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SOME THINGS MEND MORE EASILY THAN OTHERS

FIREBUGS ARE CREATURES of flames and heat, sibling to the phoenix and dragon. Not genetically, but in spirit. So why was it that all it took was a hot summer day in Maine and a stuffy loft to make me want to stick my head in the freezer? If an ice cream truck went by right now, I'd melt the tires and tackle the driver. Not that we had ice cream trucks in our town. Too small. Sylvie said she saw one once, but I'm pretty sure she was just hallucinating. I fanned myself with the papers in my hand and tried to listen to Cade.

"I told you, Ava—you can't go out if you didn't finish your . . .' I'm sorry, does this say *embroidery*?" Cade glanced at Sylvie, a dubious expression on his face, and for very good reason. The likelihood of me sitting down to work on some stitchery is about up there with seeing a walrus skydive. No, that wasn't quite right. Make that an entire herd of skydiving walruses in matching spandex doing a synchronized aerial routine as they plummeted toward the earth. Firebugs and cloth-based

handicrafts don't really go together well. Sylvie ignored Cade, the click of her knitting needles pausing as she counted rows.

"But, Papa, the dance is tonight! If I miss it, I won't be able to hold my head up in polite society all season!" I crossed my ankles, my bare feet resting on the paint-splattered drop cloth covering the couch. I wiped sweat off my forehead with the heel of my hand. Maybe if I shaved my head, I'd be cooler.

Cade knocked my feet down. "As if you're fit for polite society now, Rat." I stuck my tongue out at him.

"Stick to the script, please," Sylvie responded, her voice a singsong. The clicking resumed as she returned to her work. I couldn't quite tell what she was making. Knowing Sylvie, it could be anything from a cape to a life-size Dalek cozy.

Since we'd had to rebuild Broken Spines after it was burned down, we'd expanded upward. The bookshop now had a kitchenette and employee lounge, as well as a spare room that we were probably going to use for storage (if you listened to Cade) or a deluxe napping station (if you listened to me and Sylvie). We were going to win, especially after Cade saw the badass bunk beds I'd had the dwarves install already. I'd always wanted bunk beds.

My new boss, Alistair, had decided that even though he wasn't part of the Coterie when all this happened, the organization should help foot some of the rebuilding costs. I was grateful for this generosity, though I didn't tell him that. Because even with our insurance money and the back pay Alistair had given me and my team, we couldn't afford dwarf builders. They're the best, and quite frankly, we can't afford the best. We can't even afford the second best. I'm not sure we could swing the top ten.

Cade put his set of pages on the counter. "I now regret encouraging you to read Jane Austen."

I gently rested mine on my chest, letting my hand hang down. Sylvie had worked hard on the script, so I didn't burn the pages, which was tempting. Since Sylvie didn't know I was a firebug, I couldn't burn them right that minute anyway. Not without my secret getting out, and only two humans knew what I was—Cade and my ex-boyfriend, He Who Must Never Be Mentioned Ever If You Don't Want a Fiery Reckoning Brought Down Upon You. I needed to keep it that way.

"I guess I should be happy you didn't demand we put a pianoforte up here." Cade picked his pages back up.

"I considered that," Sylvie said. "But it would ruin the flow. And I couldn't find one within the budget." Sylvie had taken over the organization and decoration of the upstairs space. Everything was purchased and positioned for maximum efficiency. I'm not kidding. She'd used graph paper and a scientific calculator and read some interior design books that had come into the bookshop.

Sylvie is plagued by extreme cuteness. Today she'd braided her hair into a crown and placed tiny blue flowers in strategic places. Her purple, girl-cut T-shirt featured a glittery kitten with a jet pack. Her voice is cute, her smile is cute, and her disposition is sunny. Even I had the urge to pat her head occasionally. In contrast, I was wearing a tank top with a tear at the bottom. My jeans shorts had seen better days, and about all I could manage with my hair was a loose ponytail. There were no strategic flowers, nor would it have occurred to me to use any. My clothes leaned toward the darker end of the color spectrum in general, and the only glitter I had on me had come off Sylvie's shirt when she'd hugged me earlier—something she'd gotten in the habit of doing ever since I came back from my battle with

Venus. Not that Sylvie knew anything about what had happened. We'd told her that I'd fallen victim to an aggressive stomach flu. Whatever the cause, seeing me emaciated and worn out had scared her. So now I had to put up with random hugging because I was Sylvie's friend.

I hadn't exactly sought out the relationship. Since I grew up on the run with my mom, people my age, especially normal human people, mystify me. I haven't had much contact with the completely human world. I wouldn't have known how to make friends with Sylvie even if I'd wanted to, but for whatever reason, she'd decided she liked me. And you don't argue with Sylvie.

Sylvie was an employee, yes. She was young. But she also ran the bookshop with a tiny iron fist when she was around, and we didn't argue. Sylvie was damn good at fixing problems, and she'd recently decided that Cade and I needed to be fixed.

"What are you making, anyway?" I asked.

She didn't look up from her project. "Don't change the subject, Ava. You two need help easing from ward and guardian to father and daughter." Cade crossed his eyes at me at the same time I stuck my tongue out at him. "I can see you, you know." We both got a stern glare from her before she continued. "*Role playing* is a proven tool that psychologists use to improve communication and rebuild relationships. I still think it's a good idea."

"It's not the role playing I'm objecting to—" At Cade's snort, I amended my statement. "Okay, I don't *completely* think role playing is ridiculous, and I appreciate your help, Sylvie, but if I'm having a difficult time with the D-word, what makes you think I can manage an unscripted *Papa*? Or would want to?"

"I love it when you call me Big Papa," Cade said, taking a

sip of his iced tea. He frowned. "That sounded less disturbing in my head."

"Well, it sounded super creepy outside it." Sylvie had her back to Cade, so I flicked my fingers and the remnants of his iced tea went up in steam. I pretended to look at my nails so I wouldn't see his disapproving look. I wasn't supposed to "play" with my powers. (He calls it play. I call it practice.)

Cade grabbed the pitcher of iced tea out of the fridge and poured himself another cup.

Sylvie held her glass out to Cade, shaking it in case he hadn't noticed it was empty. "So what word would work for you? *Father?* *Pa?* *Daddy?*"

"I rather like *Cade*, actually." I shook my own glass for a refill. Cade very pointedly looked at me while he put the pitcher back. That's what I got for evaporating his drink.

Sylvie shot me her own version of the disapproval look. Apparently I was just racking up the censure points with everyone today. "Don't be like that," she said. "Cynical and whatnot. You've been calling him Cade your whole life. You're denying him his title—one he's earned. It's a respect thing. You have a chance now that you never thought you'd have—you get to call someone Dad. Don't toss it away."

"Daaaaaad, she's making me talk about my feelings. Make it stop." I really threw the whine into the last word, then grinned at Sylvie. "There. Is that better?"

Sylvie dropped her knitting in her lap with a motion that was part pout, part exasperated sigh. "You're deflecting."

"And I'm going to hide all your books on psychology. Clearly you can't use your powers for good."

"This is for good!"

Cade sighed. "Children, stop." He held up a ten-dollar bill. "If I offer this money on the altar of the ice cream gods, may I have a few minutes of peace?"

Now that was a plan I could get behind. I bounded to my feet and snatched the ten out of his hand. "Mine." I one-armed him into a hug and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Dad."

Sylvie huffed. "You did that on purpose to mock me and my script."

Cade shook his head. "No, she just wasn't thinking about it because I offered her ice cream. Food is a large motivating factor with my daughter."

I scrunched up my nose and squinted my eyes, a face Cade likes to tell me will stick one day. "Nope, still feels weird." I ignored Cade's sigh and grabbed Sylvie's arm. "Come on. Ice cream beckons. You can come back to your meddling later."

She pulled back. "But—"

"Ice cream, Sylvie. Did you hear that part? The knitting can wait. It's wicked hot. Surface-of-the-sun hot. Besides, I'm sure there are about five other things you can try to change about me on the way there."

Sylvie reluctantly came with me, her face still pinched. "Eleven, not five. I've made a list."

"I'm offended."

Cade's voice floated down the stairs after us. "No you're not. You're surprised it's only eleven." Damn it, he was right.

We got frappes, then sat on a bench in the sun playing Spot the Flatlander.

"I spot a couple from away. Notice their khaki plumage and her full face of makeup. If those aren't summer people, I'll eat my shirt. Fifteen points." Sylvie was from here, so she pro-

nounced it “summah people.” It was easy to spot the people from away. Locals were working. They didn’t have sweaters knotted around their necks, nor were they driving ten miles under the speed limit to gawk at our “provincial” village. Driving can be a real pain this time of year. You find yourself organizing your whole life around avoiding left turns.

“Damn, I missed them.” I scanned the crowd, trying to catch up. Sylvie was winning. I was a little distracted by my phone, which kept buzzing with incoming texts. “Hey, there’s one. He forgot to take off his lobster bib. That’s worth twenty points at least.” The man was also overdressed, and I was willing to bet that if we got closer, we’d smell bug spray.

“Either his family hasn’t mentioned it, or he’s wearing it on purpose. That’s got to be worth at least twenty-five.” She grabbed my arm. “Children in matching ‘I Heart Maine’ T-shirts! Three kids, that’s ten points each, plus a five-point bonus.”

“Bonus?”

“That boy is over twelve and his parents managed to get that shirt on him. That’s worth a bonus. I am slaughtering you.” She was almost bouncing with glee.

My phone went off again, the change in my pocket making the vibration extra loud.

“Are you going to respond to him?”

“Who?” I asked, but it was a stupid question and Sylvie treated it with the dignity it deserved—a scowl.

“I’m busy.”

“He didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I know,” I said, holding my frappe against the back of my neck. I’d done my best to hide from Sylvie that Lock had asked me out. She’d always had a huge crush on him. But somehow

she'd pulled it out of me, in all its embarrassing glory. After a lecture on my initial boneheaded handling of the whole thing, she hadn't missed a single opportunity to point out my continued poor approach to fixing the rift.

The rift seemed like it would be pretty hard to fix, though. Bianca, Alistair's right-hand girl and general pain in my ass, had asked Lock out shortly after our debacle. Bianca is a caulbearer, and everything I'm not. Her power isn't flashy like mine—she can throw a veil and hide people or things. She's calculated, mindlessly loyal to Alistair, and pretty in a pixie-like way. According to the rumors that had filtered back from Lock through Ezra and eventually Sylvie, the date hadn't gone well and they'd decided they were better as friends, but somehow that was worse. I could easily have stepped aside and been noble if he'd dated Bianca. It would have hurt, but I could have managed if that's what would have made Lock happy.

Bianca as a friend, though, was a lot harder to deal with. It felt like Lock had instantly replaced me in his life. For years it had been me, Lock, and Ezra. Quite frankly, I didn't know how to deal with a new person coming in and screwing up the dynamic. And since I didn't know what to do, I ignored the problem, which meant ignoring Lock.

"He thinks you're punishing him."

"I know," I said, my exasperation thick.

"So talk to him." I couldn't see her eyes behind her sunglasses, but I knew Stern Sylvie was talking.

"It's not that simple." I finished my frappe, the straw making an undignified sputtering noise. "And why aren't you mad at me, anyway? I thought Lock was your one true love."

Sylvie shrugged. "The fickleness of youth."

I shoved my sunglasses back onto the bridge of my nose. "It's almost your birthday. You're only a year younger than me, and you don't have a fickle bone in your body."

She tossed the remnants of her frappe into the trash and helped me up. "Friends don't fight over boys, Ava. Lock likes you and you're both important to me, so I've moved on." She linked her arm in mine. "It was really very big of me and quite dramatic, and your continued refusal to talk to him is ruining the effect. So stop digging your hole deeper, and text the poor boy back."

