car can, but it takes more fuel to do so.”

“I should trade you in,” Brid said.

“Don’t make me sic Ling Tsu on you,” I told her.

Ashley gave us the same look she had given the ball. Brid giggled, but I managed a straight face. Ashley ignored us. “The scooter,” she said loudly, “also needs its gas to have a boost, something to give it more power, like an oil rich mixture. Even with that, it’s harder and takes longer for the scooter to catch up with the hybrid car.” Ashley gave me a graceful shrug. “Not a perfect analogy, but...”

I nodded. A thought came to me. “Is there a way for me to get past the bindings, you know, besides finding my uncle?” Finding Nick, even with Ashley’s help, might take too long. His address was at home on my dresser, and as Ashley had proved, the name thing could be a little shaky.

“Besides a bigger badder necromancer?”

“Yeah. I’m a little short on those and the one I do know...” The one I knew would probably love to eat my liver with a nice Chianti. “I don’t think I should ask him.”

Ashley gave me a sympathetic look. “I can’t help you there. You’re a strange case to begin with. Most of the time, you bind people from doing a certain thing, or you just bind them as a whole. I’ve never seen someone with their power bound. That’s like cutting a piece of you off.”

“And you’ve had it done twice,” Brid murmured.

Even among the anomalies, I was an anomaly. I took some pride in that. Or I would have, if my source of pride hadn’t also been my death sentence.

Ash stood up and dusted herself off.

“You’re going?” A spurt of panic shot through me. Even if Ashley hadn’t been able to get me out of the cage, she had at least been able to answer some of my questions. How could I possibly figure out how to beat Douglas if I didn’t learn?

“I’ll come back,” she said. “I’m sorry, but it took some time to find you, and I do have a day job. I’m ten minutes late for Mrs. Jenkins as it is.”

“Wait,” I said. “I know you can’t get me out, but can you do something for me?”

Ashley raised an eyebrow, her little face lighting up. Looks like little Ashley loved a negotiation.

“Can you let someone know where we are?”

“Depends,” she said.

“On what?”

“On who the person is,” Ash said.

I tried to think of who to get a message to. Nick might take too long and might not be willing to help because he was afraid of Douglas. My mom? No, I didn’t want her involved. The last thing I wanted was to have to build a box for my mom’s head. Or Haley’s. Ramon? He knew what was going on, but I didn’t know who he could tell. He couldn’t just attack Douglas’ house with a skateboard. I yanked my thumb at Brid. “What about her pack?”

“Not unless they have a necromancer on staff.”

Brid shook her head.

“June then,” I offered. “Please let her know what’s going on. She doesn’t have to come herself, but I need you to ask her to contact Brid’s family or someone who is willing to help us.”

Brid grabbed my shoulder. “And Sam’s mom.”

I frowned at her. “I don’t want my mom getting hurt.”

Brid scoffed, impatient. “Boys. Always getting so focused on one thing. Nevermind.” She looked at Ashley questioningly. “Can you have June see if Sam’s mom can release her part of the binding from afar?”

I turned my head and blinked at her in surprise.

She gave my shoulder another squeeze. “You have two, Sam. Some of your power is better than none, and I figure this way you should have access to more of it.” She scanned my face. “Did you even ask your mom to remove it?”

“I thought...” I cast my eyes at my feet. “When she told me the first binding didn’t work, I didn’t think.” I cleared my throat. “No, I didn’t ask her.”

Brid nudged my chin up with her finger until all I could see were her hazel eyes. “Worth a shot,” she said.

I pulled my gaze back to Ashley. “Can you do that, please? Ask June to contact my mom and Brid’s pack? Tell her I know she can’t act herself. And tell her thank you.”

“I can do that,” Ashley said. “Now we just need to talk about price.”

“I don’t have anything right now,” I said, “and I can’t pay you if I don’t get out of here. Besides, I thought you said it was your job.”

Ashley waved my logic away with one tiny hand. “Keeping an eye on your little baby necromancer sisters, that is my job. Running messages? Not my job.”

I chewed my lip. “Well, what did June offer you?”

“All transactions are confidential.”

“What would you like?” Brid asked, head tilted to the side.

“Waffles,” Ashley said promptly.

“What?” Whatever I’d been expecting, it hadn’t been that.

“And not the frozen kind, either. The good kind. With fresh strawberries and real maple syrup. None of that compote garbage. So help me if you use compote—”

“You want waffles?” I tried to keep the skepticism from my voice. “No first born or pot of gold?”

“I’m not a leprechaun, Sam. And what would I do with a baby?” Her eyebrow shot back up, and she crossed her arms. “I want waffles, take it or leave it.”

I glanced at Brid who was staring at Ashley shrewdly.

“Let’s talk numbers,” she said. “Are we talking like twenty waffles all at once? Or a waffle a week for six months? What?”

“Every day for two years,” Ashley said.

“That’s outrageous,” Brid sputtered.

“I don’t care what we pay if it gets us out,” I said.

Brid glared at me. Clearly I was weakening her bargaining position. Personally, I think she was forgetting the big picture. I caved under her glare and held up my hands in surrender.

“Every week,” Brid countered.

Ashley’s eyes narrowed. “Every day, one year.”

“Six months,” Brid said.

Ashley pursed her mouth. Finally, she nodded.

“Done,” I said.

Ashley reached out her hand. I shook it. A grin split her face.

“Great,” she said. She whipped out her BlackBerry and hit a button. A small swirling vortex opened up above her. What looked like a stream of sparrows came out and grabbed onto her clothes. Ashley waved.

“You guys take care, okay?” The birds flew back into the vortex, pulling Ashley with them and plunging us back into darkness.

“Just when I think things can’t get any weirder.” I wrapped an arm around Brid. “Now what?” I said.

“I’m going back to bed.” She slipped away from me. I heard the blanket slide across the metal as she settled in. I wanted to join her, but waiting and doing nothing was driving me crazy.

I gripped the bars, feeling the cold on my hands and letting the symbols crystallize in my head. I knew I wouldn’t be able to break whatever Douglas had done, but I could at least try and muddle my way through it. Learn the symbol, something.

There was no way for me to keep track of time, so I don’t know how long I sat there holding the bars. My hands felt frozen stiff when I pried them off, and my shoulders hurt. I guess I’d been tensing them the whole time. I hadn’t learned much, but I had found what seemed like a weakness around the door. If I had infinite time or a gigantic boost of power, I might be able to spring the door open.

Since I didn’t have either, I crawled back under the blanket with Brid. It felt like hours before my hands warmed up enough for me to fall asleep.

- Chapter 15 -

- Easy Like Sunday Morning -

Ramon scooted into one of Plumpy's plastic booths, across from Detective Dunaway. He took a sip from his soda.

"I appreciate you meeting with me," Dunaway said. "I'm sorry to take you away from your work."

"I only work here because of Brooke and Sammy." Ramon picked at the edges of a rogue ketchup packet. "Now..." Ramon didn't know how to finish that sentence. What about now? Brooke wouldn't be back at work ever.

Ramon had caught a bus out to Sam's mom's house earlier and dropped Brooke off. Carrying her box on the bus had been nerve wracking. When a guy tried to crack a joke about it, Ramon had told him in Spanish that it was the severed head of his friend. If anyone on the bus knew Spanish, they didn't question him about it. Of course, a few years back a man with a broad sword had attacked a downtown bus, so maybe the commuters had grown jaded and couldn't be bothered to ask the Hispanic kid why he carried a bejeweled box onto the cross-town express. Haley had graciously agreed to head-sit.

Ramon could have left Brooke at the apartment, but he'd been afraid that the cops might want to look through it while he was at work. Brooke wanted to go, anyway. She thought she'd make a good distraction for Sam's family. Ramon had agreed, especially after he'd seen Mrs. L's face. Normally, Ramon would use words like luminous to describe Sam's mom. She glowed with an inner light. But when he'd dropped Brooke off this morning, that radiance was all but gone. Mrs. LaCroix was taking Sam's absence pretty hard. Not that Ramon could see any other way to take it.

“You still haven’t heard from him?” Dunaway pulled out his notebook.

Ramon shook his head. “Negative.” He hadn’t wanted to call in the cops at all. They’d discussed it before and had all agreed not to bring the authorities in. But when Sam didn’t come back, Ramon couldn’t see an alternative. With Brooke’s murder, Sam’s disappearance would be noticed. If Ramon or Frank didn’t call Dunaway, they’d look super fishy. Ramon decided to head it off at the pass. He called Dunaway. Besides, some cops were tools, but Dunaway seemed okay, like he would listen, even though Ramon hadn’t been able to tell him much.

“Do you mind if we go over it again?”

“Sammy came home from visiting Bainbridge Island Friday afternoon.”

“Who did he go there to see?”

“His douche bag father.”

Detective Dunaway looked up from his notebook.

“I’m sorry, his estranged father,” Ramon said, “who is a douche bag.”

Dunaway laughed, turning it into a discreet cough at the end. He flipped back to another page in the notebook.

“You said he went out there trying to locate his uncle?”

“Yeah.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Sammy’s gotten really into his roots lately.” Not exactly a lie. Ramon didn’t like lying. Mama didn’t have any patience for liars, but Ramon felt comfortable dealing the occasional half-truth. Mama liked the truth, but she knew the necessity of the half-truth was very real.

“Then what?”

Ramon tossed the ketchup packet on the table. “Not much. We hung out with Frank and Brooke.” Ramon stopped himself and looked down, trying to look sad. “Sorry, I guess I’m not used to it. I meant we hung out and talked about Brooke.”

Dunaway nodded sympathetically. He waited patiently for Ramon to continue. Ramon felt sure that Dunaway could wait for a very long time.

“After that, he took his board and left.”

“Did he mention where he was going?” Dunaway tapped his pen against the pad. “Maybe when he’d be back?”

“Nope.” Ramon got up and refilled his soda from the fountain machine. Technically, employees only got one meal per eight hour shift. Ramon had always ignored this. One of the kids behind the counter opened his mouth to say something. Ramon stared at him until he shut his mouth and looked away. Plumpy’s owed Ramon many things. Free soda was *numero uno* on that list.

Ramon tapped the cup and waited for the foam to settle. “I offered to go with him.” He finished filling it and popped the top back on. “Said he wanted some alone time.” Ramon slid back into the booth. “I should have gone with him.”

Dunaway rubbed absently at his neck. He looked tired. “You don’t know if that would have helped. All that might have done is make you a missing person, too.”

Ramon shrugged. Maybe. Then again, maybe not.

“Anything else?”

“He talked on the phone for a bit before he left,” Ramon said, “but I don’t know who with.”

Dunaway asked him more questions, none of which he could answer. The detective got up to leave, leaning over the plastic table and offering Ramon his hand. Ramon hesitated out of surprise. No cop had ever offered him a handshake. Ramon took the officer's hand and shook it.

"Thanks again," Dunaway said.

"No problem, detective."

Dunaway released his hand. "I'll try to keep you in the loop if I can."

Ramon nodded, grateful.

Dunaway slipped his notebook into his pocket and headed for the parking lot.

A heavy feeling in his stomach, Ramon watched the detective drive away. He didn't know what had happened to Sam. He didn't think he was dead. No, Douglas seemed the kind of guy to leave the body as a message. But Ramon couldn't hang around anymore, waiting for things to work out. He had to find a way to do something. Damned if he could figure out what that was. Ramon drank his soda, ignored the ending of his break time, and furiously sifted for ideas. He needed a plan. A fragment of his conversation with Dunaway floated to the top. Sam had talked on the phone.

Bingo.

Ramon threw away his soda and went into the back. He pulled on his zip-up hoodie and reached for his back-up board, since his usual ride was composting in a dumpster somewhere after its debut use as a weapon. Ramon missed that board. If anything, he had to find Sammy so he could buy Ramon a new ride.

"Where are you going?" A touch of panic lit Frank's face.

Ramon grabbed Frank's shoulders. "I gotta go."

“But it’s the middle of your shift,” Frank said. “You have seniority. You can’t just *go*.”

Frank began to look a little wild around the eyes.

