Chapter Fourteen

If You Want Blood, You Got It

I watched as James dumped another large plastic bucket of blood into the metal tub. It splashed up, sending red droplets onto the floor and onto James. Having apparently been prepared for this, James was wearing coveralls, like the kind mechanics wore…if the mechanics had a side gig as an ax murderer or a butcher.

This was far from the first bucket and James looked like an extra from *Carrie*. Sadly, he fit the decor. The basement used to be Douglas’s lair, and even though I’d destroyed some of the objects, it still had the air of a sinister laboratory/torture chamber. Normally it smelled heavily of incense, but right now, mostly blood.

“You were right,” I said. “I don’t like it.”

James set the bucket down, dug a white handkerchief out of his pocket, and mopped at the sweat on his brow. He’d been hauling five-gallon buckets of blood down the stairs and into the basement, which was sweaty work. Ramon came in after him, whistling, a bucket in each hand. I’d offered to carry buckets, which had made Ramon laugh his ass off. He pointed out that they were both much stronger than me—I would likely spill if I tried to help. That’s what they said, anyway. In reality, I thought James was afraid that I would take one look at the blood and bolt for the hills. The basement only had one exit and they could block it.

They weren’t wrong. It was a lot of blood. So I shivered in my thin robe and watched them fill the metal tub, feeling very much like a sacrificial lamb myself.

In the process of wiping his brow, James had smeared blood across his cheekbone.

“This is the most disheveled I’ve ever seen you,” I said, clutching my robe tighter. James was always so immaculate; the sight was jarring.

James glowered at me. “Do *you* want to do this?”

I shook my head. “I do not. Besides, you won’t let me.”

“Don’t let Sam talk shit,” Ramon said, setting down his buckets. “The messy look works for you. You’re like that dude in the movie you made us watch. Where the guy gets out of the water.”

James frowned for a second before his expression cleared. “Are you referring to Mr. Darcy in *Pride & Prejudice*?”

Ramon picked up the first bucket without blinking an eye, dumping it into the metal tub. “That’s the one. You’re like him. All buttoned up, saying borderline offensive shit—”

“Or not so borderline—” I murmured, trying to ignore the way the blood was making me queasy. There was just *so much of it*.

Ramon dropped the empty bucket and grabbed the next one. “And for some reason, that stuffy thing is kind of hot? Like, you get why all the ladies are after him.”

“Pretty sure they were after his money, dude.” I was trying to breathe through my mouth. The basement didn’t have much airflow and the tub was almost full.

Ramon shook his head, as if dismissing that. “Mr. Darcy would’ve been a snack, even without his wealth and title. So anyway, then you see the guy as a mess, getting out of the pond, swimming in his clothes because I guess people did that then for some reason, and it signifies his inner self.” He dumped the second bucket of blood into the tub. “And you see him unravel, and how the hot-mess part of him has a good soul, you know?”

“Honestly, I think you lost me.”

Ramon ignored me, setting down the bucket with a hollow *thunk*. “Anyway, that’s James. He’s Mr. Darcy.”

James was staring at him, bewildered. “I honestly can’t tell if I should be flattered or offended.”

“Both,” Ramon and I said in unison.

“Then thank you,” James said slowly. “And go to hell.”

Ramon grinned.

I was staring at the blood. “Okay, why isn’t it, you know, lumpy?”

“Clotted,” Ramon said. “The word you’re looking for is ‘clotted.’”

James unzipped the top half of his jumpsuit, revealing a black T-shirt. “We want the blood as fresh as possible. Since Sam frowns on some of the bigger sacrifices—”

“Humans,” I said. “I frown on you killing humans.”

James didn’t blink, just pulled his arms out from his jumpsuit. “I had to slaughter livestock.”

I was trying *really* hard not to think about the goats, sheep, deer, or possibly cattle that James had killed for me. He wouldn’t tell me precisely for this reason—it ate me up inside. All those big eyes, and velvet noses…

James scowled at me. “Nothing is wasted. The meat is being split between the dwarves, Taco, and the rest of us carnivores.” Seeing my obvious misery, James sighed, throwing his head back like he was begging for patience. “I made sure to get mature, free-range animals, Sam. That’s the best I can do.”

“I know,” I said. “I appreciate it, I really do. I just also hate it.” The blood had stopped rippling, the surface smooth as glass. “I can both appreciate you and hate the situation at the same time. So why isn’t the blood clotting?”

“I prepared it,” James said. “This isn’t my first blood ritual.”

“People usually say ‘rodeo’ in that kind of sentence,” Ramon said. “And it’s a lot less creepy.”

“I’ve been to more blood rituals than rodeos,” James said, dropping down to examine the floor. “As such, my level of experience there is much higher, so it would make more sense for me to say, ‘this isn’t my first blood ritual’ than it would be to say ‘rodeo.’”