I grunted in a noncommittal fashion, which she seemed to take for a yes. "What?" I asked when she wouldn't stop staring at me.

"You know you can trust me, right? That you can tell me anything?"

I quashed the urge to fidget. The thing is, I did trust Sylvie, but that didn't mean I could tell her my secret. Bottom line, Sylvie is human. To tell her about my power and the Coterie would endanger us both, and I like my friend too much for that. "Of course," I lied, fixing a fake smile to my face.

I thought I saw a flash of disappointment cross her features, but it was so fast, I barely caught it.

"Okay," Sylvie said. "Well, we'd better get back. That shop won't organize itself."

I snorted. "You know Cade is perfectly capable of setting up a little bit of furniture, right? Especially since you already gave him a diagram."

Sylvie patted my arm. "Sure he can. But if your dad sets it up, then I'm just going to have to fix it, so I might as well do it the first time."

"You're awfully charming for a despot, you know that, right?"

“I resent that. It doesn’t have to be my way, it just has to be the right way.” She stepped carefully over a line of ants.

“Which just so happens to be your way.”

“If you can find a more efficient manner of doing things, then I will happily apply that method.”

I laughed, giving up on the argument. We were occasionally able to convince Sylvie that she wasn’t right about something, but it happened so infrequently that it seemed like never. If Cade hadn’t started writing down these triumphs in a small notebook in the back office, I wouldn’t believe those events ever occurred.

We were busy when we got back to the shop, and then it was dinnertime. Cade ordered pizza for us and the dwarves. It had been impossible to hide the dwarves from Sylvie. She was at the shop even when she wasn’t scheduled to be. Cade and I had come up with all kinds of explanations for her but hadn’t used any of them so far. She had lots of questions for them about their work, and the dwarves seemed endlessly patient with Sylvie—far more than they were with anyone else. But it was odd that she hadn’t said anything.

Between the work and the pizza, the night flew by, and before I knew it, I was at home and in bed and it was too late to text Lock back. At least, that’s what I told myself when I ignored my phone yet again.

ALISTAIR’S VOICE sounded tinny and far away when I answered the phone the next morning. “I need you in Boston,” he said without preamble. I readjusted my cell, which was pinched between my shoulder and my ear. My hands were full of books. I guess I could have gotten one of those hands-free things, but then I would’ve had to punch myself in the face. I hated the people

who came into the bookshop with them on. They looked like they'd had the bits of plastic surgically implanted into their ears, and I always wondered if the people ever took them out, even to sleep. Sylvie was convinced that those customers were secretly cyborgs.

I slid a paperback onto one of our brand-new shelves. Broken Spines would reopen in record time because of the dwarves. We could have simply moved into a new building—it certainly would have been cheaper—but we all liked the original location. So Alistair fast-tracked all the permits in addition to furnishing a motivated group of builders. And if my small town of Currant, Maine, had thought it was weird that we had height-challenged builders who worked through the night, well, no one said anything.

The new building was gorgeous. Brick on the outside, beautifully carved wood on the inside. I traced a finger along the thin wooden vine cut into the shelf next to me; the veins of each leaf stood out in amazing detail. You couldn't find work like this anymore—not by humans, at any rate. It was worth every single penny. They even built a cat tree for Horatio that looked so much like a real tree, I expected a dryad to take up residence. Gnarled roots sank into the floor, making it appear as if the trunk were growing out of it. Branches twisted up, the stained-glass leaves shining a brilliant emerald. A new skylight sat above it, and when the light hit the tree, it cast a fractured green pattern on the floor and walls, making you feel like you were caught in a constant Technicolor leaf fall. The dwarves said the leaves would shift color when it came time for autumn. I couldn't wait. I was almost glad that Venus had burned the other building down.

On the phone, Alistair cleared his throat. “Did you hear me?” He was almost shouting now. The Inferno, the restaurant and club that the Coterie operated out of, was also getting an overhaul. Probably because I had blown up large chunks of it. Allegedly.

“Yeah, sorry, I got distracted. What’s so urgent?” I only asked this as a formality. We both knew I’d go. Although Bianca was Alistair’s real second in command, we were pretending that I was, for the sake of appearances. Bianca did better work if she could use her skill set, which was sneaking. Whereas I was a loud, mouthy distraction with a known history of playing muscle. Basically, I seemed scarier than Bianca, so I was on display. This would lead to more treks to Boston, though I suspected that lately he’d been fobbing some jobs off on other teams to give me time to heal. He’d glossed over that, however.

“Shouldn’t be too big of a deal—just something I want to nip in the bud, so to speak. I’ll send the files to your new tablet—” I must have made a sound because he stopped and sighed. “What happened to the new tablet, Ava?”

“It’s not my fault!” The words came out rushed, no doubt confirming to Alistair that it was entirely my fault. Alistair was trying to whip the Coterie into shape—running it like an actual business instead of something out of a supernatural *Goodfellas*. And as part of that, he’d given me a fancy tablet and a new phone to “facilitate communication.” He was supposed to send me files and stuff on it. I’d tried to learn how to use it, and Sophie had talked me into dipping my toe into social media. Some nonsense about me being more like a normal teenager and less like a deranged technologically challenged hermit. So I did. Naturally, the first thing I did was friend Lock. Which meant that the very

first image I saw on my tablet was one Bianca had posted on his page. Her and Lock cheek-to-cheek at some café. The camera had caught him mid laugh, the corners of his eyes crinkling, his entire face alight. I hadn't seen him laugh like that in weeks. In fact, I barely saw him at all. Only for work, and then he was all business and so was I because we were both auditioning for the Most Awkward Person Ever Award. It made my stomach clench. I felt bad for Ezra, who was stuck in the middle. So to see that smile with Bianca rubbed salt into an already raw wound. Then the image crashed, and I noticed the smoke and the burned-plastic smell. I'd melted the casing. Luckily, Sylvie had been busy shelving and hadn't noticed me peeling the brand-new tablet off my hands and throwing it away.

I could almost hear Alistair rubbing his face with his hand out of frustration. "Is it repairable?"

"It has gone to see the great tablet in the sky." I squeezed my eyes shut, waiting for him to yell at me. Venus would have threatened me until I pretended to lose cell coverage and shut off my phone. And then she would have carried out those threats. "I'm sorry?"

"No you're not. Not really. Look, this is probably my fault. I should have taken your . . . issues into account. We'll get you something else. Something warded for someone of your particular talents. In the meantime, if your phone happens to follow in the footsteps of your tablet, please go get a new one. In fact, you should carry a backup in your bag. Top of the line—no bargain-basement stuff, Ava. Keep the receipt and I'll reimburse you."

"My phone is a business expense? Does the Coterie have an accountant now?"

“It had one before. An underutilized hobgoblin named Zet. Venus wasn’t even keeping receipts. How she ran this place . . . Anyway, you’ll be seeing a lot of Zet. Don’t lose your receipt. He bites.”

Of course he does. “So . . . tonight?” I asked, shelving another book.

“I’m sending someone to pick you up. Don’t worry—it’s someone you like.”

There was a click as he ended the call. Didn’t anyone say good-bye anymore? And who was he sending—Lock? If he sent Lock, did that mean Bianca would be coming, too? A spark flitted from my left hand, and I jerked it away from the shelves. They were heavily warded and spelled against fire, but the books weren’t. Bookseller probably wasn’t the best job for a firebug. But I liked it a hell of a lot better than the job my talents actually qualified me for. I shelved the rest of my stack, then went to find Cade to tell him he had to call in Sylvie. I needed the night off.

The Coterie is more clandestine crime family than employer. I don’t get performance reviews, there is no time clock and I can’t quit. Being a firebug makes me an impressive and efficient enforcer, and the last boss couldn’t pass that up. To stay alive and to protect what little family I had left—Cade—I signed a contract with a hired blood witch, handing myself over to the Coterie. I am essentially an indentured servant for them until I die, or until I find another blood witch willing to cross the Coterie to break my contract.

I’ll probably die first.

We used to joke that it was a crappy job but at least we had nonexistent benefits. We couldn’t make that joke anymore. Alistair signed us up for medical, dental, and vision insurance.

I think 401(k)s are next. So far Alistair is a best-case scenario for new boss, but I keep wondering if that's an act. He certainly seems to be keeping to his word that I'm going to be more of a threat than an out-and-out assassin, but he could just be trying to pacify me. Power corrupts, right? Alistair has power. How long until he's ordering me around the way Venus did? Pushing with my feet, I spun the chair at the front desk around until I was dizzy. I kept thinking about this like it mattered. Like I could actually do something about any of it. I flopped back into my chair and watched the ceiling spin.

The doors chimed, and Sylvie bounded in. Sylvie always bounded. I'm pretty sure she is part puppy.

"Ava! Look what I made to go with the fancy new store." She continued to dance about as she brandished something in front of me.

"Sylvie, it's awfully hard to be sufficiently in awe of your skills when you're bouncing around too much for me to actually *see* what you're holding." She stopped and put her hand in front of my face. She had knitted a cat collar. With a little bow tie.

"Bow ties are cool," she said, her tone solemn.

Horatio would absolutely hate it. He hated collars of any sort. "Good luck," I snorted.

Undaunted, Sylvie went off to find our resident feline. Her voice filtered in from the back. "So you've got a hot date tonight?"

"Yup, that's me, social gadabout."

Sylvie walked up, Horatio a purring mass of orange fur in her arms, his bow tie firmly attached. Apparently Horatio thought bow ties were cool, too.

"Ugh, that's disgusting. I bet he didn't even scratch you. If I tried to do that, my arm would be mincemeat."

She smiled at me, her cheek snuggled up against his fur. "You should try asking him nicely. He's a very well-mannered feline if you treat him with courtesy." She scratched under his chin, and he stretched out further to give her better access. "So, no date, then?"

"None. *Nyet*. Negatory, milady."

"Thanks for your freakishly thorough answer."

I saluted her from my seat.

She put Horatio gently on the floor. "You act like it's a crazy question. If you're not careful, you'll miss your opportunity with Lock. Or is this a Ryan thing? You can't stew over that mess forever." She flopped into the chair next to me.

"Who says?"

"I say. The honorable and much beloved Queen Sylvie has decreed it."

"You're not royalty," I said.

"Yet," she said firmly. "I'm not royalty *yet*."

What Sylvie didn't know was that I wasn't really mourning the loss of Ryan—I was grieving the *idea* of Ryan. As it turned out, our entire relationship was based on lies and betrayal and make-outs, and I only liked one out of three of those things. Before that, though, he'd represented the possibility of a normal life for me. Now that ideal had died a whimpering death. No white picket fences and whatnot for this girl.

And yet I couldn't help feeling a little sorry for what Ryan had lost. Once, he'd been bright, cheerful, popular, and smoking hot. He'd had what I thought was a perfect life that I envied to my inner core. Now he was more of a hot mess. I tried to avoid him as much as I could, but Currant was a small town. The awkward bump-into-each-other was inevitable.

Sylvie rolled her chair into mine. “Any minute, some nice boy will walk through those doors, and a whole new chapter to your life will begin.” We both stared at the doors, waiting for her words to be prophetic.

“I don’t know what annoys me more,” I said. “That you’re an optimistic romantic, or that it appears to be contagious.”

Horatio leapt into Sylvie’s lap, telling her quite plainly that she wasn’t done petting him. “I’m not sure if I’m either of those things, but I don’t think they’re as bad as you think they are. All I’m saying is that we deserve as much of a shot as anyone when it comes to matters of the heart.” She batted her eyes at me coquettishly.

“Please never do that again.”

The growling rumble of a motorcycle cut off whatever response she might have had. Sunlight glinted off the chrome as the rider parked. Though the motorcycle itself gleamed, with its black paint job setting off the silver accents and making it look new, the riding leathers and saddlebags were broken in and worn. This was not a new toy, but a seriously loved bike. Once the motorcycle was parked, the rider dismounted, his body turned away from us. On the back of his jacket was a logo I recognized—a beat-up cartoon jackrabbit with the stub of a cigar in his mouth. I wasn’t surprised to see shaggy brown hair when the rider took off his helmet and tucked it under his arm. Apparently my ride had arrived.