Ramon grabbed his spatula and handed it over to Frank. “It’s time, man.”

Frank stared at the shiny metal spatula in his hand. “I haven’t been trained.”

“Frank, a drunk monkey could do this job.” He clapped him on the shoulder. “You’re ready.”

“No, you can’t. I can’t.” Frank looked up from the spatula, looking Ramon questioningly in the eye. Some day, when Ramon had the time, he was going to find out where Frank got his lack of confidence from, if only so he could help raise the boy right. For now, all he could do was make sure all his faith in Frank’s ability to manage this piece of shit job showed in his eyes.

Frank’s eyes calmed and he gathered himself, all of his 5’5” frame. “I won’t let you down.”

“That’s my boy.” He saluted Frank and grabbed his board.

“What do I do if the manager shows up?”

“Tell him I had a family emergency.” Frank nodded, and Ramon shot out the door.

Wheels hit pavement with a soft whir as he steered his board away from Plumpy’s. The weight in his stomach lightened. It felt good to be taking action. And he didn’t even have to make Frank lie for him. If Sammy wasn’t a family emergency, he didn’t know what was.

Ramon tossed his board against the wall of the apartment. He went to Sam’s phone and started scrolling through the caller ID for names he didn’t recognize. June Walker. Had to be. Out of the few he didn’t know, she was the only one who’d called even close to the right time. He dialed,

his heart skipping in anticipation. A woman answered. Her voice reminded him of Dessa's: intelligent, warm, with a hint of sarcasm. Dessa's usually had more than a hint.

"June Walker?"

"Depends on who's asking." She sounded amused.

"Do you know a Sam LaCroix?"

"Who is this?" All amusement evaporated.

"This is his friend, Ramon." Ramon paced, too jittery to sit down. "I know he called you. What did you talk about?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"Because I haven't seen him since Friday." The line got quiet. He could hear a few birds and June's breath, but nothing else. Then he heard some mumbled curses and the clattering of what sounded like a bowl.

"Ramon, right?"

He nodded, realized she couldn't see him, and then told her yes.

"Let me call you back, Ramon." She hung up before he could respond.

Twenty minutes and half a bag of Cheetos later, June called back.

"Sorry," she said, "but Sam's messenger got lost." June's voice quieted like she was talking away from the mouth piece. "Yes, I know you have other things to do, but really—would you get away from my waffle maker?"

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry," she said, "I didn't mean you. Look, Ramon, do you know Sam's mom?"

“Since sixth grade.”

“Good. Get a hold of her. Tell her she needs to try and break her binding on Sam.”

“Can she do that?” Ramon wiped some leftover powdered cheese on Sam’s couch. Sam could yell at him when he got back.

“To be honest, I’m not sure. But she needs to try. Douglas has him.” June paused.

Ramon heard the click of a lighter as she lit a cigarette. He assumed it was a cigarette. If it was crack, they were all screwed.

“And Ramon?”

“Yeah?”

“I need you to do one more thing.”

Ramon used his own cell phone to call the other number, just like June had instructed. At first, no one answered. After a few rings, a very chipper male voice came on.

“Hey, you’ve reached the den, home of many. Leave a message, and we might get back to you. And don’t be one of those lame-ass people who hangs up or expects us to remember their number.” There was a smacking sound in the background and a pause in the message. “Ow, you want to do this? Didn’t think so. Right. Leave it at the beep, people.”

Ramon felt like smiling, despite the situation. The guy’s cheerfulness was infectious, even over the phone. The machine beeped.

“Hey,” he said, “my name is Ramon. You don’t know me, but my buddy is stuck somewhere with...I don’t know. Her name is Brid, that’s all I know.” Ramon couldn’t think of what else to say, so he just left his number and hung up.

He grabbed his keys. He didn't know how he was going to get to Sam's mom's, but he didn't feel like riding the bus again. This time of day, it would take too long, and he already felt antsy. Frank was at work. He could take Sam's car, but he didn't have a license. That could be bad. A cab would be too expensive. He picked up his board and locked the front door.

Maybe he could call Sam's mom? No, he didn't want to ask for another favor, not after having her Brooke-sit. Besides, Ramon didn't think she'd like what he had to say to begin with.

Ramon walked over to the door next to Sam's and knocked. Mrs. Winalski answered immediately. The bright pink of her sweats almost blinded him. "Sorry Mrs. W, bad time?"

"No," she said, slightly winded, "just doing my yoga. At my age, you have to work to stay flexible, if you know what I mean."

Ramon tried his best to not know what she meant.

"Any news from Sam?"

Ramon thrust his hands into his pockets. Mrs. W always made him feel like he was under inspection. "Sort of," he said. "That's why I knocked."

"Stop fidgeting," she said, "I won't bite. Now out with it."

Ramon straightened up. "Do you think you could give me a ride out to Sam's mom's house?"

She nodded and held up a hand, telling him to wait before he could explain or even offer her gas money. Two minutes later, she popped out in jeans and a bright purple v-neck sweater.

"Wow. You're fast."

"Time waits for no one, Ramon, even me. C'mon."

Ramon hugged his skateboard to his chest with one arm and half-jogged to catch up with her.

* * *

Mrs. Winalski owned a candy apple red 1960 Corvette that she drove like she could die at any minute and needed to get five things done before that happened. With an immaculate interior and a wax job that would do any car wash proud, Ramon could tell that the car was Mrs. W's baby. That didn't bring him any comfort as he shut his eyes, gripped the door, and tried to remember the names of all the saints.

He didn't crack his eyes until he felt the car slow to a stop. He was surprised that Mrs. W hadn't needed directions. Not that he'd been in a state to give them.

"We're here," she said, climbing out of the car.

"Did you go up on two wheels there for a while?"

Mrs. Winalski laughed. "I could grow to like you, Ramon."

Ramon didn't respond to that. He concentrated on getting his legs to stop shaking instead. Then he followed her up the walkway.

"Sammy bring you here before?"

Mrs. Winalski shook her head. She jabbed the doorbell with her finger. Haley opened it and immediately burst into a grin.

"Hey, Mom, Mrs. W's here!"

Sam's mom peered around Haley before welcoming them in. Tia hugged them both, a strained smile on her face.

"You said you'd never been here." Ramon gave Mrs. W his best accusing stare while he placed his skateboard carefully next to the door.

"No," she said, following Haley into the kitchen. "You asked if Sam had ever brought me here. He hasn't."

Tia shut the door behind them and ushered Ramon into the kitchen.

“Libby is an old friend,” she said. “I asked her to keep an eye on Sam for me.”

“Is she—?” He made wavy gestures with his hands, though he wasn’t sure what that might indicate.

“She’s a witch, Ramon, like me.”

“Okay, then.” He took a seat at the table and wondered at the prevalence of weirdness in his life.

While Tia assembled a platter of sandwich stuff, Ramon filled them all in on what he knew. Once he’d finished, he gave Sam’s mom a moment to digest it all. He piled cheese onto some bread, hoping to eat in the meantime.

Mrs. W, however, did not screw around. “You got to do it now, Tia.”

Tia clasped her hands and stared at her white knuckles. “I don’t know if I can. He’s so far.” Her voice cracked, and she trailed off. Haley reached over and covered Tia’s hands with hers.

“You did what you thought was best, Mom,” Haley said. “Not perfect, no. But it helped. You did good.”

Tia looked up, grateful.

“But now we need to try something else,” Haley said.

Libby agreed with Haley, and they both kept on her until Tia finally said, “Okay.”

* * *

Ramon held onto Brooke's box and sat back to watch. He didn't know what to expect, exactly. So far, everything involved plants, cooking, and candles. Fascinating as it was, he felt antsy. When his phone went off, he set Brooke's box on a corner table so she could see. Then he excused himself and went out back.

"Hello?"

"Tell me what you know." The voice had a low growl in it and didn't sound anything like the person Ramon had heard on the message. This voice wanted to bite his head off. Ramon felt the hair on the back of his neck rise. He pushed it down with the palm of his hand. "Douglas has her, but I don't know where."

The man grunted. "That's okay, I think we do." He sounded like he was about to hang up.

"Wait," Ramon said, "tell me where. He has my friend, too."

The line went quiet.

"Please," Ramon said.

"Fine, but don't get in our way. And if my daughter gets harmed because of your bumbling, your blood is mine."

"Understandable." Ramon ran in and got a pen so he could write down the address.

Once he had the information, Ramon couldn't stand still. Sitting back down with Brooke and the girls was unbearable. Sam needed his help, whatever Ramon could offer. He was useless on Tia's back porch. Ramon didn't even know what the girls were doing inside, so he couldn't help them. No, he had to go as soon as he could.

He snuck quietly past the room where the girls were, through the kitchen and out the front door, quietly grabbing what he needed on his way out.

* * *

Haley worried about her mom. She'd been focusing for a long time now. Haley felt the power in the room ebb and flow several times, like a tide coming up to kiss the sand. When her mom got too far from the shore, Haley and Libby grabbed her hands and offered up what power they had. Haley hoped it was enough.

Haley had never worried about Sam before. He'd always been the epic big brother in her mind. Even if he couldn't smite her enemies for her, he'd always been there to give what he could. Patience. Guidance. He'd taught her how to walk. Her mom and Libby still held her hands, so she had to let the tears drop to the floor on their own.

The pressure around her suddenly built. Power filled the room, making her heart trip and her pulse speed. Sweat exploded onto her skin. Haley grabbed all that power. She gobbled it up with her mind and shoved it through her hand, into her mother.

Then it was gone.

Sweating and shaking, the three of them still held hands. The room remained quiet as they caught their breaths.

Brooke, in the corner, cleared her throat.

"That," she said, "was pretty cool."

Haley grinned at her.

"But did it work?" Libby asked.

"Yes," Tia croaked, "I think it did." Then she collapsed into Haley and cried. Haley held her, arms tight around her mother's shaking shoulders. It was a strange thing, being strong for her mother. Haley let her cry.

"I'm sorry," she sobbed, "Sam, I'm so sorry."

Haley tightened her grip, looking at Mrs. W for guidance. Libby's lips were in a firm line. She clearly felt there was nothing to be sorry about.

"That's enough, Tia," she said, pulling her gently, but firmly, out of Haley's grasp. "You can cry later if you still want too. Right now, we've got things to do."

"Speaking of which," Brooke said, "has anyone seen Ramon?"

Haley hopped up and ran to the front door. The spot where her mother's car usually sat was empty. So was the key off its usual hook.

"He took your car, Mom!" she yelled. Tia wandered up behind her, Brooke's box in hand, with Mrs. W in tow.

"But he doesn't have a license."

Haley looked at her mom like she'd taken a trip to crazy town.

"Impetuous boy," Mrs. W huffed. "We'll just have to take my car."

Tia blanched. "But we don't know where he went."

"Yes, we do, dear. We just need the address." Mrs. W dug around in her purse. She pulled out a cell phone. "Let me just call a few of my contacts. Won't take a second."

"Can I drive?" Haley asked hopefully. "I have my permit."

Mrs. W hit a button and put her phone up to her ear. "Not a chance, dear."

- Chapter 16 -

- School's Out Forever -

The whip-crack of pain across my already injured back made my whole body seize up. It didn't bring me to my knees. I'd already been on those. Now I was on my hands and knees trying to breath past the pain. Either Douglas was tired of the visceral thrill involved in beating me with his own hands, or his hands were getting sore from smacking me around. What ever the reason, the end result was the riding crop in his right hand. I'd tell him he looked silly walking around a basement with a riding crop, but I liked myself enough not to.

Douglas grabbed a fistful of my hair and jerked my head back. He leaned down, getting close enough that I could smell the musk of his aftershave. "I can't tell," he said through gritted teeth, "if you are intentionally screwing up or if you're really this useless."

I licked at a crack on my lip from an earlier blow and wondered why I couldn't be both.

"I'm trying," I said putting as much calm in my voice as I could manage, "as best I can." Douglas had been running out of patience with me, and I didn't want that. Normal Douglas freaked me out. Angry out of control Douglas? I didn't want to consider the idea.

