Chapter 7

I’m Not Crying

(It’s Just Been Raining, On My Face)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ramon shrugged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Offers open,” I told her gently.

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

“I will.”

“It will come back, Sam.”

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

I fell asleep before we left June’s driveway.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He held up two fingers.

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

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

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

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

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

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

I scoffed. “I can adult.”

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

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

James visibly wilted.

I smiled at him. “The only reason I know what a verb is because my mom got us a lot of Mad Libs as a kid.”

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

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

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

“Have you checked?”

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

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

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

The corner of James’s mouth twitched.

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

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

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

It had such *hunger.*

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

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

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

This would never do.

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

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

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

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

More *self.*

With more self, its understanding of the world grew.

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

*Yes.* A plan.

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

It needed to move on the winds.

 Not drift, but glide.

 Float with purpose.

 Hunt like it was meant to hunt.

But hunting wouldn’t be enough.

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

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

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

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

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

Oh yes. That’s what it would do.

The creature was learning.

And it was learning fast.

 It wouldn’t be hungry forever.