Sid turned, taking in the new storefront with a grin. There’s something mischievous in Sid’s grin. I can’t quite place what it is exactly, but it’s like he’s always thinking of something funny at your expense. He looks like that all the way up until he knocks your lights out, too. There were probably several blades hidden

on his person; there usually are. He didn't exactly look dangerous, though. Especially now—brown eyes squinting against the light, his wiry frame lined in leather and jeans. He looked boyish and friendly. And he was, to a point.

Sylvie looked at me, her eyes hooded. "I thought you said you didn't have a date tonight."

I blinked at her. "What—Sid?" I laughed. "He's too..." What? Old for me? How old was Sid? "He's too Sid," I finished lamely. His grin widened when he caught my gaze through the window, and he gave a little wave as he hopped up the steps. I gave a weak wave in return.

"Well, if it's not a date, that's a travesty. He's cute." Sylvie tilted her head, considering. "Is he single?"

The bell chimed as Sid pushed the door open and came over to lean on the counter we were seated at. "I hope I'm not interrupting."

"You're not," I said. "Sylvie here was just talking about how cute you are. And I had to agree—cute as a soft, cuddly *bunny*."

Sid lost all his humor, and his right eye twitched. Were-hares are incredibly sensitive about what they turn into, and I knew Sid especially took offense quickly if he thought you were making fun of him. The funny thing is, I like Sid. So why was I going out of my way to annoy him? Maybe I'd been sort of hoping my team would show up, Ezra and Lock, just like old times, and the fact that they didn't chafed. Still, not Sid's fault.

I took a deep breath, blowing it out my nostrils. "Sorry, sorry. Don't know what got into me."

"You're just being your natural, charming self," Sid said with the appropriate amount of disdain. "Maybe it's a defense mech-

anism? You know, the lady protesting too much? You can't deny that there was a little *spark* between us in the past, hmm?"

Geez, you accidentally set a guy on fire *one time*, and he never lets you hear the end of it.

Sylvie looked between us, trying to figure out the subtext that was obviously there. I could see her filing it away mentally to chew over later. "Yes, well, I was just asking Ava if you were single." She scratched Horatio but kept her gaze on Sid. "Are you?"

Sid blinked. "I guess I am. Why?"

Sylvie placed Horatio gently on the floor. "I've had to retire my recent crush, which means I have a position open. It's a big spot to fill, but you might be a possibility."

"Don't you dare turn any of that into innuendo," I said, jabbing a finger at Sid. "The only person allowed to corrupt Sylvie is me."

Sylvie handed a bemused Sid a card. "Here's my calling card. Text me and we'll talk."

He tucked it away carefully in his pocket, then grabbed her hand and kissed her knuckles. Somehow Sid can manage to be both courtly and impish at the same time. "As my lady wishes." He stepped away with a flourish before turning to me. "Ready, you harpy? Your chariot awaits."

"You're a terrible human being," I said, snagging my jacket from the back of my chair. "Let's just get this freak show on the road. Thanks again for covering for me, Sylvie."

She pulled out a large tote bag from under the counter. "It's cool. I brought my knitting."

Sylvie had been knitting sweaters for a charity. She was a fair knitter, but it had seemed to me that the cardigans she'd been

churning out were sized a little oddly. When I'd commented on it, she'd said quite curtly that they were done to very particular specifications. Since I didn't really care, I'd let it go. I gave her a final thank-you, and then we were out the door.

Sid handed me a helmet and a leather jacket that had the same logo on the back as his did. "I brought Ikka's spares for you," he said. "The jacket might be a bit big. You can stow yours in one of the saddlebags for later." He put on his helmet. "Is she always like that?"

"Sylvie? Yeah. I mean, the calling cards are new. She's been reading a lot of Jane Austen. And what's wrong with my jacket?" I loved my beat-up old army jacket. Not stylish, no, but amazingly functional. I had all kinds of things in the pockets and sewn into the linings.

"If we take a spill, do you want to be in leather or in that?"

"Is not crashing an option?" I asked, but I did as instructed and put on Ikka's leather jacket.

Since my butt was not accustomed to long rides on the back of a motorcycle, Sid pulled off at a diner halfway through. Sid and I both eat like binging termites. Like many weres, Sid has an incredibly fast metabolism. I don't, but I do burn fuel when I make fire, and calories are fuel. Once I run out of that energy, my body will start burning fat, and then muscle. If firebugs don't watch their food intake, and if they're not careful with their fire, they will literally burn themselves up. So, if at all possible, I keep a few extra pounds on at all times. I'm probably the only teenage girl in America not trying to slim down for swimsuit season. To be fair, I don't think I'd be that kind of girl anyway. If people don't like me because I don't meet some sort of skewed

body measurement, they are welcome to find different company. I even have a list of suggested activities for them, starting with “suck it” and ending with “nude alligator wrestling.”

Sid and I each ordered appetizers and entrees, and he pre-ordered dessert for us, even though it was clear that the waitress thought he was being optimistic. Or she was just having a bad day. Four loudmouthed guys—either drunk or just obnoxious—were keeping themselves busy yelling at one another and her. Judging by our waitress’s generally frazzled demeanor, she was not having a good time. Sid offered her his wide, devil-may-care grin, which is a doozy. I don’t think anyone is immune to it. She wasn’t. A hint of a smile flitted across her face in return as she tucked her notepad into her apron pocket.

Once she was in the back, Sid quietly got up and walked over to the boisterous table. I couldn’t hear what Sid said to them because he was talking softly. The ruckus from the table was cut short as if someone had suddenly dialed down the volume. I looked up just in time to see Sid coming back, the same grin on his face, the same attitude. Huh.

“I don’t know what you did,” I said, “but I’m glad you did it. I can now hear myself think.”

Sid shrugged nonchalantly at me as he slid back into his chair. “I just gave them their options, is all.”

The waitress went back to the now-quiet table, and by the time she came over to us, she was beaming.

“You guys need anything,” she said, staring at Sid, “anything at all, you just let me know.”

Sid propped his elbows on the table and rested his chin in his hands, his expression too innocent to be believed, at least by

me. The waitress totally bought it, though. She dropped her gaze, filling up our water glasses as she did. Her cheeks were rosy, and I could see the pulse in her neck flutter. Just like that, Sid had earned her worship. It's amazing what one nice gesture will do.

My phone buzzed. I ignored it. It buzzed again.

"Aren't you going to answer that?"

"It's rude to check your phone at the table." I believed that. But I was also being a filthy, filthy coward.

"Still ignoring Lock?"

I slid down in my chair. "How would you know? Are you guys best buddies now or something?" I tried to keep the jealousy out of my voice, but it didn't work.

Sid picked up his butter knife, spinning it in his fingers. "Hardly. I've nothing against your boys, but we haven't picked out our matching tattoos yet. We're at the Inferno a lot, though, and people talk."

"Can weres even get tattoos?"

"No. Our bodies reject the ink as foreign matter. I figured I'd tell Lock after he got his."

"Sneaky. I like it." I straightened back up in my chair. "Why are you at the Inferno so much?"

Sid flipped the knife and caught it in his other hand. "We've been working so well with Alistair, I think he decided that he didn't want to mess up a good thing. He's worked out some sort of deal with Les."

"You guys are Coterie now?" I couldn't imagine the drove permanently handing themselves over to anyone. The drove, the were-hare's answer to the werewolf pack, only had one boss, and that was Les.

"No, we're just doing some contract work." He smirked at

my obvious discomfort as my phone vibrated again. “Which you’d probably know if you ever looked at your texts.”

Our food appeared, and I finally gave in and checked my phone, if only to get Sid to stop smirking at me. Damn smug bunny. The first was a text from Lock to see if I was on my way to Boston. The other two were from Ezra, who wanted to know if I was going to ever answer Lock or if perhaps my fingers were broken. As I was reading, Ezra sent me a selfie with the message *Because I know you’re going through withdrawal. You can’t go cold turkey on this kind of hotness.* I took a moment to admire Ezra Sagishi in all his glory because who wouldn’t? It’s not my bias toward him as a friend that makes me call him gorgeous. Where it concerns Ezra, beauty is not subjective. If my phone could speak, it would expound on Ezra’s amber-gold eyes and flawless tan skin. Sonnets would be written about his cheekbones, and I’m pretty sure you could pick another body part at random and find someone who’s written a dirty limerick about it. His features are a perfect meld of his Japanese and fox heritage, and if he smiles at you, you’re doomed. He is, in essence, a total knockout. I sent back an emoji of a smiling pile of poo, because someone has to keep his vanity, however well deserved, in check. Hopefully that would keep him off my back for a bit. I typed and deleted three responses to Lock before I settled on *Yup*. With my strong grasp of the English language and obvious wit, it was no wonder I was doing so well in my relationships. Stars and sparks, what a mess.

Despite my focus, I still saw the waitress slip her phone number to Sid.

“Was our waitress grateful for her knight in shining leather, then?”

He took a bite of his pie before pointing the fork in my direction. "Ava, I am insulted. Do you really think me the type of man who would take advantage of such things?"

"You did keep her number."

He stabbed at his pie again, an irritated twist to his features. "Yeah, well, I'm not. But I'm not going to throw away her number in front of her, either. There is a fine line between charming rogue and jackass, and I prefer to land on the side of the former."

"Okay, well, as soon as you're done with your pie, we need to head out. Alistair will have kittens if we're late. I'm still posing as his scariest weapon, so he can't start without me. If you need to say good-bye to anyone, now is the time." I couldn't help my grin. "Just be quick. You know, like a bunny."

Sid didn't talk to me again until we reached our destination. Totally worth it.

2

THE MORE THINGS CHANGE, THE MORE I HAVE TO REPLACE CLOTHING

THE MAN WASN'T WHIMPERING, but he would be soon. He crouched on the floor, a line of bloody spit connecting him to the oh-so-white carpet Alistair hadn't replaced yet. Sid hovered over him, fists at the ready to give the guy another good thump. I stood next to Alistair as he relaxed on his chair as if it were a throne. His face impassive, like he didn't have a care in the world, a glass of whiskey dangling dangerously from his fingertips. The scene reminded me so much of Venus and Owen, her pet firebug, that I felt my stomach lurch. Standing next to Alistair didn't make me Owen. I would never be that deranged or depraved. A small voice deep inside pointed out that I was already standing by watching someone get pummeled for crossing the Coterie. What made me really sick wasn't what I was doing but that I agreed with Alistair on this one.

Matias was a mid-level thug out of Philadelphia. He was some flavor of shifter, though I couldn't remember what kind. He was part of a steady stream of idiots we'd caught trying to

carve a piece of Boston for themselves. Alistair was still cementing his rule, and they saw that as a business opportunity. And while I didn't agree with a lot of the Coterie's business principles, I could see that Matias was dangerous. Selling drugs to humans was bad. Selling them to other creatures like us was dangerous beyond belief. Control and the ability to blend into humanity kept us safe. Matias endangered that safety, which meant he was endangering some people I held very dear. So I stood by and watched Sid get his hands dirty. Literally. His knuckles had split and bled and then healed, but the blood was still there, drying as I watched.

Matias spit, leaving a bright red smear on the carpet. "I can give you a cut."

Alistair held up his glass, swirling the whiskey in the light while pretending to think about what Matias was offering. Alistair wouldn't take more than a sip or two while this was going on. Like many things about him, the whiskey was a part of the image he wanted to present. He wouldn't actually drink while he was busy. Losing any kind of control didn't appeal to him. "I don't think you understand the situation, Matias. Money is not the problem. You are." The amber liquid in his glass caught the light as he brought it down and took a sip. "And I think perhaps you aren't taking this seriously."