Under Douglas' tutelage, I'd been trying to summon a spirit for what felt like forever. I'd managed the circle after a few tries, but not much else. I wanted to point out that I'd at least gotten better at that. Shouldn't I get a gold star for effort?

Whatever it was that I was supposed to be able to do just wasn't happening. I stared at the curvy scrawl of Douglas' list again. When I hadn't been able to manage a general summoning of even the most basic spirit, Douglas gave me a list of names. Apparently that old adage was true; names have power. Even with the list, I'd struck out. It felt like I was trying to get an engine to

turn over in a dead car. The spark of ignition was there, but I'd run clean out of gas. Great, now I was comparing myself to cars. If I ever saw Ashley again, I'd kick her.

"I suggest you try again," Douglas said. His tone had cooled. Not reassuring. No, a definite threat lived in that tone. He held the crop loosely in his grip. If I screwed up again, Douglas might take a few steps up on the violence ladder. I licked my lips and tried again.

I eased my body into a cross-legged position. It hurt my back more than staying on my hands and knees, but my arms would get too tired the other way. I straightened my back and tried to minimize the discomfort. My eyes closed as I took a deep breath.

The basement looked much different when I shut my eyes. I guess everything looks different with your eyes shut, but for me the change was drastic. When I relaxed and really looked, things floated up from the darkness. Brid shone to my right—twisting copper and emerald. The cage around her held the colors of Douglas. The wards on the bars burned beacon-like at the top. Douglas, with his nauseating swirls of grays, silvers, blacks and ice-blues, stood to my left.

But that wasn't all. The room itself seemed filled with a shifting haze. I didn't know what that was. I'd never seen it before. Was it supposed to look like that?

I concentrated on my hazy circle. My blue was brighter in color than Douglas' was. He'd drawn his own circle earlier after telling me that he still didn't trust mine. I compared the two. Both blue, mine a dimmer electric, Douglas' a vibrant ice color. The circles didn't sit still completely. They held to the lines we'd drawn, anchored to the floor, but in the air they shifted and moved, just like our auras did. Mine looked weak. Douglas was right. His circle was better.

Okay, no more screwing around. I called up one of the names Douglas had given me into my mind. Not as easy as it sounds. I tired from the earlier effort. And the bleeding. I could feel

the tickle of south-bound blood on my lower back. Ashley had said that I didn't need blood to summon lesser spirits, but at this point I figured every little bit helped. Keeping my eyes closed, I reached around and swiped what I could off my back. Then I hand printed the floor in front of me with it. Kind of like finger-painting in kindergarten, only gross.

I just hoped Ashley was right. With that thought sitting in my mind, a strange thing happened. It felt like something thin inside me snapped, bursting into a million pieces at once. I sucked in a breath, my spine going rigid with the force of it. This was what closing my first circle had felt like. Times a thousand. Every cell in my body took a shuddering gasp. The dam inside me hadn't broken; it simply evaporated and all my power came rushing out. Years of unused, untouched potential, all at once. And I had to let it go. I felt like I'd explode if I didn't.

Brid gasped, and I heard a sudden commotion in front of me. My eyes snapped open.

A giant hole gaped in mid-air, like someone had cut out a piece of the basement with a pair of scissors.

Ashley, still in catholic girl chic, stood in the portal, talking to one of the freakiest things I'd ever seen. And I'd seen a talking severed head and a zombie panda. He, I assume it was a he, stood a good three feet over Ashley, putting him somewhere in the seven foot zone. He wore a simple linen skirt around his waist and two golden cuffs encircled two of the biggest biceps I'd seen outside of professional wrestling. Though heavily muscled, he wasn't hulking. In fact, he looked more like a swimmer who lifted weights. A lot of weights. But his head was what gave me pause. He had the head of a jackal. Jackals come in many colors, from brown to black to gold, usually. I'd never seen this particular kind of coloring. His muzzle appeared to be a dark gray, shifting into various silvers all the way down to where the fur of the neck met the human

part of the body. Terrifying, yes. But he held a kind of terrible beauty as well. As I stared at him, my mouth hanging in slack-jaw style, I could think of only one word—Awe.

“I’m just saying these new codes are ridiculous.” Ashley’s arms flailed about as she spoke, her face vehement. “What do they care if—”

The creature cleared its throat loudly and tipped its head slightly towards us. She stopped, hands fluttering down to her hips. She looked around.

“Geez Sam, talk about a learning curve.” She pursed her lips and examined the open portal around her. I couldn’t make out anything behind her except a potted house plant for some reason, in a very ornate golden pot.

“Seriously,” she said, “this is pretty good. You even brought Ed here.” She jerked her thumb towards the jackal headed man.

Nice to meet you. The voice boomed inside my head.

“Nice to meet you too...Ed.” I gave him a little head nod before I turned a slightly panicked look towards Ashley. “What are you doing here?”

Her eyebrows shot up. “You must have summoned me. I was just talking to Ed about some new legislature that came down from on high. Or from down low, depending how you look at it.” She scanned the room, eyes in judgment mode. “This place looks different in the light. Not better mind you, just different.”

Her eyes caught on Douglas. Ashley’s face stilled, losing all expression. Since she had a very expressive face, I couldn’t imagine what had caused her to go all poker faced on me. I followed her gaze. Oh, right. Douglas. He had that effect on people.

Ashley poked Ed in the stomach lightly, indicating that he needed to look.

Ed twisted his head and smiled. *Douglas Montgomery*, he said, tongue lolling out in a laugh, *is it finally time?*

Douglas looked to be the picture of calm, but I could see his knuckles whitening as he held onto the crop. “It will never be time,” he answered.

You know what people say about the word never. Ed’s tongue curled up over his nose before slipping into his mouth. *And Ammut is always hungry.*

Douglas gave him a tight-lipped smile. I felt Douglas’ power flow over mine. Not a pleasant feeling. It felt like I’d been plastered in gritty mud and stinging nettles. I tried to push back, but I was already drained to pretty much empty. Douglas overpowered me, and the portal snapped shut.

The room got very quiet. I tried to stand up, but I had to sit back down. Exhaustion coupled with the sudden flow and stop of power was too much for my body to take. I wasn’t even done healing. Hell, I think I was still bleeding. I’d finally hit the point of *enough*. I needed sleep and food. I didn’t care which came first.

Douglas’ shoes made crisp sounds on the concrete as he walked over. He cuffed me with the back of his hand. Then he drew back and did it again. And again.

His eyes were wild, and spittle flew from his lips. Douglas had hit the point of enough as well. He picked me up by my neck and threw me into the concrete wall. The roughness of the wall bit into my back, my scabs, and made me scream. My teeth clicked shut as I bit off the sound.

Douglas pushed his face close to mine.

“Do you have any idea what you’ve done?” He shouted the words at me. “Do you?” He hit me again instead of waiting for the answer. Full fist this time. I heard Brid growling in the background, but it was smothered by Douglas’ semi-coherent accusations.

I couldn’t answer him. Even if I had the will and energy to open my mouth, I truly had no idea what I’d done.

He picked me back up by the throat. I realized that I’d been picked up by my throat a lot lately.

Douglas held me there, pinned against the wall. My world began to fade around the edges. His face came in close to mine and I watched as the anger drained away from him. He’d come to a decision of some sort, but he wasn’t sharing. Instead he held me against the wall as my vision folded in, his breathing steady, his face calm. Not the most encouraging last vision. Panic gripped me, but I was too far gone to care. I slipped into nothingness.

- Chapter 17 -

- Everybody was Kung Fu Fighting -

Ramon parked Tia's car on a side street. The afternoon had shifted from blustery to a more cheerful, partially sunny day as he'd headed north. Ramon estimated that he had fifteen more minutes before the weather did its bipolar thing, probably shifting into a misty rain. He grabbed his skateboard and got out of the car. The skateboard was the closest thing he had to a weapon.

He checked the address he'd jotted down. The mailbox in front of him told him he had the right place, but that was all he had to go on. Douglas' house seemed to be set back on a fairly decent-sized property. Ramon assumed the house was back there somewhere. Right now, all he could see was a lot of pine trees. He steered clear of the small dirt driveway, choosing to stick to the cover of the trees instead.

The brush Ramon cut through grew thickly, making progress slow. Once the house came into view, he crouched down, trying to get the lay of the land. Not for the first time, Ramon questioned the decisions that had led him away from a life of crime and evil. Casa de Douglas was *huge*. Or maybe the house looked huge because he'd been sleeping on the couch in a one bedroom apartment for so long. The great expanse of yard should have dwarfed the house, but the flat plains of grass added to the scale of everything. A sea of grass between him and the house. Trees and shrubbery on all sides, blocking any view of neighbors. Ramon couldn't see the water, but he could hear it and knew they were close to Lake Washington.

This much land, this big house on the water...Douglas must have big pockets. That usually meant a lot of security, but Ramon couldn't see any. Not that he knew what to look for. If he'd spent more time developing a life of crime, he'd be able to spot all kinds of helpful things. Even without security, he still had to cross a large exposed area. All Douglas had to do was peek

out the window, and Ramon would be history. Still, he needed to try. Ramon took a half-step forward.

An arm wrapped around him from behind and yanked him off his feet, making him drop his skateboard. Another hand went over his mouth. The hand smelled like dirt.

“Are you Ramon? Nod if you are.”

Ramon nodded slowly.

“By all that’s holy, would you chill out, Bran? Who the hell else would it be?”

Ramon recognized the other speaker from the answering machine he’d called earlier.

The grip on him loosened. Ramon put his hands out, showing he was unarmed, and turned around slowly.

A handful of people stood around him. The group included a couple of the biggest freaking wolves he’d ever seen, and the people didn’t have them leashed in any way Ramon could see. No way those were dogs. At best, they might be wolf hybrids, if that could be considered an at best. Ramon tried to appear calm, knowing that dogs sense fear. He didn’t want to do anything to give those wolves an excuse to gnaw on one of his legs.

The man who’d grabbed him was tall, maybe six feet, with a grim set to his face. His brown hair was cut in a short, plain style, like he didn’t give a damn what it looked like as long as it stayed out of his face. He wore jeans and a tank top, despite the rainy weather.

The guy next to him was smaller, but still a bit taller than Ramon. He had auburn hair and a prominent nose. Ramon could see some resemblance to the other guy around the jaw line, but where the tall one seemed all business, this one smiled and practically bounced on his feet.

The smaller man held out his hand. Ramon took it. The guy had a good, firm handshake. His skin felt hot to the touch. “Sean,” he said. “And this is the rest of the Merry Men.” He jerked to the group behind them.

“So you guys are here to get...?” Ramon couldn’t remember the name. Bridget?

“Our sister,” Bran said. “It would be safer if you wait here. We’ll do our best to get your friend out if he is still alive.”

Ramon squared his shoulders and got ready to tell off General Jackass when Sean stepped between them. He held a cautionary hand out to Ramon. “You’ll have to excuse Sunshine here; we’re all a bit worried about Brid.” He held his hands out in a ‘you understand’ gesture. “What he means is, our pack leader gave you permission to join us, but we’re worried about your safety. If you choose to come with us, please do what we say.”

Ramon let his shoulders slump. “I understand.” He tried to make eye contact with all of them. “Sammy is family, too. I don’t know what’s up with you guys or your giant, mutant dogs, but I’m willing to swallow some ego if it gets my friend out in one piece.”

Sean rolled his neck from side to side and started shaking out his muscles. He looked like a boxer right before he goes into the ring. “Now that we’re all playing nice, shall we get on with it?”

Bran might have been tough looking, but it was Sean that sent a shiver up Ramon’s spine. He looked way too happy about the prospect of violence.

When I woke, I couldn’t move. The first thing I saw was concrete. I was still in the basement, though I couldn’t tell if I was relieved by that or not. I doubted that Douglas would move me if

he wanted to do something nefarious, but there was some comfort to be found in the familiar surroundings. At least I wasn't in some shiny new hell.