Ramon froze.

James looked up. “What now?”

“I’m trying to imagine you at a rodeo,” Ramon said. “It’s exquisite.”

“So dirty,” I said thoughtfully. “Would he put down a hanky before he sat on the bleachers?”

“Why was he even *at* a rodeo?” Ramon’s eyes glittered, the idea obviously bringing him joy.

“Possessed rodeo clowns,” James said. He used his handkerchief to wipe up the spots of blood. “And buying magic contraband.” He held out his hand. “Chalk, please.”

“We’re going to need more information than that,” Ramon said, grabbing some chalk off a shelf and handing it to James

James smirked, but didn’t say anything, just started drawing.

Knowing full well that James wasn’t going to talk, Ramon went to the shelf and started grabbing the candles James would need.

As I watched, James drew intricate symbols and circles, leaving spaces for the candles. “Have you ever done this blood ritual?”

James hesitated. “Once. A very long time ago. They’re not done every day. As you might suspect, gathering this much blood at a time draws attention to you after a while. Just ask Lady Bathory.”

“Who’s that?” Ramon asked.

“She was a lady that was accused of bathing in the blood of young women,” I said.

“A Hungarian countess.” James didn’t look up from his drawing. He’d moved to the other side of the tub to finish the elaborate design. “Some historians think she tortured and murdered hundreds of young women. Other think the evidence is shaky and that she was falsely accused so that her relatives could take ahold of her accounts, and so the Hapsburgs wouldn’t have to pay back the money they owed her.” He sat back and examined his work. “By all accounts, she was an awful person. Whether or not she slaughtered hundreds is in debate.”

He stood, dusting off his coveralls. “Regardless, she is a cautionary tale.”

“Don’t draw attention to yourself by going on a murder spree,” I said.

“And don’t owe money to the Hapsburgs,” Ramon added.

James handed the chalk to Ramon and started placing the candles. As soon as that was done, he straightened. “It’s time.”

I shivered in my—admittedly very fine—silk robe. James had been sneaking better clothing into my closet for months. It was so fine, in fact that I didn’t want to drop it onto the ground. I wanted to run screaming from the room instead. Because of the robe’s fine quality. Definitely not because of the tub full of blood.

“I can throw you in, if that would help,” Ramon said, “but that would mess up the chalk.”

“You can’t put the blood back into the animals, Sam.” James grimaced. “Well, you could *after* the ritual, but they will still be dead, so you might as well get on with it.”

I shrugged out of the robe, handed it to Ramon, and tried really hard not to think about what I was doing. I didn’t have a stitch on under the silk, so I was now completely naked except for my stygian coin, which I’d borrowed back from Brooke. James had decided we were going to do a two-fer and feed my powers and the coin at the same time.

Careful to avoid smearing the chalk, I stepped gingerly into the tub. I expected it to be cold. It should have been cold. Whatever James had done to it had kept the blood at body temp, which made it physically less uncomfortable, but somehow made it worse on every other level.

I sat down into the tub before I could talk myself out of it. The smell was worse. I closed my eyes and tried really hard not to throw up. Sitting in a bath of blood was mind-numbingly awful. Sitting in a bath of blood *and* vomit would be worse. “Okay,” I said, trying to breathe through my mouth. “Now what?”

James lit the candles. “Keep your eyes closed. Try to relax and open up that part of you that sees the dead.”

I tried to do as he said, but I was really distracted by, well, everything.

James sighed. “*Focus.”*

“I’m trying! But this is really gross and I hate it!” I sounded petulant, which was good because that was exactly how I was feeling. “I have blood in places it should not go, James.”

“The sooner you focus, the sooner we get you out.” Ramon sounded annoyingly calm.

I cracked an eye at him. “Why isn’t this freaking you out?”

Ramon shrugged. “I eat meat, and as a shifter, I’m around blood a lot.”

“I’m around blood a lot.” I felt I should point this out.

“Yeah, but you’re you. Now focus and I promise you’ll get to take a nice, hot shower.”

I grumbled at him, but closed my eyes again and did my best to focus. James started speaking then, his voice low, using words I didn’t even try to recognize. It wasn’t English, but whatever it was, he was fluent in it. He spoke smoothly, no hesitation.

With every word, the temperature of the blood bath ticked up. My skin felt tight. It was like the blood had tiny hands with razor claws and it was trying to dig its way into my skin.

Trying to shred me into pieces.

I started screaming, thrashing from the pain. A mistake. Blood poured into my mouth. I gagged, vomiting it back up into the tub.

James kept talking, his voice growing louder.

I’m pretty sure Ramon was laughing.

A wind picked up in the basement, ruffling my hair as I vomited. The pain grew so intense, I was blacking out.