Matias spit again, this time aiming at Sid's feet. "Your bunny can work me over all he wants. You think I'm a stranger to pain? That I can't take anything he can dish out?"

Alistair sighed, handing his glass off. To everyone in the room, it looked like the glass disappeared. In reality, he'd handed it to Bianca, who was hiding behind her veil.

"The problem is, Matias, I don't want to kill you." He rested

his chin in his hands, bored and immaculate, like the lazy god of *Esquire* magazine. “Well, that’s not entirely true. I don’t care enough to actually kill you. It’s a lot of work, you understand. Hiding bodies and all that—it’s a heck of a mess, and I’m not fond of mess. Ideally, you would just slime your way back to Philly, but then that leaves me with a problem. I have to convince you to leave in a way that doesn’t seem like weakness on my part and will sufficiently impress upon you what a mistake it would be to return. Unfortunately, you’re so stupid that a beating won’t work. Pain isn’t enough. You need nightmares.”

Matias laughed. “You think your bunny is capable of that?”

Sid’s mouth tightening was the only sign that Matias was getting to him. Knowing how touchy the drove could get with this kind of thing, I was strangely proud of his restraint.

Alistair sat up. “Oh, most certainly, but I think you’re going to need something a little flashier.”

I knew a cue when I heard one, so I stepped forward. Matias was really laughing now, spit spraying from his busted lip. I was close enough that I’m sure some got on my jeans. This is why I wear dark clothing to Coterie soirees. Matias relaxed, thinking Alistair was playing a joke.

Now it was my turn to get my hands dirty. I started slow, sparks flowing from my fingers like a cascade of fireworks. By the time I stood over him, my arms were bathed in flames and his laughter had dried up. Orange flames turned to blue as I kicked the temperature up. Matias lurched backward a foot before he caught himself, the effect of his sneer ruined by the sheen of panic sweat on his brow.

I crouched down so we were on the same level. “Forgive me, but I spaced out during the interrogation, and I can’t remember

what you are. So before I get started, there's something I need to know."

A fine tremor shook his body as he croaked out, "What?"

Our noses almost touched as I leaned in. "Exactly how much damage can you heal?"

THE EVENING ended as many of our Coterie get-togethers ended, with me throwing up in a Coterie bathroom. The door creaked open, and I turned my head to see a glass of water and a washcloth. Alistair handed me the glass and draped the damp washcloth over the back of my neck, the cold instantly making me feel a little bit better.

"He'll heal," he said.

The water soothed my scratchy throat as I drained half the glass. "I know."

He made an exasperated sound that I knew meant *Then why all the fuss?*

I grabbed the washcloth and held it against my flushed face. "I'm not into torture."

Alistair leaned against the door of the private bathroom, his arms crossed. "You met him. He's an idiot. It was this or death."

"Then why not kill him?" I asked. Venus would have slit his throat and then complained about the stains it left on her beautiful carpet.

Alistair dropped his arms, his gaze softening. "Before I answer you, let me ask this—did you ever get sick after meetings with Venus?"

"Sometimes."

"But not every time?" He asked the question but already seemed sure of the answer.

I shook my head.

He crouched down, easing himself to the floor, his face close to mine. “I think I know why. Because of the position I’ve put you in, you feel more responsible. With the structure Venus had, you didn’t feel as guilty. With her you didn’t feel like you had a choice. I’ve changed the dynamic. Let me guess—you’re starting to feel like you’re turning into Owen, and that both frightens and disgusts you, doesn’t it?”

I didn’t answer. I didn’t have to—he could see it on my face.

Alistair sighed. “Ava, you’re not Owen, and I know you won’t believe me, but I’ll say it anyway. I’m not Venus.” He rested his arms loosely on his knees. “I know exactly how she would have handled today—she would have slaughtered Matias in front of a select audience, who would have told everyone, thus reinforcing that she was not to be messed with.” Alistair always looked in control, cold and calculating, but as I watched he let that facade drop, and I realized how young my new boss was. I’d have been surprised if he was much past thirty. He rubbed the heel of his hand across his forehead, a weary and habitual-looking gesture. “Believe it or not, I’d rather not kill people if I don’t have to. I’m sorry you had to burn Matias.”

“I can still smell singed hair.” My throat tightened. “I know he’s not screaming anymore, but I can still hear him.”

For a second, I thought Alistair might reach out to comfort me, but he never moved. “Terrible, I know. But I can’t let some street thug come into my city and push his poisons. He would have no problem peddling drugs to Coterie kids. And if I can’t protect my people from threats like him, what’s the point?” Sounds of rushing water moved through the plumbing, breaking the quiet as we sat there. “He will heal his burns eventually.

Then he will go home and tell everyone not to come here. He will wake up screaming for the rest of his life.”

“So will I,” I said, turning my head slightly so we looked each other in the eye.

“That’s the price we pay to keep our people safe.” He looked at me, not with pity but with understanding, which somehow made me feel worse.

“I know,” I said, closing my eyes.

“You agree with me,” he said, his voice hushed. “And that’s why you’re getting sick.”

Again, I didn’t have to answer. Alistair’s clothes rustled as he stood up. “Rest until you’re ready to come out.” I heard him pause as he reached the door. “The difference, Ava, is that Venus hurt people because she wanted to. She might have dressed it up in different ways, but that’s what it boils down to. We’re not doing that. We have to be ruthless, yes, but it’s to protect the people who belong to us. As long as we’re doing that, we’re not going to be like them.”

The faint scent of bleach wafted up from the toilet, and my stomach clenched. “And if we lose sight of that lofty goal? Lots of evil in this world happens because of some greater good, Alistair.”

“Then we’d better not let that happen, Ava.” I heard the door rattle as he rested his hand on the knob. “Besides, I’ve already thought of that. If we start to act like our predecessors, Bianca has orders to murder us in our beds.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at that. “And you’re sure that plan will work?”

“I trust Bianca implicitly—with my life and with my death.”

With that cheery thought, Alistair left me to gather myself in the empty bathroom.

Once I'd calmed down, I scrutinized myself in the mirror behind the sink. Not so much to check my hair or anything like that. No, I needed to make sure I'd removed all evidence of Matias. Dried blood freckled my face. I used the washcloth to scrub it off. Just as I'd thought, you couldn't see any blood on my clothes, but I still had a faint whiff of burning human flesh about me. There wasn't much I could do about that. Sure, I could take a shower, but I'd have to put my clothes back on. I settled for washing my hands up to the elbows in citrus-smelling soap and then headed out in search of Sid.

Normally I would have grabbed something to eat before I left, but I didn't want to run into Lock or Ezra. They weren't working restaurant shifts anymore—now they got their pay exclusively for Coterie work—but that didn't mean they weren't around.

And because I have the worst luck ever, there they were, at a table with Sid and Bianca. Lock was seated next to Bianca, their chairs close and their shoulders touching. It was like they'd been friends forever. I felt a firm jab of jealousy before I crushed it. This was my fault, and I was just going to have to learn to take my lumps with a smile. Ezra and Sid were on the other side of the table, each one doing what he could to annoy the other. A stylish black cane rested against a fifth chair that sat empty at the end of the table. Ezra had stepped into a silver bear trap and was still healing from the ordeal. The trap had torn into skin and muscle and left him on crutches for weeks. Because of the high silver content, Ezra had healed slowly. Not quite as slowly

as I would have if I'd stepped into a bear trap, but definitely not at his usual clip. Mostly he managed with a slight limp now, keeping the cane around for when he got tired. In a few more days, the limp would probably be gone.

I took my seat at the head of the table, wishing I could disappear into the wood of my chair. Ezra nudged a plate in front of me—my favorite burger, served with roasted veggies instead of fries. The vegetables were Lock's idea: I'd put money on it. Convinced that Ezra and I didn't eat well enough, he did his best to make us healthy.

The burger was still warm, which meant the boys ordered it knowing I'd be in the bathroom for a while. I don't know why, but that thought more than anything else tonight made me want to break down sobbing. As I ate, I waited for Lock and Ez to start in on me for avoiding them. No one said a word. They all chatted and let me wrap myself up in their aimless conversation and laughter and didn't give me any shit. It didn't feel like shunning or an angry silence. What it did feel like was understanding and support, which made me more ashamed of my behavior than a shunning would have. I could be angry at a shunning, but I couldn't be mad at this, which took away the only defense I had. I didn't know what else to do, so I ate quietly. Once I was done, Sid excused himself from the table and pulled on his jacket so he could take me home. Only then did Ezra pull me into his arms. He stuck his nose behind my ear, loudly breathing me in, and I couldn't help but smile. His nose was cold. Like a dog's. Bianca nodded at me, knowing that all I expected of her at the best of times was a lack of animosity. Lock fiddled with his cloth napkin, only looking up at me at the last second. Everything we'd been leaving unsaid was in his face. I looked away first. I don't

think I've ever left their company so fast. If I'd been a cartoon, there would have been a little cloud of smoke where I'd been standing.

When I was zipping up Ikka's jacket, I felt something sticking out of the pocket. I pulled out a scrap of paper, rolled up and clutched tightly in a vine, a tiny purple flower blooming near the end. My fingers trembled as I unrolled it. *We miss you, little dumpling.* Though unsigned, I knew the note was from Ezra. The flower, from Lock.

Sid wordlessly handed me Ikka's helmet, and I shoved the flower and note back into the jacket pocket. When I was properly suited up, I climbed onto the bike. I spent the first part of the ride crying, and Sid spent it pretending not to notice.

3

FIREBUGS AREN'T GOOD AT PLAYING IT COOL

MANAGED TWO GLORIOUS days to myself before I got another assignment from Alistair. I hung out with Sylvie and Cade, putting the bookstore together and pretending to be a normal person. We were going to reopen in a few days, a week ahead of schedule, because dwarves freaking rock.

Early on the morning of the third day, my phone beeped, indicating that I had an e-mail. I wanted to ignore it. I just wanted to keep basking in the bookstore's normality. But ignoring it wouldn't make it go away, so I left Sylvie to finish cleaning the windows by herself as I opened the case file Alistair had sent. The more I read, the more my stomach began to feel like a leaden pit. Sid was on his way to pick me up, and we were headed to Portland. Alistair wasn't going to wait for this problem to come to him.

Elias Johnson, rogue werewolf, and Luke Baker, siren, had been making noise in our territory. In mythology, sirens were female. Though female sirens outnumber males five to one, males

do exist. They just aren't as popular, mythology-wise. My theory is that most sailors didn't want to admit that they'd crashed their ship into a bunch of jagged rocks because pretty men had tempted them with their song. The reality is, it doesn't matter if the siren is male or female—if they sing and you listen, you're toast.

Elias and Luke were hiding out in an old warehouse down by the water that was so derelict, it should have had a sign out front that said *CREEPY BAD GUYS LIVE HERE*. Surely there must be a cheerful-looking warehouse somewhere on this planet, but I have yet to see one. It's like they propagate a universally seedy atmosphere.

We didn't bother to sneak in—we weren't there for that kind of show. My role was to be a bogeyman, which meant I had to go in big, loud, and scary. So I had Sid kick the door down while I walked in bathed in flames, my feet leaving smoking footprints behind me. It turned out even better than I thought and undoubtedly would have been very impressive to all of those involved if they hadn't been really, truly dead.

And from the smell of it, they'd been dead for at least twenty-four hours. We'd had a few abnormally warm days, and the warehouse's only air-conditioning was a handful of small open windows set up high. The whole place smelled like salt, seaweed, and rot, with a baseline of offal. I gagged, dropped my flame, and yanked my shirt up to cover my mouth. I'd left Ikka's leather jacket on the bike, Sid being uncomfortable with the idea of me setting it on fire.