My arms were bound in worn leather straps that appeared to be stained with things I didn't want to think about. My legs were bound in the same way. I was strapped down to an ancient wooden table that would have been the pride and joy of an old fashion insane asylum. I tugged at my straps, bucking my body the best I could, looking for any kind of give. None. I swore, if I ever survived this, I'd never sleep again. Each time I'd woken up lately, things had gone from bad to exponentially worse.

"Sam?"

I turned my head as far as I could. If I angled it up a little, I could just see Brid standing in the cage. At least she looked all right.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"I'm tied to a table."

She gave me a stare that could freeze hell.

"Sorry," I said. "I guess life-threatening situations bring out my inner smartass. Except for the table, I'm no worse than I was before." Except my throat felt sore, but I didn't tell her that. I didn't want to add to her worries. And the very fact that I thought that telling her that would make things worse for her almost made me laugh out loud. She was in a cage and I was strapped down to a freaking table. Seriously, how much worse could this get?

"Bad, Sam, this is bad." Brid chewed on her lip. "Whatever you did scared him. Douglas is unbalanced on a good day. You," Brid shook her head. "He smelled like fear, and I don't think Douglas likes to be afraid."

“That does sound bad.” I tugged again on my arm restraints. Solid. “What do you think the chances are that this contraption is a temporary punishment?”

“Zero,” she said. “It reeks of blood. This whole fucking room stinks of it, and I’m tired of being in here.”

“I know.” I stopped pulling and relaxed. No sense wasting what little energy I had by twisting around.

“What the hell happened to you?” she asked.

“I don’t know.” What the hell had happened to me? “It was like I went from zero to sixty in a second.” I had to stop making car analogies. If I survived this, I’d tack it onto my list of resolutions.

“We need to get out of here.” Brid grabbed onto the bars. “You have to try and call Ashley.”

“I don’t have a circle. Besides, I don’t know if I can again. I think last time might have been a fluke.”

“Douglas said the circle was for protection. I don’t think Ashley is malevolent. She’s not going to hurt you. Just picture her in your mind and call her by name.”

I was skeptical, but I closed my eyes and gave it a shot anyway. We could only gain from trying. I conjured her up in my mind, saddle shoes and all. I took my power and aimed it at that image. When I felt it was strong enough, I whispered her name.

She popped into the room almost immediately.

“Great Cesar’s ghost!” Ashley looked quickly about the room before she ran over to me. Despite Ashley’s experience, I think my ability to get into new and life-threatening situations

shocked her. Personally, I was hoping it was a phase that I would grow out of. At least, I hoped I had a chance to grow out of it.

She reached for my wrists, only to jerk her hand back the second she touched the leather. She shook her hand like she'd been burned. "You know, I like this guy less every second."

"You can't get me out of here, can you?" I felt all hope seep out of me.

She shook her head mournfully. "I'm sorry, Sam. Those damn things are practically soaked in *power de Douglas*, if you get my drift." She stamped her foot. "Damn it, this is frustrating. I'm tired of not being able to help you guys." She nibbled at a thumbnail. "There must be something," she mumbled.

"Hey," Brid said, "can you tell Sam how to open these bars? You know, now that he's outside? If he can get me out, I can undo those straps."

Ashley lit up and gave a little skip of joy. She placed her small hands on my temples. "Close your eyes."

I obediently shut them. One of her hands moved away from my temple and there was a sudden burning on my side. I looked down towards the pain. Little girl had cut me.

"What the hell, Ashley?" Why did everything involve my blood lately? I wasn't a friggin' pin cushion.

"Sorry," she said, though she didn't sound the least bit apologetic. "This is one of those things we need blood for. Or at least, it will be faster with blood." She reached up on her tip-toes and smeared my blood on the symbols etched into the bars on the cage. "Now concentrate, Sam. I want you to picture the cage, the magic inside it."

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Okay, now what?"

“What we’re looking for is a weakness. A small flaw we can exploit. Most spells aren’t perfect, and it will be a lot easier to deal with that than anything else.”

“I already know where the weak spot is.”

“Good,” she said. She sounded surprised. “Now what I want you to do is concentrate all your power on that spot. Shove everything you got into it.”

“What will that do?”

“It should overload it. Like when too much electricity flips a breaker.”

I found the weak spot in the spell and did what Ashley said. It didn’t smash like I’d hoped. More like a slow chipping away. Sweat beaded on my forehead. We didn’t have time for chipping. I clenched my jaw, dug deep and shoved all I had into that one spot.

The breaker tripped, and the glow of the spell on the cage vanished. “Done,” I said.

“Great,” Ashley said, “now we just need to pick the lo—”

I heard a dull snap.

“Never mind,” Ashley said.

Two seconds later, Brid’s face hovered over mine. She smiled, and it went all the way to her eyes. A quick kiss on my mouth, and then she started undoing the leather cuff that held my right hand. The clasp was rusty, but Brid got it undone fairly quickly. One arm freed, I motioned Brid towards my feet while I worked on the other arm.

The sound of the lock above being drawn made us both stop. Brid wouldn’t have time to free me completely. I mouthed the word *hide* at her and Ashley. Since I didn’t know who was coming downstairs, I didn’t want to say it out loud. I don’t know what’s fact or fiction yet about werewolves, but I didn’t want to risk Michael hearing us if the super hearing bit ended up being

true. Added to my list of resolutions, right after never sleep again, I resolved to learn everything I could about everything.

Ashley disappeared in a blink. Brid crept under the stairs. She wouldn't go back in that cage, not if she could help it. Which was smart. If she hid in there and ended up getting locked in again, then we were both up the stream sans paddle.

I slipped my right hand back into the restraint, doing my best to look tied-up. The door banged open. I arched up and saw Michael coming down the steps. When he got to the bottom, he went over to the bookcase. I eased down since I didn't have to arch to see him anymore. Michael pushed aside the bookcase. Sweet Hardy Boys, the basement had a secret room or passage attached to it. Michael bent under the archway and disappeared. I guess I knew where they'd been hiding the restraint table. A table with leather straps wasn't something you could leave lying about. People tend to ask questions about those things at dinner parties. I focused back on Michael before I tried to imagine what kind of dinner parties Douglas might throw. I didn't want to know.

Michael came back out, arms full. I could see a big bowl and a few other things, but I wasn't sure what they were. He saw me and smiled.

"Good to see you awake," he said, the shit-eating grin on his face getting bigger.

"And why is that?"

"I was afraid you might sleep through all the fun." He set down his armload on the floor.

"You really don't like me, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"Why?" I asked. "What did I ever do to you?"

Michael crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “Can’t a guy just hate someone on sight anymore?”

“I guess if you’re an asshole, sure.”

Michael didn’t rise to the bait. He just grunted. He hadn’t once backed down from an insult so far. Michael was the kind of guy they invented the phrase “hair trigger temper” for. I was curious. And afraid.

“How come you’re so chipper?”

“Because,” he said, “I finally get to help kill you.” He seemed really pleased about the prospect too.

My pulse sped up, but I tried to keep the smile on my face. It’s one thing to know there’s a chance people might kill you, or that it’s probable that they will kill you. But when they confirm it, with a smile, it’s a whole other thing all together.

Douglas came down the steps, his sleeves rolled up and ready. His face serene, he walked slowly towards me.

“I thought you said you’d only kill me if I didn’t learn.”

Douglas took his knife down off the bookshelf and studied it.

“I finally did something you told me to do, and I get trussed up for my effort. What gives?”

“You are too vexing to live.”

I waited for him to go on. Nothing. He just checked the edge of his knife.

“That’s it? C’mon, in the movies you can’t get a Bond villain to shut up. You’re not even going to outline your evil plan for me?” I didn’t actually want to hear what he had planned, or

why I ‘vexed’ him. None of that information would set me at ease. My only thought at this point was buying Brid some time. I couldn’t look over at her. I just stalled and hoped.

“I’m not a Bond villain, just as you are no Sean Connery.” He put the knife back on the shelf and went for a piece of chalk. “But out of pity I will, as they say, throw you a bone.” He selected a large chunk of chalk that would have been more at home on a playground hop-scotch diagram. “I don’t know how you hid from me. I don’t know how you veiled your gift once you were here. What you did actually managed to surprise me, and that hasn’t happened in quite some time.” He leaned down and began the circle. “Too many unknowns with you. And since your gift came out to play, I no longer need to train you to draw it out.”

“So you were planning on killing me the whole time?”

Douglas blew away some of the loose chalk. “Not necessarily.”

He had to draw a big circle to get the table and himself inside, so he stood up and moved to another chunk of the floor. Unfortunately that took him right in view of the cage.

The room exploded into motion. Douglas shouted at Michael, who leapt at the cage. Brid dove out of hiding. She let out a warrior scream mid-leap and changed. I’m not sure what I expected. Some amount of twisting limbs, maybe some mucus. I certainly didn’t think the process would be fast. One minute, Brid was howling in mid-air, her arms extended, wearing my Batman shirt and my boxers, the next minute she was vapor. It was like Brid exploded into a million pieces, and when those pieces came back together, she was a white blur of fur and teeth. My shirt and boxers drifted to the floor.

Michael turned so fast I didn’t see him move, but it wasn’t fast enough. Brid caught his arm in her teeth. Her momentum too great to hold on, she continued forward, slicing his arm in the process. Brid hit the ground, sliding on her paws. In her new form, Brid was pure white,

except for the inside of her ears, which were pink like the inner recesses of seashells. As she moved, I caught a spot of crimson on her tail and the back of one of her ears. She'd only looked pure white at first. I'd never seen markings that color before. Her eyes were a blazing red. As she glared at Michael, the blaze grew until it looked like she had balls of flame for eyes.

A popping sound later and Brid was back, only naked now.

"I'd fight you wolf to wolf, but the change would take you way too long." She went into a fighting stance, her face hard.

Michael flicked his arms out and opened his palms. "I can change what I need to." His voice lowered into an eager growl. As I watched, his hands thickened, claws growing from the pads of his fingers.

"C'mon," he said, "where's your dainty claws?" His voice took on a taunting lilt. "Oh, right," he said, "you can't do a partial change, can you, half-breed?"

"No," Brid said, "I can't." She flicked her arms out in a similar motion. Instead of claws, each of Brid's hands held a short sword. The blade flared out from the pommel, a little over two feet in length. Brid rolled her wrists and smiled. As she did, the blades burst into the same flames I'd seen in her eyes earlier. She lunged at Michael who dodged her thrust. He rolled to the side and slashed out with his hand. When they pulled away from each other, Brid was bleeding from her rib cage. The wound looked shallow, and she ignored it. They started circling one another.

A small black and silver blur zoomed past my head, hovering next to Douglas. The blur slowed and landed on the top of the bookshelf, morphing into the shape of Douglas' cat. The cat flicked its tail and settled.

“We have a problem.” The cat’s voice sounded grim. Despite everything, I was surprised when the cat spoke. I’d never seen a cat talk outside of a Disney movie. No wonder everyone had looked at me funny when I pet it.

“Now what?” Douglas asked.

“Intruders,” the cat said.

Douglas cursed under his breath.

“What kind?”

“Wolves, front and back of the house, and what appears to be a kid with a skateboard.” The cat’s tail snapped back and forth. “I recommend postponing the ritual and doing some damage control.”

Douglas rubbed at his mouth with one hand. Brid threw Michael into the wall to the side of us. He bounced back from it and hurled himself back at her like nothing had happened.

“Take care of it,” Douglas said to the cat.

“But—”

Douglas made a slashing motion with his free hand. “Take care of it.”

The cat gave a final flick of its tail before jumping off the bookcase and morphing back into the black and silver blur. It shot up the stairs, gone.

Douglas twirled the knife in his hand. “We better get started.”

- Chapter 18 –
- Those Cats Were Fast as Lightning -

A howl issued from the other side of the house. The hair on the back of Ramon's neck stood up in reaction. The group around him tensed. "What does that mean?" he whispered.

"It means," Sean said, dropping into a runner's crouch, "get ready."

Ramon clutched his board. He leaned down and put one hand on the ground and leaned forward, matching Sean. Sean grinned at him before turning his head back toward the house. Bran didn't smile but held himself in a similar position.