Fuck, I was going to drown in a pool of animal blood. I fought against it, trying to stay conscious.

James was yelling the words now, the wind whipping them past me as I tried to stay awake, to stay above the blood.

James yelled a final word, just as Ramon stepped forward. I saw a flash of silver, then felt a sharp pain in my shoulder.

Ramon had *fucking stabbed me*.

My blood hit the surface of the pool. Pain struck, a lightning flare of agony through my entire body, and I went rigid.

Then the next second, it was gone. The wind was gone. The room was quiet except for me retching over the side of the blood-tub.

A long line of spit connected my face to the floor. I hope James didn’t need the chalk symbols anymore, because they were ruined. I spit. “You fucking stabbed—”

That was all I got out, before cold pain shot through my body. My spine bowed again, whacking against the back of the tub. More blood splashed onto the floor. I screamed, but no sound came out.

Just pain.

Not white hot. White *cold.* It was like being flayed alive by shards of ice.

I blacked out.

When I woke up, Ramon stood behind me, his hands in my armpits, holding me above the blood. My skin was hot. Power. So much *power.* I was swamped with it.

Ramon loomed over me. “Should his eyes be glowing blue like that?”

“It will go away in a minute,” James said evenly.

“What the actual fuck,” I slurred.

“I think you’re back to being a necromantic turducken,” Ramon said. “There are apparently some side effects to the Bathory Ritual.”

“He was already balking,” James said, still using that calm voice. “If I had told him, he wouldn’t have done it.” He hesitated. “I didn’t think it would be quite this bad, however.”

“I’m going to kill you both,” I slurred.

“Sure you will, Boo. You go right on and murder us, as soon as you can lift your head on your own.” Ramon started laughing quietly, shaking me in the process.

“I’ll raise an army of the undead to do it. I can, now. I know I can.” Even I knew I wasn’t making much sense. But my mouth tasted like blood, my body ached, and I was pissed. My magic started helpfully finding all the dead. Whispering to me where they were, how *happy* the dead would be to do what I asked.

I coughed, spitting up more blood.

Whatever James or Ramon was going to say in response was lost as there was a popping sound, the air to the side of the room suddenly swirling with mist. A handful of sparrows flew out, followed by a stumbling Ashley.

“Sam! There you are! June’s—” She stopped, her teeth clicking shut. “What…what did I just stumble into?”

“Bathory ritual,” James said, wiping his hands on his handkerchief. It didn’t seem to do much good. He was going to have to take a shower, too.

“Huh,” Ashley said. “I’d forgot about that. Never actually seen it used. Did it work?” She peered at me as I gagged.

I spit again, but like James’ handkerchief, it didn’t do any good. “I’m going to raise an army of the dead and rip all of you to pieces.” Or at least, I tried to say it. I’m not sure how garbled it was what with the slurring and whatnot.

“Yes,” James said.

“Good,” Ashley said, straightening. “Because I can’t find June.” She waved a hand at me. “Hose him off and pour some coffee down his throat. I need him functional.”

Ramon pulled me out of the tub, James wrapping me in a towel.

I was having a hard time tracking what they were saying. The dead just kept whispering. *Wanting* me to use all the power boiling inside me. Some rational part of me was horrified to realize that I was still babbling about murdering everyone with my army of the dead.

“Yes, yes,” Ramon said, picking me up like I was a baby, the towel wrapped around me. “Armies of the dead. We know.”

“Let me get another towel,” James said. “I’ll wipe him down. We don’t need him dripping all over the floors.”

“I will roast you both on a spit,” I garbled. “And feed you to the hungry ghosts—”

“How long is he going to be like this?” Ramon asked, ignoring me.

“The magic will level off soon,” James said. “I think. He reacted a little more strongly to the blood than I thought he would.”

“Is that a necromancer thing, or a Sam thing?” Ramon asked.

“Stop ignoring me!” I heard a hissing sound and realized it was me. “I will feed you to the crows!”

“A Sam thing, I think.” James used the towel to dry my face and hair. “I wonder what kind of witches he has in his family tree.”

“Besides Haley and Tia, you mean?”

I was growling now.

Ramon shook me a little. “Cut that out.”

“From the level of his reaction,” James said, moving to Ramon’s other side to get my legs. “I think there might be a blood witch in there somewhere.”

“That’s cool and all,” Ashley said. “But if we can move this along?”

“My apologies,” James said. “Didn’t you call June earlier?”

“I tried. No answer. I left a message.” Ramon jerked. “Ow. Sam, did you just bite me?”

“I think we need to get this blood off him,” James said. “Don’t worry about the floors. Run him up to the shower.”

The next thing I knew, I was bouncing along in Ramon’s arms as he ran up the stairs, completely ignoring me as I told him I was going to eat his soul.