Sid must have been having a worse time of it because of his heightened sense of smell, but he wasn't showing it. He sauntered over with a whistle and examined the bodies. There were

more than we thought there would be. From where I was standing, it looked like there were two males and three females. We knew the exact number based on the heads lying on the floor. The men were reasonably intact, though not in the best shape.

“Those our boys?” I asked through my shirt.

Sid examined the bodies, pulling wallets off the two men. The women didn’t appear to be wearing much, though I think they’d arrived that way. Maybe they’d come from a club, but I doubted it. My gut said these were escorts, which I didn’t know much about, but even prostitutes carry purses, right? I reluctantly walked over and started searching for them so I could at least *look* useful.

“These are definitely our boys,” Sid said. “At least, the photos on their IDs match. Well, would match if their faces weren’t so . . . puffy.” Elias, the werewolf, had been able to heal some of what had happened to him, but he was still covered in blood and worse. Luke was almost . . . pulpy . . . in parts. And the women? They were a puzzle best left for a medical examiner—a puzzle with some pieces missing.

Sid stood up, wiping his hand on his jeans before pulling out his phone. “Alistair? Yeah. The job was easier than expected. In fact, you might want to get up here.” He nudged one of the corpses over with his boot. It was putrefying already, and I couldn’t help notice the brown goo all over it. Something was helping the corpse along its road to Breakdown City. “And you should probably be quick about it.”

WE WAITED outside for Alistair. The drive from Boston to Portland takes two hours without traffic, and there was no way I was spending that time hanging out inside the warehouse.

There's not a lot to do while you wait next to an abandoned building. I tried counting all the lobster buoys in the water, but Sid kept shouting out random numbers and messing me up. I really wish I'd brought a book with me.

When Alistair arrived, I expected him to storm in all red faced and blustery, yelling about us dragging him up here, but he didn't. I kept waiting for Alistair to act like Venus, but he hadn't yet. That didn't mean he wouldn't, but strangely his nice demeanor was putting me on edge. Where were the tantrums? The crazy demands? He was ruining my mental picture of how a Coterie despot should act.

Alistair looked cool and unruffled, as usual. His brown hair was neatly styled, his sunglasses pushed up in such a way that they were more of a fashion accessory than something he actually used. And he was wearing an honest-to-goodness polo shirt. With *slacks*. I couldn't tell if Alistair was ruining the Coterie's image or classin' it up a bit.

Bianca drifted in behind him as usual. Everything about her was a study in pale—blond hair that barely qualified as blond it was so light, pale skin, and the lightest gray eyes I've ever seen. I wasn't sure if she darkened her eyebrows or if they were naturally darker. We weren't friendly enough for me to ask. Most days, we were lucky if we didn't try to throttle each other.

To make up for all the pale, Bianca usually wore all black. Today was no exception—black boots, black jeans, black hooded sleeveless T-shirt, eyes thickly ringed with black eyeliner so that the ghostly gray of her irises jumped out at you. I considered buying her a Hawaiian shirt for her birthday. She would love that.

Alistair and Bianca both examined the bodies, as well as the

rest of the warehouse. They didn't look too pleased that the situation had taken care of itself.

"I thought you'd be a little happy. Why aren't we doing cartwheels of joy?" I asked after Alistair had glared at the bodies for a few minutes.

"Because before, it was a tidy package. Come in, show them who's boss, leave. Now it's a mess," he said, scowling. "I dislike messes."

Bianca used a pen to lift the shirt off one of the bodies to peer at the torso. It made a wet sound as it unstuck. She didn't so much as pause. "Before, we knew the enemy. Now we have to wonder if these deaths are unrelated to us or a play for territory or if it's another unknown group eliminating competition and sending Alistair a message."

"You make it sound like we've been dealing with a lot of this," I said. "We've had a fairly light summer, though."

She let the shirt drop and moved on. "No," said Bianca, drawing the word out as she examined what I think was a finger. "You've had a fairly light summer."

I looked at Alistair for confirmation. He continued to scowl down at the bodies. "We've been dealing with a lot of people who saw the change in Coterie leadership as an opportunity to make their own play. I figured I'd get proactive with this one."

I knew I wasn't getting called in for every little thing, but I hadn't realized they'd been cutting me out to such an extent. How much had everyone been working as I whiled away my days in the bookstore?

"Instead," Alistair continued, "I get this muddle. Extra work

and a waste of life. Not to mention that no one here will be getting a proper funeral." Alistair looked at the corpses of the three women with some pity. "I'm afraid their families will never know what happened to them."

Bianca eyed one of the tables, which was covered in a dusting of fine white powder. "Something tells me that the families are expecting that kind of fate."

"Doesn't make it any less sad," he said.

"And why aren't the families going to hear?" I asked.

Alistair held out his arms, shook his fingers like he was limbering up, then spread them wide and concentrated. "Because," he said, "after we get everything we can from them, you're going to honor them with a Viking funeral. In the meantime, though, we need to preserve the scene." Frost crept across the ground, covering the bodies; the temperature in the warehouse dropped several degrees and kept going. Sid found a long pole to close the windows, and then Alistair left us all, including Bianca, to guard the warehouse. I couldn't tell who was less thrilled, me or her.

"Where are you going?" she asked, indignant, as he walked toward the door.

"To find us a necromancer," he answered without turning around. "We need to ask these corpses some questions."

No one wanted to hang out in the warehouse. One, it was so cold, you could see your breath, and two, it smelled like human Popsicles in there. So we took turns walking around the perimeter or sitting by the door. Sid had to prop it back up, since he'd kicked it in so dramatically.

We ordered pizza, and if the delivery driver thought it was

weird to deliver six pies to three people sitting outside a run-down, semi-abandoned warehouse, he didn't mention it. After two hours of sitting around, Sid decided to try to take a nap while Bianca and I took turns keeping watch. I'll say this about the caulbearer, she doesn't slack on the job. If I was sitting, she was walking, and if she sat down, she glared at me until I got up.

At the next walk/glare rotation, I finally said something. "I get it. You don't like me. You don't have to pretend you're all business. Just say you want me out of your face." I dusted off the back of my jeans as I stood up.

Bianca gave a sharp exhale of disgust. Her face looked like she smelled something foul. "Believe it or not, Ava, not everything is about you." She leaned against the warehouse, hands in her pockets. "Alistair left us here as guards. When he shows up, we are going to hand over this warehouse in *exactly* the same shape as when he left it. Because that's what he wants and that's all that matters. Just because you don't take your job seriously doesn't mean the rest of us don't."

Ah. I was the disgusting thing she smelled, then. I felt my cheeks burn and I knew if I glanced down, sparks would be slam dancing all around my fingers. "You think I don't take what I do *seriously*?"

She gave a half shrug. "You whine. You bitch and moan and do the woe-is-me thing, and it's boring. You're a firebug. So what? Get over it and do your damn job. Nobody is interested in holding your hands as soon as you're done wringing them." She looked away, like I was dismissed.

Oh, that was *it*. I flicked my hands wide open, enthusiastic

flames licking my fingers. Bianca got to her feet, fists at her sides, ready to go.

Before we could get any further, someone grabbed my wrists.

“That’s about enough of that, children.” Sid’s warm breath brushed my ear.

Bianca and I both opened our mouths to argue, but Sid shushed us. When we both opened our mouths again to complain about the shushing, he laughed. I don’t know what he found so funny.

“While you two are hissing and spitting, someone could be breaking into this nice warehouse we’re guarding. Tell you what—I’ll take a little stroll around the premises. In the meantime, Ava, you go inside and make sure everything is as it should be. Bianca, guard the door.”

Before I could even get the words out, Sid answered, “You pulled inside duty because you were about to throw fire at our ally here. She’s not the enemy. I don’t care how much you guys want to bicker, but your control should be better than that. You don’t get to spark in public just because you’re pissy.” He dropped my wrists and disappeared around the building.

My cheeks still burned as I stomped to the door. I wanted to argue and pout, but damn it all, Sid was right. My control should be better. I wasn’t a new bug anymore. Bianca opened the door, smirking, and I stopped so hard my boot heel almost squeaked. As nice as it would be, I couldn’t act like a child, which meant doing things I didn’t want to do. I took a deep breath.

“Sorry,” I said, not looking at Bianca. “Sid is right. I was being a brat.” Before she could do more than blink at me, I walked past her into the makeshift freezer.

If Alistair ever got bored of being a crime boss, he had plenty of career options open to him. The warehouse was still cold enough that I could see my breath as I moved. My boots left patterns in the frost as I walked around the edges of the room. Except in the spots where the frost wouldn't go. A film of sticky goo coated that part of the floor. Now that I had noticed it, it was easier to see. I followed the goo up the wall to one of the windows. Then down by where I was standing, which was currently behind a pile of rotting crates. Something had waited here and left an oozing puddle. I edged around it, not wanting to step in the mess. Nothing good oozes—slugs, businessmen, infected sores. Things like flowers, kittens, and adorable ponies hardly ooze at *all*. In the natural world, the more dangerous or disgusting something is, the higher its goo factor. Believe it or not, monsters like myself are part of the natural world—the same law applies to us. Which meant that whatever left this mark probably wasn't friendly, and the likelihood that it would, at one point, try to digest me was pretty high.

I took out my phone and snapped some photos for later just in case. We might need them to identify the creature, or to figure out what happened here. On a whim, I sent the photos to Cade to see if he could identify the slime trail. I took some plastic sandwich bags out of my pocket and carefully took a sample without touching the goo. My phone vibrated with an immediate reply from Cade, saying he would hit the books to see if he could find anything like the goo, but suggested I send the photos to Alistair as well, since the Coterie had better resources than he did. A few texts from Lock had come in without my noticing. Nothing special. Just *Bianca said you were on a job—why didn't Alistair call me?* Followed by *Why didn't you call me?* I wondered

if he'd noticed that it was the first time he'd texted me since yesterday morning. Next was a text from Ezra: *Text Lock back before he implodes.*

I ignored them both.

I STOPPED counting Alistair's absence in hours and started going by deliveries. By the time he came back, we'd had Thai, tacos, and sub sandwiches. I was taking advantage of being in a city (Carrant had only one stoplight—we did not, at this time, warrant a Thai restaurant), and Bianca was stuck somewhere between awe and disgust at Sid's and my appetites.

Alistair wasn't alone when he returned. His passenger climbed out of the car, pulling a pack of cigarettes from her thin jacket. Without a word, she fished a lighter out of her green cargo pants and lit up. She glanced around, and I could see her eyes assessing us. I bet she didn't miss a thing, either. Her brown hair was pulled back from her face, and her body was lean, like she was prepared to fight or run, depending on the situation. Her heeled boots added an inch or two to her already impressive height, and her white tank top set off the deep gold of her skin. I wouldn't call her pretty—something about the way she held herself negated that. Striking, maybe. Or terrifying. Yeah, that was closer to the truth. I could see her being worshipped as an Egyptian goddess, and not a friendly one. She was the kind that you left a sacrifice for and hoped she didn't notice you too much.

The woman looked down at the empty food trash and waved her cigarette hand, leaving a trail of smoke. "At least one of them is a were—probably two."

Alistair leaned against his car. Whenever he did that, he

looked like a TV ad for an upscale cologne. "You haven't even touched them yet." He sounded defeated.

She nodded toward the garbage. "You called me as soon as you locked down the scene. That's a lot of food for three people." The cherry end of her cigarette flared as she took a drag, her eyes still moving. "You." She pointed at Sid. "What do you turn into?"

"Not telling," Sid said, his voice flat.

She grinned, clearly enjoying the game. "I can see three knives from where I'm standing. Only a few weres that I know of bother with weapons. Too scruffy for a mongoose. Not prissy enough to be a swan. Cocky." Her grin widened and took on a decidedly wolfish quality. "Hare."