A sharp yip echoed, and the group was off. Ramon ran after them, feet slipping in loose leaf cover and dirt. Though he had never tried out for track, Ramon knew he was pretty fast. You don't spend years skateboarding and not learn how to run from cops. But this group outstripped him easily. The wolves pulled to the front, their people following in their tracks. Sean and the rest seemed to trust the wolves, letting them run without orders or direction, the whole group moving in unison. The image made Ramon think of a flock of birds, each one flying in formation.

Ramon quickly fell to the back. As he watched them leap over bushes and fly across the grass, Ramon wondered if they were somehow cyborgs. He made the sound effect from *The Six Million Dollar Man* under his breath as he took off after them.

A gout of flame came out of nowhere and burned the grass in a swath next to him. Ramon twisted away from it, keeping his feet. When he looked, up he saw a shiny black blur tearing about like a hummingbird. The blur slowed and unleashed another line of fire at the approaching group. As it slowed, Ramon could actually make out what the blob was—a dragon. Only about the size of a housecat, the dragon produced a stream of flame ten times its size. The group scattered but kept moving forward.

The tiny dragon swooped at the wolves, swiping at their eyes with one of its four taloned feet. Ramon heard a few yelps of pain, but not many. One huge, gray wolf leaped at the dragon, snapping at it with its jaws. The wolf missed, but the move forced the dragon to fly back up. This happened a few more times, and while the dragon was getting some good hits in, Ramon couldn't help but notice that the group had gained on the house. The dragon was outnumbered. The creature ignored the odds against it, spitting fire, clawing, and giving the fight its best shot. Even though it was keeping him from Sam, Ramon had to give the little guy some respect. To take on a group like this, even a dragon must have *cajones* the size of watermelons.

After another swoop and yelp, Ramon pulled back his arm and hurled his skateboard as best he could. Distracted by the seemingly bigger threat of the wolf's jaws, the dragon never saw the spinning board coming. Fire-breathing mythical creature or not, the thing was flesh and blood enough to be taken down by an airborne skateboard.

Ramon paused to snag his board, ignoring the stunned creature a few feet from it. He didn't want to kill the thing; he just wanted it out of commission.

Bran leaped over the steps leading to the front porch, slamming into the door as he went. Bran never even hesitated. Surprise rippled through Ramon as he watched the door give way. They poured through the gap after him. A split second later, Ramon heard a similar creak and snap as another door split on the other side of the house.

Ramon ran up the stained wood of the steps. He jumped through the hole that Bran had made, hoping Sammy was still okay somewhere. And that he wasn't too late.

* * *

The fighting continued around the cage, but I ignored it. From the several yips, groans and thuds coming from Michael, Brid could obviously take care of herself. I was more concerned with Douglas. He walked toward me, eyeing me like he was trying to decide where my light meat and my dark meat were. I kept myself from grabbing at him with my free arm. It wouldn't do any good. Douglas stood out of reach, so all I'd accomplish was revealing the only trick I had.

He came at me with the knife, slicing into the still-bound arm. I gritted my teeth, but the scream came anyway. Douglas had kept the knife sharp enough to do its job. A long thin line of red erupted along my arm, right above the blue of my vein. Douglas caught my blood in a bowl that was way too big for my liking. Big bowls mean more blood, and Douglas was the greedy type.

Douglas jumped back as a snarling ball of Brid and Michael slammed into the bookcase. He didn't lose any blood from the bowl. He waited until Brid kicked Michael in the stomach and bobbed to his other side, leading him off in the other direction. I watched, breath caught, blood dripping from my arm onto the ground.

I felt the first drop hit.

As it splashed back up, a sensation tore through my body, like sticking a fork in a light socket. With that one drop I knew something very important.

Douglas had killed a lot of people in this room. And a lot of other things.

He'd slaughtered them for a lot of different reasons.

And they were pissed.

More of my blood fell to the floor. My eyes went wide, and my breath came in short gasps. My whole body went rigid.

Any time I'd tried to do something involving necromancy, I'd floundered. I'd stumbled along blindly, trying to figure out how things worked. I didn't have to do that this time.

When I'd looked at the room earlier, I'd seen a haze and wondered if it was normal. I knew the answer. The air looked hazy because it held an amalgamation of different specters. They were all angry, and they were all howling for Douglas' blood. I doubted there were many places on the earth that looked like that. I wanted to cover my ears, drown out the sound of it. I wondered how Douglas could even walk into the basement, how he could concentrate over the din. Or were they simply calling out for help from the first necromancer that came around besides their killer?

Another drop hit. I was damn near choking on power. My muscles were so rigid I couldn't draw a full breath. I knew I could tell the spirits to be quiet. I knew they'd have to do what I said. I forced myself to listen, to hear all their pain. To pull it all inside me until my chest ached with it.

Because I listened, they told me what to do. I didn't see any other option. I had to hope they wouldn't hurt Brid. I accepted their offer, and my power blew outwards, throwing the room into chaos.

The floor split, and creatures came up from the ground, forming as they climbed, just like the first zombie I'd seen. I heard a loud crash as the fridge under the stairs up-ended, glass vials spilling all over the floor. One of the vials broke open, and the energy inside me expanded. Blood. Douglas had been keeping vials full of blood in his fridge. The spirits didn't like it as much as mine. It wasn't fresh. But they used it all the same.

Biting spirits materialized and flew at Douglas. Their hands out, aiming for his throat, his clothes, anything. He held up his arms, throwing out his own power and keeping them at bay.

I felt him try to activate his circle. Too late, he realized he'd never finished it. He'd been in too much of a rush after Brid's attack.

Another drop bled into the floor, and I egged the spirits on.

More people poured into the room, people I didn't recognize. No, not people. In the throws of magic, I could see twists of color, some like Brid, and some like something I'd never seen. I'd figure it out later. Wolves came at their heels. The giant beasts hurled themselves at Douglas. I felt that nettle and mud feeling as he used his will to turn some of the weaker spirits away from him and onto the wolves. I watched as a confused zombie turned from Douglas and leaped onto a tall, short-haired man in a tank top. I did my best to keep them pointed away from the strangers and towards the real enemy, but Douglas had more training than me. His tactic worked, keeping a mass of undead bodies and spirits between him and the intruders.

The room was turning into one solid brawl.

Douglas went back to his spell, words streaming from his lips. He used the blood from the bowl to draw symbols on my legs and heart. I couldn't turn away. I had to stay focused on controlling the spirits.

The world tunneled in and became only two things: the spirits and Douglas. I had to tune everything else out and hope it would work. I didn't have a choice. Between the anger and the built up power, the spirits were in a frenzy. They attacked anyone or anything they came into contact with. I couldn't send them back. The best I could do was damage control and hope that everyone would be okay.

I heard a shout, and my world folded out again: Ramon at the top of the stairs; Ramon barreling towards me, board in hand, swinging at anything in his way. Douglas didn't even look. He just made a negligent pushing motion with his hand, and a zombie attacked Ramon. The

ragged creature picked him up and threw him under the stairs. The crowd enveloped him, and I couldn't see if he was okay.

Mrs. W didn't hesitate but drove right up the damn driveway like an old bat out of hell. Tia crouched down in her seat, but Haley leaned forward, anxious to get there.

"Are we not even going to try for stealth?" Tia asked, grabbing onto the door as they hit a pothole in the road.

Mrs. W snorted. "Ramon is already here, and from the looks of it, a lot of other people, too. Stealth is a long-gone concept."

Haley had to agree. As they approached the yard, she could see scorched earth and broken doors. She tried to make sense of it. Had there been a flamethrower fight? "Where do you think Sam is?" she asked. She squashed the tremor of fear in her voice. Fear wouldn't do her or Sam any good. This was a rescue mission. She had to concentrate on that.

Tia unfurled from her crouch, her desire to examine the yard more powerful than her fear of Mrs. W's driving. Or, Haley thought, it might just be because the car was finally going under eighty miles an hour.

Tia squinted, looking for a sign. She suddenly pointed towards the back of the house. "There," she said.

"You sure?" Mrs. W asked, even though she'd already started driving over grass to get there.

"Yes," Tia said, eyes going toward the eaves of the house. For the first time Haley noticed the biggest freaking crow she'd ever seen. How had she missed that?

“Okey-dokey.” Mrs. W down-shifted and hit the gas, tearing huge chunks out of the yard, her face filled with devilish glee. It occurred to Haley that Mrs. W was enjoying this, a fact confirmed when Mrs. W said, “I hope ol’ Dougie has a good gardener on staff,” before letting loose a demented cackle.

Haley hunkered down in her seat and braced herself for the end of the ride.

Sweat beaded on my lip as I tried to maintain some measure of control over the situation. But with my blood flowing onto the floor and my energy waning under the strain, I didn’t think I had much more in me.

Douglas continued to mumble and throw my blood around. I couldn’t see everything he was doing, but I didn’t really want to. I didn’t need to see him to know that his spell was coming together. I could feel the power of it pressing on the backs of my eyelids. I shuddered as the spell crawled along my skin. It felt oily and unclean.

The power of the spell jack-knifed up, and I knew Douglas was almost done. If I had any tricks, the time to use them had come.

As he reached across me to draw a symbol on my head, I jerked my right hand out of the cuff and slammed my fist into his eye. As my knuckles connected with his cheek and brow, I felt his surprise. He stumbled back, and I grabbed for the knife. My palm wrapped around the top of the blade, cutting into the soft flesh of my hand. I managed to get a finger or two around the hilt. Jaw clenched, I yanked the knife away from Douglas, the pressure causing the blade to cut deeper into my palm.

Douglas lunged, his mouth carved into a snarl. I threw my arm forward as he did, putting as much force as I could into the stab.

The world slowed down as the knife bit into his throat. The sounds of fighting around me dimmed. In the new quiet, I could hear the wet pop as the blade slid home. The hilt protruded from his neck. Douglas' eyes went panic-wide. Anger changed to surprise and fear, the emotions boiling over onto my skin. He hadn't thought me capable of this. He'd underestimated me greatly, and I felt that thought register. I could literally feel his pain. How had he been able to do this so many times if it felt like this?

We stayed frozen like that, both of us overwhelmed. The image of Douglas bleeding, dying, my hand on the hilt of the blade, burned itself into my brain. It would probably stay with me until the day I died.

He jerked away from me, pulling the knife free from his neck. Blood spray hit me in the face. I must have hit an artery. His blood hit my tongue—a viscous, heavy saltiness. My heart shuddered. No, not my heart. Douglas' heart.

We'd completed the spell.

Power ran through me, stronger than before. My body convulsed with it, but I didn't drop the knife. Douglas dropped to his knees, and another wave took me. Something old and brittle shattered in my chest. My heart fluttered for a split second, tied to Douglas' floundering beat. I felt the rhythm stumble and slow.

I felt him die.

At the same moment I felt another death, like a fluttering motion on the edge of my field of vision. My eyes stayed stuck on Douglas, but in my mind I could see Brid. Her face and hands bloody, her pale form standing over the crumpled heap of Michael. She'd gotten her revenge,

though she didn't look happy about it. She didn't cry, but she looked sad. Sad that it had to come to this, that she had to kill one of her own.

Brid was the only point of stillness in a sea of motion. Everyone else around her was still battling the dead. But Brid made no move to help them. Instead, she stared and watched as Michael's blood leaked out from the tear in his throat.

I watched with her. I felt it as the red pool spread at her feet.

And it was too much.

I screamed then—not a scream of pain—but an ending peal of torment. The pain was excruciating. The pain felt glorious. I could feel every nerve in my hand, every cut in my back, every sensation magnified until the line between good and bad blurred into something so awesome, so awful, that I had to open my mouth and let it out.

I felt the room still, the fighting pause, everyone and everything hanging onto that scream. I couldn't get a handle on it. In my mind I grabbed at it, tried to find an edge, but there was none. Power clawed at my insides, trying to get out.

My gift was tearing me apart.

I continued to scream, though my voice was becoming hoarse. I'd never known how much damage a sound could do to my throat. And I didn't care. I kept screaming because it was all I could do.

It was Haley who grabbed my face. Her gray eyes bored into mine. I didn't realize how hot my cheeks were until her cool hands burned into them. I looked for the horror in her eyes. Horror for what had happened, for what I'd done, for what I'd become. I couldn't find it. Haley looked at me like she always did when she needed me to focus on what she was saying.

I stopped screaming. I grabbed her wrist with my free hand and held on.

“Put them back,” she whispered.

Was she whispering, or was I having a hard time hearing? I could see the creases in her lips as they moved. She wanted me to put something back. Wait...someone. She wanted someone put back. But I couldn't remember who or what.

Haley must have seen my confusion. “The dead. Put them back.” She annunciated each word. She'd left her hair down instead of putting it in her usual ponytail. It formed a black frame around her face, making her look older. My little sister was growing up. She shook my face, trying to get my attention. “Put the dead back in the freaking ground *now*, Sam.”

Of course. The dead were scattered like toys that I needed to put away. Biting, undead toys. I shivered against the chill of her palms and nodded. I didn't even have to try to find them. The spirits were all there at my finger tips. Go to sleep, I told them. It's done. It's all over.

One by one, I felt them return to the earth. The power poured with them as they went, but it didn't leave entirely. I could feel it curled up in my chest like a sleeping cat. The table shuddered as the floor shifted back into its original shape. I didn't see it. I stared into Haley's eyes until she told me I was done.

I don't remember anything after that.

- Chapter 19 -
- Back in Black -

For the first time in a week, I woke up somewhere pleasant. Okay, a hospital bed isn't usually described as *pleasant*, but no one was kicking my ass or throwing me into a cage, so on the whole, everything seemed fantastic to me. The room was light and airy, and the blankets were soft. The bed felt great—definitely one of the nicest beds I'd ever run into in a hospital. Not that I'd spent much time in hospitals. The comfortable bed made me feel better about the fact that my entire body ached. But, to be honest, I was kind of surprised to be alive, so complaining about the pain wasn't too high on my list.

The room was empty—empty except for someone I'd never seen before. He sprawled in an easy chair next to the bed, idly flipping through the comics section of a newspaper. He wore jeans and a T-shirt that read, *Control the Population: Support Cannibalism!* in big block letters. Between his reddish hair and easy manner, I figured him to be a relation of Brid's.

"You made me miss Sunday," he said, not looking up from the paper.

"Excuse me?" I coughed when I tried to talk. He handed me a plastic mug of water with a bendy straw, still not looking up.

"Sunday's comics," he said. "So now I have to catch up." He tossed the paper on the floor. "I miss *Calvin and Hobbes*."

"Don't we all."

We stared at each other for what felt like five extremely long seconds. The window was open, and a soft spring breeze drifted in. "So you're the guy who did the no-no cha-cha with my baby sister."

My stomach twisted. Was he pretending to be nice to cover the fact that he wanted to eat my face? If I ever ran into a guy who'd even touched Haley, I know I'd want to smack him

around. I closed my eyes, ready to accept whatever action this guy felt he had to dish out. “I’m in hell, aren’t I? You’re the devil, and I died in Douglas’ basement.”

He cocked his head. “You always this high-strung?”

“No, I mean, I don’t think so,” I grunted as I tried to sit up, which turned out to be much harder than I thought. The guy hopped out of his chair to help me. With a little finagling, we managed a position that didn’t make me want to vomit from the pain. He even slipped another pillow behind my back so I could rest easy. “Sorry,” I mumbled, “bad week.”

“So we’ve been told.” He eased back down in the chair.

“Is that how you knew? You know, that Brid, um...” I’ve never had—nor wanted to—talk to someone about sleeping with their sister. The experience was just as awkward as I would have imagined. The guy jumped in, saving me from my embarrassment.

“Calm down, captain. Brid and I are close, but we don’t talk about everything.” He scratched his chin. “At least, I don’t think we do. Either way, she didn’t say anything to me. But let me tell ya’,” he said, tapping his nose, “this thing isn’t just for ornament.”

“I don’t even want to think about what you’re implying. Can we change the subject please?”

He crossed his feet and rested them on the edge of my bed. “Humans, always so uptight. Fine. You hungry?”

My stomach practically sat up and begged.

“I know that look,” he said with a laugh. “What do you want?”

“Anything?”

He nodded. “You’ve reached semi-hero status right now,” he said, standing up and stretching. “I’d take advantage of it.”

I'd hit that level of hungry where anything sounded good. I'd chew on a block of wood if they brought it to me right now. But as I thought, a promise came to mind.

"Do you have waffles?"

His mouth twitched after I'd said it.

I felt a twitch of annoyance. What was wrong with waffles? I never thought I'd have to get defensive over a breakfast food but—"What's so funny?" I asked.

"You almost died, and you want waffles." He slapped my shoulder, which hurt. "I think we'll get along just fine.

He ambled towards the door. "Anything else?"

"If it's not too much to ask, could I have fresh strawberries and whip cream, too? No compote. I'm, uh, allergic. And two plates, please."

If he thought the request odd, he didn't say so. "Right," he said, ticking the list off on his fingers, "waffles, strawberries, whip cream, two plates, no compote. Got it."

"Thanks." I realized I didn't actually know his name so I tacked on a lame, "you."

"You're welcome," he shouted from the hallway, "and it's Sean."

"Oh," Ashley groaned, eyes rolling dramatically, "this is awesome." She dug into her second helping with as much gusto as the first. Once Sean had seen Ashley eat, he'd quickly called down to the kitchens for more waffles. Then he crouched in the easy chair, chin in hands, taking in the spectacle.

"She's like a machine," he said, voice awed. "You sure you're not a werewolf?"

Ashley shook her head while she scooped up a blob of whip cream with her fork. “Why,” she said, “do you eat a lot of waffles?”

“We eat a lot of everything,” he said.

“Why is that?” I stabbed a strawberry with my fork.

“Higher metabolism.” His eyes stayed riveted on Ashley. “Dude, the black hole of Calcutta is smaller than your stomach.”

Ashley examined her now empty plate with a look of regret on her face.

“Don’t lick the plate,” I said.

“I wasn’t going to.”

“Yeah, you were.” I handed her the rest of my waffle. I’d managed one and a half. As starved as I was, I had to pace myself. One and a half waffles as big as my head coupled with orange juice was enough for now. “So you’re like Brid, a hybrid?”

“Yeah,” he said, snaking a strawberry from Ashley’s plate. She reached out to smack his hand but stopped when I looked at her. Sean popped the strawberry in his mouth, unconcerned.

He stopped chewing when an older man entered the room. Sinewy and lean as the older man was, I’d seen a lot bigger than him lately. But appearances, I’d learned, were deceiving. The man held himself with authority, and from the way Sean suddenly grew quiet, I was willing to bet the man had authority coming out the wazoo.

He sat down on the edge of my bed. “My name,” he said, “is Brannoc Blackthorn. I’m Bridin’s father.” The subtext being that he was also the head of Brid’s pack, which meant, as werewolf things went, Brannoc was the toughest in the city. Personally, just telling me he was Brid’s father was enough to get my adrenaline going. I hate meeting parents.

“Sam,” I said, shaking his hand. “Thank you for the cavalry.”

He squinted, just a slight tension around the eyes, and I felt like he was sizing me up. I didn't know what he was comparing me to. Other boys Brid had brought home? Other necromancers? I hope I passed inspection. Brannoc was the kind of guy I wanted in my corner, not against it.

"You're welcome, though you understand we were mostly there for my daughter."

"Of course." I wished he'd stop sitting on my bed and get it. I didn't think he was going to hurt me, but he was still an imposing man, and I wanted him elsewhere.

"I wanted to thank you, Sam, for helping her stay safe."

"You're welcome."

He had stubble on his chin, and he looked tired. From the lines around his eyes and mouth, he looked like he spent a lot of his time smiling. He didn't smile now. I wasn't the only one who'd had a hard week.

"Where exactly am I?" I asked. "I need to call my family, let them know I'm okay."

"Your mom knows where you are. We sent her and your sister home for a shower and some sleep." His mouth twitched, and I could tell he was trying not to smile. In that moment, I could see hints of Sean in his face. I bet on a normal day, a day when he wasn't totally bogged down with worry, that Brannoc would be a lot of fun. "It took some convincing," he said. "I don't think your mom trusts us entirely." He waved me off before I could say anything. "Which is exactly what I would be thinking in her place. They'll be back in a bit."

He got up from the bed. "This is our own private clinic, Sam. You can stay here until our doctor says you're okay to go."

"I don't have insurance."

“I’m your insurance,” he said. He turned to Sean. “When he’s well enough, he can visit his friend.” Then he left before I could ask what that meant. When I bugged Sean, all he would tell me was that Ramon had a room down the hall, and that he was fine. Then he quickly changed the subject.

My mom kept squeezing me until Sean told her she might pop my stitches. Besides the finally healing wounds on my back, I had some nice patch work on my arm. I’d barely even have a scar. Well, on my arm. My back was going to look pretty freaky once it healed. Ashley reminded me that chicks dig scars, and at least I wasn’t dead. Not much for sympathy, our Ashley.

Haley came with my mom, as well as Mrs. W. My mom looked worried and kept adjusting my blanket and my pillow, like she couldn’t figure out what to do with her hands. Haley looked excited to see me, and Mrs. W looked like she always did. I guess it takes a lot to impress Mrs. W.

My mom explained, somewhat sheepishly, that she’d arranged for Mrs. W to get an apartment next to mine in order to keep an eye on me. She waited for me to get angry, but I told her I understood. Hell, it’d been a good choice. Mrs. W handed me a package of those deli-made chocolate chip and M&M cookies.

“Don’t take it too hard,” Mrs. W said, referring to my mom’s revelation. “It turns out I liked you anyway.” She opened the package and took a bite out of one of the cookies. “Besides,” she said, wiggling her hips, “there was a dance studio right down the street. Because of you, I learned how to salsa.” I tried not to picture Mrs. W doing any of the forbidden dances.

Once Haley got Mom to settle down, mostly by grabbing Mom's hands and telling her to cut it out, she went through her part of the story, not bothering to ask if we wanted her to or not. I actually didn't mind. I'd been occupied for a lot of it. Apparently, Haley had dragged my ass the whole way to the car. And I could tell by the look on her face, she'd be using that against me for a long time.

Halfway through Mrs. W's reenactment of her speeding car chase, complete with vroom noises, a man knocked on the door frame.

"Excuse me," he said, entering the room without waiting for a response. He held a briefcase almost as shiny as his shoes, which he opened on the table.

The way everyone stopped and stared, I could tell they didn't know him. I didn't recognize him either. He had close-cropped dark hair and a nice suit, nice enough that I knew he'd probably had it tailored.

He handed me a very large stack of papers.

"What's this?"

He glanced up from another file that he'd pulled out of his briefcase. "You're one Samhain Corvus LaCroix, are you not?"

"I am."

"Then I need you to sign all the orange highlighted spots, as well as initial all the pink highlighted areas."

I'm not sure what I expected him to do, but asking me to sign on the highlights wasn't it. I leaned into my pillow and stared at him, trying to read the guy. Nothing but a stern, yet somehow blank, face.

"And why would I do that?" I asked carefully.

The man put down the file. “So I can do my job and transfer the estate to you.”

“My what?”

The man sighed. “Did you or did you not kill one Douglas Montgomery?”

“I’m not answering that without a lawyer.” It seemed like the right thing to say. That’s what they always said on TV, anyway.

“I am your lawyer.” The man looked at me dryly and handed me a business card that informed me that he was Mr. Paul Mankin, attorney at law.

“I think I’d know if I hired a lawyer.” From the firm set of his jaw, I think the guy wanted to kill me as well.

He pointed at the stack in my hand. “Those papers state that you, Samhain LaCroix, did kill one Douglas Montgomery in what the Council deems as a sanctioned fight to the death. When such an event occurs, the Council appoints an attorney,”—he jabbed his finger into his own chest—“me, to represent you and take care of all the details. You walked away. Douglas didn’t. Therefore, in accordance with Council law, you inherit his position on the Council, at least temporarily, as well as all his worldly goods and possessions.”