Sid slumped. The woman moved on to Bianca but continued almost as soon as she took her in. "Obviously your pet caul-bearer." Bianca stiffened, but the woman either didn't notice or didn't care. "That just leaves you," she said to me. She got close to my face, her brown eyes inches from mine. "Not a were, though you obviously eat like one."

"Hey!" Just because she was right didn't mean I couldn't get huffy about it. "How do you know that food wasn't Bianca's?"

"Mustard on your shirt here, sriracha on your pants there, and you smell like pepperoni." She jabbed at the offending spots with her cigarette but was careful not to touch me.

"How do you know that's sriracha?" Sid asked.

"Sriracha and I have met. Repeatedly." She pointed to a faded stain on her cargo pants before she took another quick drag of her cigarette. "You're not a careful eater, and you have a high metabolism, but you're not a were." At my surprise she said, "You're not twitchy. Weres have a hard time sitting still when

being approached by a stranger. They growl, they pace, they posture,” she said, ashing her cigarette in Sid’s direction, “but they don’t just stand there.”

The air was still as we continued to stare at each other. She stepped back, circled me, made me lift my feet to show her the soles of my boots, but never laid so much as a fingertip on my person. Finally she was back around to my front. With great ceremony she dropped her cigarette and ground it out with her boot. She pulled a fresh one from the pack and held it up. “How about you light this one for me?”

Alistair sighed and I knew that, whatever game we’d been playing, he’d lost. “You didn’t touch her—I watched. How did you know?”

She winked at me and put her new cigarette away. “She eats like a were but isn’t one. All her buttons are metal. There are scorch marks on the bottoms of her boots from stomping out flames. I can see embroidery peeking out from the inside of her jacket cuffs—my guess is runes, mostly the ones to do with fire and protection. And every time I took a drag, her eyes followed the ember.”

Had they? I didn’t notice I was doing that. Sloppy. She held out her hand, and I hesitated to take it. I’d heard things about touching necromancers, all of them warnings against it. But then I saw a flicker of disappointment in her eyes and said the hell with it. I shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you, firebug.”

“Likewise, necromancer.” Her grip was firm and warm, and I didn’t vomit bees or turn into dust or anything. It was just a handshake, and a good one. With a start, I realized that I liked her. Weren’t necromancers supposed to exude evil and walk

around covered in human blood? She was wearing a necklace with a little Eeyore charm on it, for heaven's sake. "Are we going to keep this all supersecret superhero codenames? Do I have to start calling Bianca 'the Veil' or something?"

The woman laughed.

"We could do that, sure, or you could just call me June." She looked at Alistair. "Now how about we get to the dead things?"

4

BRING OUT YOUR DEAD

JUNE WALKED STRAIGHT over to the scene, suddenly all business. She gave the corpses a thoughtful frown before digging some chalk out of her pocket. “All right, little miss, come on out. I’d like you here before I start making circles.”

Nothing happened. Was there a ghost around that I couldn’t see? Were the bodies supposed to get up and sing us a Greek chorus? June obviously expected something to happen, but the warehouse was quiet and the only thing moving was our breath steaming in and out. She tapped her foot. I didn’t think June sat still very well, either. “I don’t have all day,” she said to the air.

There was a rustling noise and the soft scuff of shoes as a little girl came out from behind the box pile. She didn’t look like much—shorts, a faded Batman tank top, and flip-flops, her inky hair held back in two ponytails. Little pink heart-shaped sunglasses covered her eyes. That didn’t stop us all from going into defensive mode. Sid dropped into a crouch, knives appearing almost magically in his hands. A large fireball flared to life in

front of me, and Bianca disappeared. Only June and Alistair didn't react.

The little girl propped her sunglass on top of her head, both eyebrows going up with it. "Whoa there, cowpokes. A little high-strung, are we? Chill your knickers. I've been invited."

None of us twitched until June confirmed what the little girl, introduced as Ashley, said.

"What did you think I was going to do?" Ashley asked, clearly amused.

I shrugged. "I don't know. But we're stuck in a warehouse with several dead bodies and you appeared out of nowhere. Not everything looks dangerous at first. You could have been wearing glamour. Better to be prepared and alive than assume you're not a threat and get added to the human Popsicle pile."

Ashley turned to June. "I like her. Can we keep her?" She clasped her hands like she was praying. "Maybe we can send her up to Seattle to keep Dipshit McGee out of trouble?"

"No one can keep that boy out of trouble," June said absently as she drew a circle around us in chalk. She closed herself inside with us. Only Ashley was left out. "No one break this line until I say, no matter what you see or hear. Got it?"

June pulled out a small knife and sliced into her forearm. Blood welled, dripped, and hit the ground. It felt like the temperature dropped down even lower. Each breath burned like frost coating my lungs.

She started with the women. They pieced themselves together—arms reattaching, holes filling, bones knitting together with sickening pops. It became less pleasant from there. Once they were whole, June started questioning them one at a time. The first just started . . . screaming. The shrill sound felt like a

physical assault. It raked at my eardrums and my heart. June did her best to calm her, but in the end she had Ashley give her a little tap, and the woman collapsed and went still. The second girl didn't scream, but her eerie silence was almost worse. The only sound she made was this pathetic bleating noise when she sobbed. Other than that she just rocked herself and stared off into space.

Ashley put her back down the same way. I'm no expert, but I think their traumatic deaths had torn holes in their sanity. Even their dead selves couldn't cope. Which, by the way, was absolutely *spectacular* news for us. Because I'd have to go out and hunt down whatever this thing was.

"So far all I can tell you is that they were human. Literally torn apart—probably by the were." June's wound had stopped bleeding. She flexed her arm, starting the flow again.

"Are you sure?"

"From the way they went back together and the general scene, I'm pretty sure. This was not a nice death, Alistair, and not a quick one."

"Is that why they're acting like something out of a Japanese horror film?" Sid asked.

June nodded. "Between what happened and the drugs, I think that's a fair assessment."

The third girl wasn't much different from the other two.

"Do you think the guys will be more of the same?" Alistair asked.

June pursed her lips in thought, her arm dripping blood onto the floor again. I wonder if she even noticed. "Probably," she said, finally. "But I can't be sure. Do you want me to do them both at once?"

“If you think it’s safe.”

“Alistair, I’m raising the dead. It’s never safe,” she said. “That’s why we have the circle. But I think I can handle it.” June flicked her hand, making a thin line of blood drops hit the floor. The room temperature dropped again and I shivered.

The boys snapped to life, and I can honestly say it was nothing like the girls. Elias reached over and grasped Luke by the arms, hurling him into the warehouse wall. Before Luke even hit the floor, Elias was running toward us at full speed, only stopping when he smacked into June’s circle. He flew backward, skidding along the warehouse floor. Before I could blink, he’d rolled up onto his feet and was back, stopping just short of the circle. His face twisted in a snarl of rage, spittle flying from his lips. He clawed at the circle. When that didn’t work, he began throwing himself at it, over and over, testing different spots for any possible weakness.

We were all so focused on him, no one noticed when Luke got to his feet. I didn’t spot him until he’d halved the distance between the wall and our protective bubble. He didn’t thrash against it like Elias. Instead, he opened his mouth and everything went white. Blinding. I couldn’t see anything or hear anything. The pain was excruciating. Every nerve ending hummed with electricity, shocking me down to my core.

Then it cleared and it felt like I was floating. The world was a dream and Luke was its center. All I wanted was to be near him. If I didn’t go to him right now, I would wither and die. He was my water, my air—

I’m not sure who broke the circle. One minute, my head was stuffed with fluffy clouds and angel song; the next I was staring at Luke’s collapsed body on the floor. Ashley stood over him,

her hand out. She'd tapped the siren back into the realm of the dead, and that's why my head had cleared. Stars and sparks, he could have killed us all.

That's when Sid screamed.

I turned in time to see Bianca grab Alistair and throw a veil over him. They popped out of existence. She must have spread it out over the rest of us, too, because I could only see Sid and Elias grappling on the floor. Sid was an experienced fighter, but it doesn't matter how many blades you have and how fast you are when the person you're fighting is already dead. Elias was tearing into Sid with clawed hands until gashes bled from his chest, his leg, and his face. Sid stopped screaming when Elias cracked a rib and punctured his lung.

Ashley left the safety of the veil and tried to jump in, but Elias dodged her advance, grabbed the back of her T-shirt, and tossed her across the warehouse. I couldn't get a clear shot from where I was standing, and I didn't want to throw fireballs and hit Sid. Besides, flesh wounds meant nothing to Elias. Nothing short of debilitating was going to work on him. So I did the only thing I could and hurled myself onto Elias's back. Even with my arms around his neck, he didn't register me as a threat. He continued to wail on Sid, who was still doing his best to defend himself, but each block was a little slower. He was losing a lot of blood, and his breath was wet and labored.

I'm not the biggest or the strongest person around. I don't carry weapons. But there's a reason I don't have a knife or spend a lot of time on my right hook. I don't need a weapon because I *am* a weapon. I held Elias tight and let myself burn. No fireballs, no concentrated bursts. Just flames from the crown of my head to the tips of my boots.

I could live a thousand years and never get used to the smell. It was all I could do to not gag. I tightened my grip. I could fall apart later, but there was no time for indulging in weakness. Elias's skin and hair started to blister with the heat before I moved to fat, and soon muscle.

He was so far gone that he didn't notice right away. My nostrils filled with the stench of hot, rancid fat, and I squeezed tighter. Elias spun around and tried to grab me, but I hung on like a barnacle. I wouldn't last two seconds if he managed to dislodge me. I was getting dizzy from the spinning before Elias figured out that what he was doing wasn't working. He skidded to a stop and grabbed onto my arms, his claws digging into my flesh. I felt a warm wash of blood as he tightened his grip and I screamed, but I kept burning.

It's not the easiest thing to burn a body quickly. The average human body is seventy-five percent water. And I had to go deep with Elias. He wasn't feeling pain, so a light burn wasn't going to affect him. I needed to burn him to ash and bone, and that takes a lot of heat, somewhere between 1,100 degrees and 2,000. I've never stuck a turkey thermometer in someone, so I don't know exactly. But I'd looked it up online—I wanted to understand exactly what I was capable of doing to a person.

It's not the cleanest process. The soft tissue vaporizes. Skin becomes waxy, blisters, and splits. Muscles and tendons tighten around bone as they char. It's not something even I'm usually up close and personal with. I sent fire into Elias's entire body, but I focused on the brain in the hopes that every zombie movie ever was right: destroy the brain, destroy the zombie. Eventually he dropped to his knees. He swayed there for a minute, his grip on my arms loosening. Then he fell forward in a puff of ash.

Despite what you think you know about cremation, people don't actually turn into powder. Vampires, well, that's a whole different situation, but the human skeleton doesn't burn very well. Crematoriums have a separate machine they use to grind down the bones. So while some ash puffed up into my nose, eyes, and mouth, there was just as much leftover charred flesh and bone beneath me to cushion my fall when Elias finally disintegrated beneath me.

I stayed on the floor for a moment and tried to breathe, thinking about the amazing shower and the gallons of mouth-wash in my future. For future reference, charred werewolf ash tastes *awful*. Like singed hair and oily fat. I gagged.

June had to pull me up, my arms still death-locked around what was left of Elias's neck. She dragged me over next to Sid. He was at least breathing normally again. He'd twisted into a partial push-up and was spitting up blood to clear his lungs. We made a neat pair.

"Try not to get blood on me, okay?" I asked.

He reached over, his chest dragging into the ash, and smeared blood down the front of my shirt with one hand.

"You did that on purpose," I said.

He nodded, then spit one more mouthful of blood onto the floor.

"Well, you're now covered in Elias, so we're even."

"This is why we're friends," he said, then collapsed onto his back. He held out his fist so we could bump knuckles. "Thanks."