I stared at him, completely stunned. Did he just say what I thought he said?

“I get all his stuff?” I said slowly, “including his house?” The house I’d been trapped in for days. A chill went down my spine as I thought about it. I had no desire to go there ever again. I could see no reason to.

“Yes.” The lawyer handed me a pen. “And a temporary Council seat until you can be voted in properly or until we find a more suitable candidate.”

I took it, but I didn’t sign. I looked at the group around me, none of them giving me any hint as to what to do. “Is this standard?” I asked.

A lot of shrugs and a few blank looks. Ashley was the only one who nodded.

“The Council frowns on dueling, but according to the witnesses, Douglas didn’t give you much choice, so you should be free and clear.”

“So it’s all legit?”

He nodded.

I started skimming the pages. I knew I was supposed to read them, but I really didn’t care at that moment. “Why not just sell the house? Or give it to one of his descendents?”

“Douglas had no descendents,” the lawyer said, “and we can’t just sell the house. The Council has deemed it too...dangerous to hand off to humans.”

“Great, so I won the creepy death house.”

“Yes,” the lawyer said, either missing the joke or not thinking it was funny. I was betting on the latter. As much as I hated the idea of owning my prison, he had a point. The house was probably too dangerous to foist on the unsuspecting populace. Not that it would be much better in my ignorant hands. Still, I’d rather risk myself than some innocent newlyweds or something. Maybe I could bulldoze the house and burn the rubble. Then I could bury the ashes and start over.

I finished flipping through the pages and began to sign on the highlighted marks. I barely even read parts of it. One chunk did catch my eye.

“It says I have to take care of the funeral arrangements according to their wishes.”

The lawyer nodded. “Again, standard. It’s to keep the victor from desecrating the corpse. Dignity is very important to the Council. In this particular case, though, it will be unnecessary.”

“Why,” Sean said, “didn’t Douglas have dignity?”

“No corpse,” the lawyer answered.

I froze. No corpse? Not good. No corpse means he could still be around. Everyone who has ever watched a soap opera or a slasher flick knows that.

“What—” I had to lick my lips and start again. “What do you mean, no corpse?”

For the first time, the lawyer seemed to look at me as a real person. He fidgeted with his tie and then awkwardly patted me on the hand. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about. From what I’ve heard, the boost in your power base alone is proof that he is truly dead. The spell he used would have only transferred his powers to you if he died.”

“He’s right,” Ashley chimed in. She gave me a reassuring smile.

“Besides,” the lawyer continued, “from Douglas’ paperwork, it is my understanding that he had a rare *pukis*.” At our collectively puzzled looks he said, “It’s a creature that originates from the area around the Baltic states—a house spirit, if you will.”

An image of Douglas’ talking cat came to mind. The lawyer kept talking as I wondered if the pet store carried *pukis* food. Did they eat Friskies? Was that beneath them? I was quickly getting out of my depth.

“It wouldn’t have been out of character for it to steal the body and hide it away,” the lawyer explained. “Either for burial or...hoarding purposes.”

“This just keeps getting better,” I said, going back to the form. “My killer death house might also have a rotting body hoarded in it and something called a *pukis*. Just great.” I wondered how much renting a bulldozer cost. And would I have to get a license in order to drive it myself? It was worth looking into.

* * *

After the lawyer left, happily clutching his paperwork, Ashley shooed everyone out except for my mother and Sean. He'd pulled guard duty, I guess. He didn't tell me why I needed a guard, only that it might look bad if I died in their care. I hoped he was joking. My mom sat quietly in the corner, staring at her hands as if willing them to stay still.

"Since you've leaped from no-talent-hack to fancy necromancer—" Ashley said.

"Hey!"

Ashley flashed her dimples at my indignant outburst. It worked, too. I instantly forgave her.

"You warrant a few personal spirits." She snapped, and a mirror appeared on the wall. She checked her appearance, nodded in approval, and then made the mirror vanish again.

"Show off."

Ashley smoothed her skirt, making a point to ignore me. "These will act as guides, go-betweens to the land of the dead. I've decided to be one of yours."

I grunted, twisting a little to adjust my pillow. "What, did I lose a coin toss?"

"A Harbinger as a guide is nothing to scoff at," she said, scolding. Her tone would have sounded ridiculous on any other young girl, but Ashley managed it well. "You should be grateful."

"Thank you." She ignored any sarcasm in my voice and told me that I was quite welcome. After pointedly looking at me and my mom, she left. I got the feeling that Ashley would not be a quiet guide.

Sean got the idea, too, but he only went as far as the outside of the door, which he explained gave only the illusion of privacy.

He pointed to his ears. "These aren't for ornament, either."

My mom and I sat in quiet for a time. She pulled the chair up next to my bed and held my hand. Her skin looked pale, her eyes bloodshot.

“Tired?” I asked her.

She squeezed my hand. “I’m supposed to be worrying about you,” she said.

“I think you’ve met the quota on that for the day.” We fell silent again. I let the minutes stretch, happy, sitting there with my mom. There’d been a time where I’d thought I might not see her again.

“Sam—” her tone was soft, like she was about to launch into another round of apologies. Though we had a lot to work through, I didn’t want to face that today. Even if I could have, I couldn’t stand the tight look of worry on my mom’s face.

“No, Mom, it’s okay.” I gave her a faint smile. “We’re going to start over. What’s done is done.” I stared at the bruised stitching on my arm. “And we’re both going to have to live with that.”

She started to argue, but after searching my face with her eyes, decided not to. “When you’re better, we’ll go find your uncle. Get that last binding removed,” she said.

“No rush,” I said. “I should probably get used to what I have first.”

She smoothed my hair back with her hand. “Deal,” she said. She looked like she wanted to cry, but she didn’t. My mom always tried to be strong for us, whether we needed it or not. I guess it runs in the family, because I was trying to do the exact same thing for her.

They made me sleep after that. When I woke up, the sun had gone down and the room was dark. The darkness felt comfortable, like a warm bed on a rainy night. I could hear the quiet beep of a

monitor down the hall. Sean had been replaced by another man, a younger version of Brannoc, who introduced himself as Bran. Apparently, it was a family name. Curled up in the chair with him, and no longer wearing my clothes, was Brid. She slept, her eyes dancing under the lids, her head cradled on her brother's chest.

“She's fine,” Bran said, anticipating my question. “Physically anyway. Mentally? Nothing some time with her pack can't fix.”

My heart did a small painful skip, but I understood. She needed to be with family. Bran kissed her forehead and murmured something. Brid's eyes popped open. She leaped off her brother's chair and on to my bed. I tried not to groan at the pain of it. What's pain compared to a pretty girl?

She kissed me firmly on the lips, something that made me uncomfortable. I'd never been too great at kissing people in front of family. Too weird. I didn't want to see Haley lip-locked with some shmoe, and I assumed Bran felt the same way. Brid, of course, ignored both our discomforts and did what she wanted.

Bran cleared his throat.

“Fine,” Brid said. She poked my ribcage. “You feel like taking a little walk?”

The clinic differed from regular hospitals in several ways. One, I didn't have to wear paper peek-a-boo pajamas. Someone with a sense of humor had stocked the clinic with flannel wolfman pajamas, the images resembling the monster movies from the '50s. Very flattering. No slippers, though. Bran told me that most of the pack avoided shoes when they could, so they didn't bother.

Another difference was that the building itself resembled more of a big house than anything institutional, at least in regard to layout. The medicinal smell remained, and most of the surfaces were easy to wash. There were a lot of fresh flowers about, and plenty of skylights. I didn't see a lot of staff either. And if the waffles were anything to go by, the food tasted about eight thousand times better.

The other differences ran toward the odd side of things. Some of the rooms were glorified cages. The outer rooms, like the hallways and lounge areas, had no windows. When I pointed that out, Bran said it was in case someone escaped before their release time. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what that meant.

A few of the beds had metal restraints, which Bran told me were made out of silver.

"I thought silver was bad," I said looking into one of the rooms.

Bran shrugged. "When a werewolf grows up in this city, they have their pack to guide them through the change. It's natural, a part of life. Not everyone has the benefits of a pack," he said, "and some are outsiders. Everything about the process is new to them. Adult shape shifters are strong." He frowned, and I could tell he didn't like what he had to say. "Occasionally, we have to restrain them for their own safety, until they learn."

"But if they grew up with it, why do they have problems now?"

Brid slipped her arm around my waist. "You of all people should understand that things are delayed sometimes."

I rested my hand on her shoulder, her skin hot to the touch, even with her shirt in the way. "But I thought the change was a genetic thing with you guys."

"It is for us because we are fey," Bran said, his voice matter-of-fact. "The change, magic, it's all part of who we are."

“But each kind of shifter is different,” Brid said. “Werewolves are genetic. If a werewolf has a baby, the baby will most likely be a Were.”

“Right,” said Bran, “but they are also, in their own way, contagious. In the case of werewolves, the trait can be passed through blood.” Bran paused in front of a closed door. “That doesn’t mean you turn just because you’re infected. For reasons we’re not sure of, some are immune. Others turn. A few unlucky ones have a reaction and don’t make it through the change.” He sounded sickened. “Not a pleasant way to go.”

“You said each kind of shifter, there are different kinds?” I was genuinely curious. Not just because I’d made a promise to learn more if I lived, but because I found all this new information fascinating. The ones who caught the disease probably felt differently.

“Lots,” Brid said. “Nature enjoys variety. Why would she make just one kind of something?”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” I said. I’m sure I hadn’t thought of all kinds of things. “Are other shifters the same, then?”

“No,” Bran said, hesitant. “Some, the *Encantado* for example, are purely genetic.”

“*Encantado*?” I mouthed to Brid.

“Were-dolphin,” she mouthed back.

I couldn’t decide if being a were-dolphin would be really cool or the short straw in the shifter game. I suppose it mattered how close I was to tuna nets.

“Snakes have a highly contagious bite,” Bran continued, “but their blood does nothing.” He reached for the door knob, but didn’t turn it. “And a few, like the bear, are contagious only through blood, and even then only rarely.”

Brid tightened her arm around me. I could feel the worry pouring off her. No, not just her, both of them. Now that I'd noticed it, I couldn't believe I hadn't seen it earlier. A thought seeped into my brain. It had been a tumultuous day, and I had believed that if anything was seriously wrong, someone would have told me.

"What's wrong with Ramon?" I asked. Fear clenched my gut.

In answer, Bran opened the door.

I had to force my feet to take me into the room. Brid and Bran wouldn't be this anxious if Ramon was okay. They also would've answered me. The flip side was that they would have told me immediately if he'd died. Was whatever happened worse than that? I pushed myself past the doorway. Whatever had happened, Ramon lived. We could get past anything else.

Ramon lay on the bed, arms and legs chained, an IV tube jutting out of his forearm. His skin looked red, flushed. Sweat poured off him, drenching his sheets. He wore no shirt, so I could see the flesh roiling beneath his skin.

"What happened?" I said. "Did he get—" I cleared my throat. "The only thing I saw was him hit the floor."

"He landed square on a broken glass vial," Brid whispered. Her voice sounded hoarse and sad. "No one knew Douglas had been collecting blood samples. Or what he had planned for them." She hugged herself. "Rare ones, too. No one knows where he found it."

I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants. "What did he get exposed to?"

"Bear," Bran said. He stood back, giving the bed a wide berth.

Brid stood back, too. They were treating him as if he were dangerous. Ramon would have gotten a kick out of that.

I pointed to one of the chains. “Are these really necessary?”

Bran’s look was sympathetic. “We don’t ever chain unless it’s necessary. Bear is a volatile strain, and Ramon’s body is fighting it.” A thread of respect entered his voice. “He’s holding his own, though.”

I stood over him, wishing I could do something. I’d been so happy to be free that I hadn’t even begun to tally up my debts. I owed Ramon a lot.

They let me hang around for a bit, giving me time to talk to my friend, even though I wasn’t sure if he could hear me. When they decided that I needed more rest, they steered me back to my room.

“We’ll take good care of him, Sam,” Brid said.

“Like he was family?” I made it a question.

Bran helped me into my bed.

“He is family now,” he said softly.

I got released from the clinic before Ramon. They loaded me up with a pill bottle full of sedatives so I could sleep and sent me on my way.

Brid assured me that Ramon had made some improvement, but I couldn’t see it. He’d have to stay at the clinic for a few more weeks at least. Brannoc promised me he’d watch over him as if he were his own. I had to take Brannoc at his word. He seemed like the kind of guy

who took his word very seriously. When I expressed my fears to Ashley, she told me that she'd heard that fey couldn't lie. I hoped she was right.

Until then, I had to play the waiting game. I hated waiting, and waiting with this sick, unsure feeling in my stomach was torture.

Sean offered me a ride, but I needed a touch of the familiar to settle myself. I'd handled a lot of upheaval in the last week.

I called Frank before I left the hospital. When I didn't reach him, I called Plumpy's. He got really excited when he picked up and heard my voice, but the boss wouldn't let him come get me. As stoked as Frank was to see me, he had bills to pay. Bills, however, were no longer a problem.

"You pick me up, Frank, and I'll hire you as an assistant."

He sounded intrigued but wary. We had trained Frank well.

"Honest, Frank. I've got more money than I know what to do with." Something good should come out of Douglas' filthy blood money. And I counted freedom from fast food as something good.

"Yeah—wait. How much you paying?"

I felt a flutter of pride. Our little Frank was growing up. Ramon would be proud. The flutter died, and I was back with that sick feeling. "Salary, man. Full benefits. Whatever you want."

"I'll be there in twenty minutes."

* * *

I made Frank take me back to my apartment, stopping only to grab Brooke. Frank babbled at me the whole time. I only half-listened, letting his voice roll over me, happy to see him again. Happy that at least Frank had made it through this whole mess unscathed.

As good as it was to see Frank, his puppy dog enthusiasm was exhausting me.

I sent Frank to the store when we got back. I hadn't had much food in my apartment to begin with, and now I had even less.

"He's just excited to see you," Brooke said. Frank had positioned her box on the table so she could see me before he left. I'd embedded myself in the couch and refused to move.

"I know," I said, pinching the bridge of my nose. A headache was brewing. Maybe I needed to bust into those sedatives now.

"You ready to talk," she said, "or would you rather continue your pity party?"

"That's not fair," I said.

"News flash, Sam." She eyed me steadily until I realized how ridiculous my last statement had been. I was telling a girl who'd recently lost damn near everything that things weren't fair. Well, no shit. Brooke was right. Of course things weren't fair. And yes, my life wasn't what I wanted it to be right now, but sitting here and wallowing wasn't going to change anything.

"Sorry," I said.

"I know," she said, her cheeks becoming flushed, "but you don't have anything to be sorry about. Yeah, I'm dead, Ramon is sick, and you got the crap beat out of you. You also met a girl, got strange mutant powers, and kicked some ass."

"You're over-simplifying," I said.

"And you're over-complicating," she said, her tone firm. "Let it go."

“I had to kill a man.”

“Bad man, Sam. Very bad man.” A strand of hair fell in front of her eyes, and she blew at it, but it kept coming back down. I slowly pulled myself off the couch and tucked it behind her ear.

“I still didn’t want to kill him,” I said, looking at the floor. I waited for some feeling to come. Remorse, maybe. But nothing came. I felt hollow as I stared at my dirty carpet.

“I know,” Brooke said, her voice soft.

Another chunk of hair worked its way free from her ponytail holder and drifted in front of her face. She let out a frustrated grunt and blew it out of her way. When it drifted back in front of her eyes, I tucked it back with the other one.

“I can’t live like this,” she said.

I gave her chin a tweak. “You won’t have to.”

“Thanks,” she said, “for everything.”

My chest ached, and although it wasn’t from an injury, I took one of my sedatives anyway. I turned the TV on for Brooke, and crashed out in my room. It felt like heaven.

When I got up, I couldn’t get settled. Even with Frank and Brook there, the apartment felt empty. I missed Ramon.

The sudden inactivity after weeks of tension and adrenaline was driving me crazy. I needed to find something to do. Luckily, after checking my messages, I realized I had plenty to do. The first thing I did was call my lawyer. Detective Dunaway had called several times; while I couldn’t put off the interview forever, I needed to buy myself some time. I called Mankin and

had him take care of it. It was nice to hand a problem off to someone else. I should have gotten a lawyer years ago.

“Are you ready?” I asked. We were losing light, and I didn’t want to trip over any grave stones. The wind blew cool against my cheek as I waited for Frank. I could smell freshly cut grass and a mixture of flowers.

Frank nodded, his brown eyes open too wide, like he was trying not to cry. He wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“It’s okay, Frank,” Brooke said, “It’s time. Being a head blows.” She flashed him a smile. “Besides, I’ll always be with you in your heart.”

Despite the situation, we all started to snigger. “Thanks,” I said, “I needed that.” My heart felt lighter than it had in weeks. We stood in silence, staring out at the cemetery. Even before I knew about the whole necromancer thing, I’d always liked cemeteries. They were peaceful, like libraries and churches. The trees around the perimeter blocked out any ambient noise, so all I heard were birds. All I smelled was grass and flowers. It was a good place to be.

“C’mon,” Brooke said, “let’s blow this crap-shack.”

Frank carried Brooke’s box to her gravesite. I grabbed one of the green plastic vases the cemetery staff had left by the trash cans and stuck it into the ground. I put the bouquet of gladiolas that I’d brought with me into it. Brooke had been fascinated by the fact that she could pick out her own flowers. There were several other bouquets already around the temporary marker. They hadn’t had time to put up a permanent tombstone yet.

Frank opened up Brooke's box. "Nice," she said with a sniff as she looked around. "I don't know who brought those carnations though. I hate carnations."

Frank patted her hair awkwardly. Brooke smiled at him, taking the gesture as the act of comfort it was meant to be.

I heard a car door slam. Dunaway walked across the grassy slope towards us, his long stride purposeful. Despite the situation, I found I was glad to see him.

"You okay, Sam?" His concern sounded genuine. "You look like hell."

"I feel like hell, detective."

He scratched his chin, examining the open box in Frank's arm. He pulled out his notebook.

"That the evidence your lawyer mentioned? You guys are going to have a lot of explaining to do about the violation of—"

"Oh, I can explain all that," Brooke said.

Dunaway stepped back. His hands squeezed his notebook, and all the color left his face. His mouth opened and closed like a fish a few times before he got words out of it. "Did she?"

"I sure did," Brooke said, "and I wish, just once, someone would have a better reaction to me. A 'good to see you, Brooke' would do nicely."

"Good to see you, Brooke," Frank replied immediately. I guess Ramon and I weren't the only ones who'd been training Frank.

I pushed up the sleeves of my jacket. I'd had Ashley talk me through the ceremony earlier. I just hoped I got it right. At least I didn't have to worry about running out of power now.

"I brought you here so you could see this, Detective. So you could talk to Brooke and understand what really happened." I pulled out a container of salt and started to draw a big circle

around the grave. The grounds keeper was going to be pissed. “I’d like to take care of this soon, so you better get crackin’.”

I ignored Dunaway and set up the spell. I waited in the grass while Dunaway questioned Brooke. It felt good to sit here. I felt welcome, like all the dead around me recognized me as an old friend. It should have felt creepy, but it didn’t. I didn’t want to analyze it. There had been so much bad lately, it was nice to take some good at face value.

Once Brooke had answered everything to the best of her ability, I invoked the circle. I didn’t even have to try. The circle bloomed to life, solid electric blue. Dunaway and Frank stood back from the grave, watching me as I worked. I had Brooke’s head inside the circle. I’d set up the barrier to keep everything contained. I wasn’t afraid of Brooke.

“You ready?” I asked.

“I really am, Sam.” Her answer was gentle. “Are you?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do your best, I guess. That’s all anyone can ask.” Her eyes welled up around the corners. “Now get off your candy ass, LaCroix, and put me to bed.”

Everything went off without a hitch. I put Brooke back in the ground. A thoughtful Dunaway said goodbye with promises that we’d talk about all of this again soon. I shook his hand and walked back to the car, a dejected Frank in my wake.

* * *

I took a few of the sedatives they gave me at the clinic once I got home. I needed rest, and I didn't think there was any other way I was going to get it. I felt drained down to nothing.

Frank slept on the floor. He didn't feel right about taking Ramon's spot, even after I told him Ramon would tell him to get his ass on the couch.

I slept like a sedated baby. I felt refreshed when I woke. My blankets were warm, my pillow soft, and I didn't want to get up. It was *my* pillow. It had been an uphill battle to get back to it.

"You're going to get bedsores if you don't get up soon."

I twisted and fell off my bed with a shout. After I calmed the fire in my back, I peeked over the edge of my bed. Brooke, the whole Brooke, peered back at me. Her hands curled over the edge, her back arched like a cat ready to pounce.

"What the fuck?" I yelled.

Frank ran in after my yell. His face broke into a smile.

"What," Brooke said, resting her ghostly hands on her hips. "You didn't think I'd leave you losers on your own, did you?"

"Yeah," I said, grinning, "I kind of thought you would."

"*Psh*, whatever." Brooke pulled a pen and clipboard out of thin air. "Ashley said you needed another advisor, so we worked something out." Brooke tapped her pen against her lips. "Now, what should we do first?"

Detective Dunaway called me later that day. We'd been playing Mario Party, Frank and I hitting buttons, Brooke ordering us around. She'd made us choose Princess Daisy and Princess Peach

for the computer players so she could yell derogatory names at them while we played. I felt better than I had in a long time.

“I’m not sure what to do with the info you’ve given me,” he said, “but I’ll figure out something. Something to give the family closure.”

“Thanks,” I said. “I hope it doesn’t get you in trouble.”

“I’ll be okay,” he said. “I’ve still got a lot of questions for you.”

“I know,” I said. “I’ll give you what I got.”

I hung up and went back to the game.

After a few days of rest and contemplation, and Brooke’s constant hounding, I had Frank start setting things up for our move. My apartment was too small, and we might as well make good use of Douglas’ house. I needed to get over what happened. Besides, it was the only way to get Brooke to leave me alone. She could be very insistent when she wanted to be.

In the meantime, I’d clean the house of anything unsavory or dangerous. That way if I hated it, I could sell the place. Or bulldoze it. I hadn’t totally given up on that plan yet.

Besides, I would need the extra room when Ramon got better. And I was sure he’d get out of the clinic. He had to. So we needed the house because when he got released he couldn’t exactly stay at his mom’s to deal with his new, um, “lifestyle changes.” A Were-bear in my apartment building would be just as disastrous.

I needed to take the house on, if only to prove to myself that I was right—that this power could be used for good. I needed to accept what I was. What I am.

My name is Samhain Corvus LaCroix. I am a necromancer.

Now if only I could say that with a straight face.

Seattle Times, Wednesday, April 2nd

Local citizens were shocked today when Woodland Park Zoo announced that the panda, Ling Tsu, died late last night. Zoo officials are “stunned by the unexpected death.” They haven’t released a cause of death at this time, telling members of the press only that there were several unexplained findings in Ling Tsu’s necropsy. Zoo officials wish to publicly apologize to the Chinese Zoo, and they hope to make reparations in the near future. “Thanks to an anonymous benefactor, that might be possible,” one inside source informed Seattle Times. Until then, the police will continue their investigation to answer the baffling questions that have surfaced in this case. When questioned, a representative from the police department said, “I just wish we knew why there was so much salt.” (Cont.on page A9)

* * *

Vita

Lish McBride was born in Bremerton, WA, though she tries to deny it. She is happiest in Seattle, though tends to call wherever her mother lives “home,” whether she’s lived there or not.

She bounced in and out of several community colleges before getting her B.A. in Creative Writing from Seattle University in 2005. She went directly from there and into the University of New Orleans’ Writing Program where she spent most of her time convincing people that it was okay to write about zombies and unicorns. After graduation she plans to head back to Seattle with her boyfriend, son, two cats, her dog, and any friends she can drag with her.

She continues to be very, very creeped out by mustaches.