I reached over and tousled his hair, making sure to really smear the oily black ash deep into the roots. It would be a bitch to get out. "You're welcome, hoss."

Sid laughed, though I could tell it was painful for him.

We were all sitting in a rough oval, a smoldering werewolf in the middle, and not the sexy kind of smolder, either. Bianca had dropped her veil and everyone had reappeared. Ashley bandaged a dazed-looking June's arm while Alistair pressed a folded handkerchief to a gash on her forehead. Bianca sat close by, a stunned look on her face. I'd have to clean my own wounds. Lock usually did that for me. I felt a pang of loss for my friend.

"So that was fun," Sid said, using the edge of his shredded shirt to wipe the blood off his face. Some of the smaller gashes were already closing.

"What on earth happened?" I asked. "Was he rabid or something? Can werewolves get rabies?"

"Not that I'm aware of, no." Alistair had a grim look on his face.

June took a cigarette out of the pack in her pocket, but her hands were shaking too hard to light it. I sparked it for her and she mumbled a thank-you.

"I've never seen anything like that," she said.

Alistair lifted an edge of the handkerchief to check June's wound. "Bianca, can you fetch the first-aid kit from the car? This could use a few butterfly bandages. And grab the camera. I want better definition than our phones can offer." Bianca snapped out of her reverie and jogged out of the warehouse. The look Alistair gave June was stern. "I shouldn't have asked you to raise two at once. I didn't think it would be that risky." His words took the blame, but his tone implied that she should have known, too.

Ashley knotted the end of the makeshift bandage. "It shouldn't have been that dangerous. June always has control. That guy . . . It shouldn't have happened." She poked Alistair in the chest. "So don't grouch at her. You may be the boss up here,

but you're not the boss of us." Venus would have cut her finger off for that. But Alistair merely raised one hand in surrender.

"My apologies, mighty Harbinger. I didn't mean any harm." Ashley scowled but stopped poking him.

"I should have had control," June said, watching the smoke drifting up. "It was like his mind was . . . gone. Just gone."

Bianca returned, first-aid kit and camera bag in tow. She handed the kit off to Alistair, then proceeded to take pictures of everything in the warehouse. The camera was large and professional and looked comically huge in Bianca's small hands, but she clearly knew what she was doing.

"Has that happened before?" Sid asked, grabbing some alcohol wipes, ointment, and gauze from the kit. "The mindless revenant thing?"

June shook her head. "When I raise people, even weres, they usually come back as themselves. It doesn't matter if they've rotted down to bones, flesh reforms—they look whole. If a piece was removed before they died and wasn't buried with them, that's a different thing. A severed head won't regrow the body. It has to be, you know, together."

"So whatever happened to him," I said slowly, thinking it through, "happened before he died. Whatever it was ate his brain so that there wasn't enough for him to fully regenerate when you raised him. Is that what we're saying?"

June mashed her cigarette into the warehouse floor, earning another reproving glare from Alistair, who was trying to apply the butterfly bandages to her head wound.

"Stop moving," he snapped.

She ignored him. "Yes, Ava, I think that's exactly what we're saying."

"You forgot something," Sid said, tearing open an alcohol wipe from the kit so he could clean some more blood off himself. "What do weres do best?"

I looked at the skin he was wiping clean. "They heal."

"Exactly." Sid winced as the alcohol hit an open wound. "So not only did it eat his brain, it did so in such a way that either his body didn't have time to regrow the damage, or it couldn't." He motioned at me to hold my arms out so he could dress the small punctures in them. They weren't bleeding much anymore, but with what was in the warehouse, cleaning them was a good idea. It hurt like hell, but it was a good idea.

"What could do that?" Ashley asked.

Sid threw the wipe on the floor, his grim look highlighted by the occasional flash of Bianca's camera. "I don't know. Silver, maybe. But in his brain? I wouldn't even know how that could happen." He carefully smoothed on ointment and opened the new roll of gauze.

"Secret experiment?" I offered. "You know, like Wolverine and the adamantium. Maybe we should bring back just his head and get someone to run tests on it."

"No," Alistair said firmly. "We don't know what happened, but it happened to the siren as well. We can't take the risk that it might be a contaminant or a virus. Something passed by contact. I won't jeopardize our people. Remember what I said, Ava. After Bianca is done with the photos, you're going to have to burn the whole place down."

I started to protest about the loss of evidence, but he cut me off. "I said no. We burn it all. After what I've seen, I don't want even the lowliest protozoan crawling out of this building alive when you're done."

“Kill it with fire?” I asked, already feeling weary from Elias.

“Exactly. Kill it with fire, then we head to the Inferno. Everyone showers. Thoroughly.”

Sid snorted. “You don’t have to tell me twice.”

“I’ll get someone to bring us new clothes. Everything—and I do mean everything—on your person will be bagged and burned. Whatever this thing is, I’m not bringing it into my home.”

Sid and I both grabbed our respective jackets.

“Yes, even your jackets. Ava, I know yours is warded. I’ll get it replaced. Ashley, what about you?”

“My clothes are technically a projection. I’m corporeal—I can affect things on this plane—but I’m not *here* in the same way that you are. I could snap my fingers and change my outfit if I wanted.”

Alistair made me leave my carefully collected bag of mystery ooze in the warehouse. He wasn’t taking any chances. Once everyone was a safe distance away, I was asked to do my thing. I felt a twinge of sadness for everyone inside, that no one would really know what happened to them. But Alistair was right. So I burned everything down to ash and bone.

I was shaky by the time I finished. Between Elias and the warehouse, I’d been burning not only hot but also for a sustained amount of time. Sid fetched me a bottle of water from the trunk of Alistair’s car, and I swallowed a few electrolyte pills. Hopefully they would hold me over until I could rest or get something to eat.

“All right, then. Everyone is headed back to the Inferno,” Alistair said when I was done. “Ashley, are you staying with June?” June, cleaned and bandaged, looked like nothing had

bothered her today, until you caught sight of the faint tremble in her hands.

"I'll stay for a while yet," Ashley said. She hovered close to June but gave the necromancer her space.

"But that's way out of the way for Sid and me." Not only did I not feel like going back to Boston tonight, but that drive in these clothes, smelling and feeling like they did . . . I shuddered.

"I know it's a long haul, but we need to contain this as best we can." Alistair examined us carefully, ending with me and Sid. "June can ride with me, and we can clean her up enough to be passable, but you two . . ."

"Look like a murder scene," I said.

"Which means you're going to have to ride close to us the whole way home, and Bianca will have to veil you."

Sid rubbed a dirty hand over his face. You can only clean yourself so much with tiny wipes. "Because it isn't difficult enough to ride a bike on a busy road where some of the drivers can't see you, now we get to actually be invisible."

"Where's your sense of adventure?" I asked.

"I think the rabid werewolf ate it."

5

DON'T TRY THIS AT HOME . . . OR ANYWHERE ELSE

I TURNS OUT THAT RIDING on an invisible motorcycle when you are also invisible is incredibly dangerous. Makes me wonder how Wonder Woman manages in an invisible plane. Being a superhero clearly has its advantages.

We tried to follow Alistair's car, but people kept attempting to merge into us, thinking we were an empty space. Since Bianca's veil also managed sound, people couldn't hear the motorcycle right next to them. I clutched Sid and gave thanks for his excellent reflexes. Things did get a little less terrifying when the roads had enough of a shoulder for us to drive next to the car, but that wasn't always possible.

By the time we reached the Inferno, I wasn't shaking from electrolyte withdrawal anymore, but from pure terror. Sid was ghostly white and not in much better shape.

I climbed off the bike, barely able to pry the helmet off my head, my fingers were shaking so bad. "Let's never do that again."

“Agreed. Would you think less of me if I vomited over by that car?”

“I couldn’t possibly think less of you than I already do.”

“Will you hold my hair? I don’t want to get any puke on it. There might be some lovely ladies in there, and I’m not really into the kind who can sign off on puke hair.” He grabbed both the helmets. Alistair had assured us someone would come out to disinfect the vehicles. At least Sid wouldn’t lose his bike.

“Yes, because blood, gore, and ash are cool, but you draw the line at vomit.”

He offered me a friendly arm as we followed Alistair. “I do have some standards, you know.”

I couldn’t help it—I laughed. Maybe my usual team wasn’t with me, and something ached at the absence of Lock and Ezra, but Sid was good backup, too. And I had to give Bianca some credit. It couldn’t have been easy holding a veil for that long. I didn’t have to like her, but I was going to have to respect her. It was the adult thing to do. Damn it. Being an adult sucks.

Alistair led us in through a back door and down some stairs into a tiled room that stank of disinfectant. Showerheads lined the wall, each one surrounded by a flimsy vinyl curtain that really only concealed what absolutely had to be covered. Not quite prison-shower bad, but getting there. I really didn’t want to know what the original use of this room was.

Alistair had us each take a stall, pull the plastic shut, and strip. We threw our clothes and our bandages into the middle of the room, and when I peeked around the curtain, I saw someone in a hazmat suit come in. Sid was very upset when he was forced to hand over all his blades and a bracelet that apparently

doubled as a garrote. He settled down once he heard that he'd get them back after they'd been disinfected thoroughly. Dr. Wesley, the woman in the hazmat suit, would be stitching, inspecting, rebandaging, and examining all of us after we were clean, or so Alistair said.

Again, I didn't want to know why Alistair even *owned* a hazmat suit. Our clothes were collected and taken to an incinerator. The liquid soap I had to use had a hospital smell to it—all medicine and no love. Not the kind of thing you purchased in the store. Despite the chemical-warfare-grade cleaning agents, I still had to wash my hair several times to get all of Elias out of there. I'm not sure I managed.

"Any more and you'll go down the drain, my wrinkled dumpling." Ezra grinned at me from around one side of the vinyl. He handed me a fluffy towel. I didn't shrink away—Ezra's seen all I have to offer.

"You never texted us back." He handed towels to Sid and Bianca, who were on either side of me, but barely looked at them. I guess they got privacy. Probably strict orders. Ezra's not the best at understanding boundaries. Because he's charming and heart-smashingly gorgeous, he gets away with a lot.

"I was a little busy." I traded the towel for a soft white robe, the kind people steal from luxury hotels.

Amusement lit up Ezra's whiskey-colored eyes. He clearly wasn't buying my lame-ass excuse. "I'm not *new*, Ava."

"Sorry," I mumbled.

He gave a head tilt of acceptance before grabbing robes for the others. At least it was just a huffy Ezra I was dealing with, although he was clearly not too upset. I wasn't sure I could

handle Lock right then. Between the bike ride and the earlier fun, I was whuped. All I wanted was some detangler for my hair and a nap. Neither seemed likely.

Alistair led us all through a few hallways and up a stairwell that I was pretty sure I'd never seen, into an unfamiliar set of rooms. The Inferno is the acting headquarters for the Coterie. The building has three levels, but the public only knows about two. Purgatory, the restaurant, sits on the ground floor. They serve the best burger I've ever had, and there's usually a line out the door—reservations are a good idea. It toes the line between comfortable and swank, and it's a place people go to be seen.

If you go through a pair of gilded elevator doors, you can reach the dance club, Heaven. If people go to Purgatory to be seen, then they go to Heaven to be seen with less clothing. The staff wears wings, and everything is ethereal and beautiful. I hate it. To be fair, my only experience with Heaven was a tainted one. My charming ex-boyfriend who will not be named roofied me when I was in Heaven. Lock had to carry me out almost unconscious. Not my favorite memory. Plus, it reminds me of a roller disco for some reason.

The bottom floor, which is underground, is aptly named Hell. Under Venus's reign, it was the last place you wanted to be, and frequently became the last place some people were seen alive. I hated it more than Heaven, but at least Hell didn't pretend. It was large and labyrinthine, and used to be white from ceiling to floor. Venus liked the contrast with blood. Alistair had been remodeling, and this area had obviously already received treatment. It was a bit of a forced remodel. I burned a lot of Hell down during a firefight. The sprinklers and the fire department

managed to shut the fire down before it reached the upper floors, so they only took on a little water damage and some smoke.

The room we were in was put together like a hotel suite—soothing pale green walls, warm colors on the couches and carpets, and a well-stocked minifridge.

Everything about the room beckoned you to relax—all except one very irate-looking half-dryad. Judging from the plaster dust in the air and the new Ezra- and Lock-shaped dents in the wall, we'd interrupted a disagreement. Ezra's face was flushed, and he was midshout. At the sight of us, Lock dropped his hands from Ezra's throat and they both put on a serene countenance. From the guilty look Lock threw my way, I could only assume the quarrel was about me. Great.

Lock is a very even-keeled kind of guy—usually. Forgiving, gentle, and everything you'd expect from a nature spirit. But people sometimes forget that nature is multifaceted. On one hand, you have idyllic meadows, gentle breezes, fluffy bunnies, and calm seas. On the other? Tornados, earthquakes, monsoons, and sharks. Lock spent most of his time in fluffy-bunny mode. Today was not one of those days. Every muscle in his jaw was tense, and one of them was twitching. His gray eyes were like granite. We stared at each other, and it was like the only people in the room were me, Lock, and his pissy attitude.

I looked down at my shaking hands and realized that all of this, well, it just *sucked*, and I didn't want it anymore. Then Bianca gave him a light kiss on the cheek and the spell broke. Because I was trying to be mature, I didn't even make a gagging sound. Lock seemed to notice then what state we were all in. He shook the plaster dust from his hair and handed out clothes to everyone.

Alistair examined the room with chagrin. “The contractors just finished this room. The paint has barely dried. If I didn’t need you both doing other things so badly, I’d make you fix these walls yourself, understood?”

Ezra was unconcerned, his attention already somewhere else, but Lock appeared repentant.

Bianca and Alistair and the other Coterie regulars like myself had our own spare clothes on hand. Alistair had called ahead with sizes for June, who grabbed hers and hit the bathroom. Sid took a separate bedroom. And lucky me—my clothing came with a firm hand on my wrist as Lock dragged me into the other bedroom.

“If you’re going to lecture me, at least turn around so I can get dressed while you yell.”

He dutifully turned around, even though, like Ez, he’s seen it all before. But Lock has good manners and didn’t point that out. If we were going to fight, I didn’t want to be naked. It’s incredibly difficult to fight in the nude. It’s actually a little disturbing to realize how many times I’ve actually had to do just that. Lock was silent as I got dressed, and he looked more relaxed than before, but I know him. He’d gone into slow-simmer mode. I hadn’t seen him this mad in a while, and I couldn’t decide if I should tiptoe around him or get defensive.

Ezra slipped in, shutting the door again before anyone could get a peek of me in my unders. He cradled a fire extinguisher in his arms.

“You here to break up the fight?” I asked. I said it lightly, hoping to decrease the tension in the air. As much as I didn’t want to argue, I also wanted to get it over and done with. It felt weird to have this disconnect between my best friends and me.

It was like half my family had packed up and left town, only I knew for a fact that it was my fault and it was not a vacation. Ezra wasn't mad at me. Frustrated, yes, but not angry. I understood that. He was stuck between Lock and me, though, and trying really hard to not be. It was a crappy position for us to put him in, but I couldn't see a way out of it.

Ezra set the fire extinguisher down. "Not today, my little apple fritter. If I thought it would help, I would park my beautiful self in that chair with some popcorn and watch the fireworks. Instead, I am going to be right outside that door, and I'm going to make sure you're not interrupted."

I yanked on a pair of jeans that were still a little loose and grimaced. I'd gained back a lot of the weight I'd lost while fighting Venus, but clearly I wasn't quite back to myself yet. I fiddled with the zipper, buying myself a few precious seconds. Of course I knew I had to take my medicine, but that didn't mean I would like it. Ezra came over and cupped my face in his hands. "I refuse to let you two destroy what we have." He squeezed my cheeks until I made a fish face. "So I'd better hear yelling. Alistair says whatever you break will come out of your pay, just so you know."

I spend a lot of time hurting the people I love. Not on purpose. It's like there's a radius of pain around me, and the closer you get, the more it sinks into you. Cade had been kidnapped and beaten last spring, just for being the most important person in my life. *Dad*, I corrected mentally. It was easier to say *Cade* than it was to say *Dad*, and I realized that I was doing it for the same reasons that I was avoiding my friends. This thing with Cade was new and fragile, and I was afraid the wrong move would crush the fledgling life we had.

Lock and Ezra had been hurt at the same time as Cade, Ezra

more so than Lock, at least physically. And just like with Cade, I knew that I shared some of the blame for his injuries with Venus. And that sucked, but I knew they were all healing and soldiering on. I'd been too chickenshit to face up to what I'd done to Lock, which was totally different, I know. Yes, Lock had been roughed up in the fight. And that hurt me, of course. Emotional pain, though—I didn't know what to do with that. Lock had been brave. He'd put his heart out there, and I'd panicked and crushed it. That pain was all on me, and I didn't know how to fix it.

Ezra rested his forehead against mine, his eyes inches away. "Try not to do more damage to him, Ava." He said it softly enough that I wasn't sure Lock could even hear him. I was too close to peer around him to see if Lock still had his back turned.

"All my fault and all that?"

Ezra tweaked my chin. "He got this talk already. If you'd been answering your phone or texting me back, you would have had it, too. The fault is shared, though you both will try to claim it." He gave me one more reproving look, then sauntered over to Lock, smacked him on the ass, and headed for the door.

"You're supposed to say 'good hustle' or 'good game' after you smack any of our asses," Lock said. "It's a rule."

Ezra popped his head back in before he shut it. "When have I ever followed rules? Remember—yelling. Happening now. Not letting you out until a peace treaty has been reached." Then he shut the door with a soft click.

I yanked on a tank top and sat on the bed. I didn't want to start the yelling. I wasn't angry like Lock was. Okay, so sometimes I was, but mostly what I felt was a hollow dread low in my stomach. How something so empty feeling can also be so heavy

at the same time I'll never know. Heavy, empty, and delicate. I was afraid that in taking out the problem and examining it, I might break everything.

"You can turn around now." I folded my hands in my lap. "I'm ready."

Lock turned around and didn't say anything. He tried. He opened his mouth, then shut it. He turned and stared at the wall, as if the words he needed might show up there. His eyes shone and his hands were fisted and I could see that Lock wasn't just angry, either. He was hurt. I did that. I put that pain there.

Before I could think too much about it, I got up from the bed, crossed the room, and threw my arms around Lock's neck. "I don't want to yell," I whispered. I closed my eyes and held tight. At first, Lock didn't move. His whole body was rigid, but I didn't stop hugging him. "I am so, so sorry."

I hate apologizing. Not that I don't need to do it often, but it always feels like it's not enough. Even though the words are like glass as they come out, they just don't quite cut it. It's like handing a starving person a piece of gum.

Lock sighed and his shoulders softened. He put his arms around me and squeezed me to him. "I don't want to yell, either. I hate yelling."

"I make you yell a lot."

"You really do." He rested his chin on my shoulder. "You just . . . you do some really dumb stuff. Brave, but dumb, and it scares the hell out of me."

"It's my superpower. I even make Cade yell sometimes." He laughed, and it was a startled sound, wet like he'd been crying. I closed my eyes. "I've really missed you. This whole thing. It sucks. You've been trying to talk to me, and I shut you out. It's not that

I didn't want to, but what would I say? 'Sorry for being an ass' doesn't really seem to work."

"I didn't exactly make it easy on you. I . . ." His voice trailed off as if he couldn't quite make the words happen. But I knew. He'd had to hole up and lick his wounds. I guess we both did, but when you're the wounded party, you at least have the sense of being wronged to cling to. You know that you didn't really do anything. But when you're the one who put all the terrible into action? Nothing to cling to except regret, and let me tell you, regret does not know how to cuddle.

"We were both kind of assholes," I said.

"But you still take the prize," Lock added. And I didn't argue, because he was right. He pulled back and looked me in the face, and it finally clicked in just how close my friend was, how wrapped around each other we were, and I felt compelled to run and to lean into him at the same time. Lock didn't seem to notice.

He rested his hands on my hips and looked down, and I could have counted every long eyelash if I wanted to before his gray eyes met mine again. "It might take me a while," he said. "It's not that I don't want to forgive you, it's just . . ."

"It's hard," I said. "And I kind of have a lot to make up for."

"The rejection hurt. It's your answer to give, but it still hurt. But the radio silence afterward . . . that hurt more." He let go of me and walked over to the bed but ended up sitting on the floor, his back against the mattress. He rested his arms on his knees and tilted his head back. "Maybe I overreacted. I don't know."

I sat down next to him, my head resting on his shoulder. "Don't do that," I said.

"What?"

“Try to take all the blame. You make the problem all yours to keep me from having to deal with things, and I appreciate it, but this one is on me.”

Lock took my hand in both of his, absentmindedly massaging the pressure points. “How about we split it thirty—seventy. Then we can both be sorry but you can really torture yourself over it. And that way you’ll have to make it up to me by not throwing yourself in front of every terrible and dangerous situation, and also maybe make me some wacky cake.”

“You want me to bake? Are you sure you’re not still trying to torture yourself?”

“Wacky cake is pretty simple—”

“Do I need to remind you of the great pudding fire?”

“But—”

“It was instant pudding, Lock.”

He dug gently into the padding around my thumb. “How about we have Sylvie make the cake and you can buy ice cream.”

Ezra opened and shut the door quickly. He walked over and frowned. Then he pushed both of our legs down until they were flat. Lock let go of my hand, but Ezra shook his head, grabbed our wrists, and reconnected us. “You can hold that one.” Then he sprawled out over us, belly up, his head snuggled into my stomach. “You didn’t yell, which was disappointing. No, you had to talk it out. Like grown-ups. Fine. But you have to at least let me take part in the cuddling.” He took my other hand and cradled it on his chest. “And the ice cream. I’m definitely in for the ice cream. Maybe some apology foot rubs. I mean, don’t limit yourself.”

I kissed the top of his head, pulling back only enough to speak. “What makes you think you get any of this?”

Ezra snorted. "I should get more. I had to deal with *both* of you. The whining and the hand wringing. It was unseemly. . . . And you weren't much better, Ava."

I sighed and rested my cheek on his hair. "I love you, Ezra."

"How could you not? You're only human. Now tell me something I don't know. Like why you went on a job today without us. We're a unit. A team. You don't go out without us. The hare is adequate, but he's unaware of your ability to get into trouble. You need experienced Ava handlers around at all times."

Leaning over was uncomfortable, so I sat back up and propped my head on Lock. It felt good to be around my friends again, even if they could both be suffocating know-it-alls sometimes. "First of all, I didn't go out alone, I had backup. Second, I didn't know who Alistair was sending to me."

"You could have requested us," Ezra said.

"And you could have called," Lock added. "I had to find out what was going on from Bianca."

I frowned. "Bianca told you?"

"Yeah," Lock said, holding tight to my hand so I couldn't pull away. "She called us from the warehouse. Turns out they have these things called cell phones now. You can call people from all over the place."

Yep, I still wasn't out of the doghouse with Lock. Well, what did I expect—instant forgiveness even when he'd told me it would take time? "If you know everything, why are you talking to me, then?" I couldn't quite keep the hint of recrimination from my tone.

"We still need to hear your side. Walk us through, because now that we're here, we're jumping in."

Like they would do anything else.

I'd mostly caught them up by the time Alistair called an end to our minimeeting. I could have gotten mad because he cut us short, but Venus wouldn't have given us any time at all. It's good to put things in perspective sometimes.