Chapter 25

Hare Today, Gone Tomorrow

I followed the medics into their tent, the rest of the group trying to follow me like an anxious conga line. We wouldn’t all fit into the tent, so I sent everyone back to get out of their gear except Ezra, Lock, and Ava. (Well, technically we’d all fit, but we wouldn’t leave room for any other patients or for the medics to do their jobs.) The medic tent was brightly lit, with three workstations, all of which were currently empty because we went first. They would fill up soon enough.

They settled Sid onto a central table before one of the medics—a small woman with tan skin and dark wavy hair pulled back into a bun—grabbed a pair of scissors and started cutting away Sid’s jeans, slicing them open from hem to waist. As soon as she was done with both legs, the other medic, a tall guy with pale skin and tattoos, lifted Sid up so she could slide away the tattered remnants of Sid’s jeans. His shirt follow suit, leaving him in only a pair of boxers as she removed his boots and socks with the man started setting up an IV. They introduced themselves as Marta and Chris, respectively.

We huddled off to the side, trying to stay out of the way. Ava stood next to me, chewing anxiously on her thumb. Lock was on her other side, his arm slung around her waist, trying to comfort her. Ezra bracketed my other side. He was covered head to toe in draugr blood and smelled like corruption and death. His handsome face was expressionless as he stared at Sid. I put my arm around his shoulders. “He’ll be okay.”

“Why isn’t he healing?” Ava asked, her brow furrowed. “He should be healing.”

“Nothing stopping him from healing,” Marta said, her Boston accent thick, and to me, reassuring. It’s not quite the accent I grew up with, but it’s close, and I found it soothing. “He lost a lot of blood, and there’s probably internal injuries. His body would prioritize those wounds.” She finished cutting away the pants and removed them.

Sid’s legs were a fractured mess. I could see bone jutting through his skin. None of my companions blinked or tried to look away. They looked on like people used to seeing this kind of carnage. I squeezed Ezra to me in comfort and he put his arm around me and squeezed back. Just because they were used to seeing it didn’t mean they wanted to watch their friend suffer.

“I’m sorry.” I kept the words soft, just for them.

Ava turned her face toward me, the furrow between her brows deepening. “Why? You didn’t do this. And don’t say, ‘I brought you into this’ because that is nonsense. We could have said no. We chose to come.” She flicked her eyes to the medics. “I’ll leave it at that.”

She was telling me it was no one’s fault but the people who put the draugr in the ring, but she didn’t want to say it out loud because the medics might be listening and repeat whatever we said. I still felt guilty about Sid, but Ava’s words soothed me a little.

“He’s going to need a lot of food when he wakes up,” Lock said softly. He dug into one of his pockets and pulled out a battered granola bar, handing it to Ava. “Speaking of which.”

She sighed, took the granola bar, unwrapped it and dutifully took a bite. “Do they make them taste awful on purpose?”

“It’s high calorie,” Lock said automatically, his eyes still on Sid. It had the sound of a familiar argument to it. “You expended a lot of magic.”

“I understand,” Ava said, taking another bite. “I just wish they could make them actually taste good.”

Ezra remained uncharacteristically quiet.

“You okay?”

Ezra’s gore-covered face remained rigid, his gaze fixed on Sid as the medics worked on him. “I made a mistake. I got overconfident with the draugr. Took too big of a chance. It should be me there, not Sid.”

“That’s why you two worked as a team,” I said. “To make sure you had that backup. Sid will live, and I’m sure he wouldn’t wish you to change places right now.”

“That doesn’t make the pain less,” Ezra said.

“No,” I said, leaning into him. “It doesn’t.” We waited in silence after that, watching the medics as they gave Sid fluids and pain meds before they went about setting his legs. Halfway through that, the bones started to shift and heal. The medics sped up, trying to get the pieces in place before Sid’s body took over. It reminded me of that board game, Perfection, where you had a limited amount of time to get the pieces in places before the timer went off. If you failed, the board ejected everything you’d managed, and you had to start over.

I hated that game. The timer was annoying and it left my nerves feeling jangly.

As soon as Sid started visibly healing, some of the tension drained out of our group. We took turns leaving Sid’s bedside to clean up and change clothes—we wanted at least two people with him at all times just in case. This wasn’t exactly friendly territory. Eventually the four of us were back in the medical tent as the rest of the team continued to wait in the main combatant area with our gear. The warg was still following Garm around, but I wasn’t going to deal with that right then. That was a problem for future Lena.

Injured combatants came and went while time ticked by slowly. The bouts were almost over by the time Sid regained consciousness. They unhooked him from the IV with instructions that he’d need to eat soon, and he would also have to wear the boots they’d strapped onto his legs for at least another twelve hours.

“No walking on them,” Marta said firmly. “I know you rabbits. You’ll comply until you’re out of sight, and then it will be like I never even spoke. Off go the boots.” She jabbed close to his face. “Don’t undo all my hard work. Boots stay on, your word, or I will put casts on you.”

Sid put his hand over his heart. “Boots stay on.”

Marta didn’t look like she believed him at all.

“We’ll make sure,” Ezra said.

Marta snorted. “I don’t believe you, either.”

Lock put his hand on Sid’s shoulder. “We will keep the boots on until our own healer clears him, which will be twelve hours at minimum. I promise you.”

Marta squinted at Lock, then nodded sharply. “You, I believe.”

Sid grumbled.

“Okay, out of my clinic. We need the bed.”

Ezra scooped up Sid. “It’s all yours.”

Sid looped his arms around Ezra’s neck. “My hero.” He grinned and batted his eyes.

“I’m at your disposal, my flower.” Ezra looked down at Sid and smoldered. I can’t explain what he did, all I knew was that I wouldn’t want to be at the receiving end of it, because it would be hard to say no to.

Sid blinked back at him, surprised.

Then Ezra very slowly winked at him before dipping his head close. “Don’t flirt with a master, Sid. You’re not ready.”

“I’m really not,” Sid said, looking chagrined. “Sorry.”

Ezra laughed. “Don’t worry, Sid. You’re not my type and I know I’m not yours, so I didn’t take it seriously.” He stepped back from the bed, carrying Sid easily. “I’m just glad you’re still here to flirt poorly with me.”

“Me too,” Sid said. “What happened to the draugr?”

“Ezra beat it with its own arm and then I burned it to dust,” Ava said. “We were mad.”

Sid looked expectantly at Lock. “What did you do? Plant flowers on his grave?”

Lock looked vaguely uncomfortable as he shifted his balance. “I might have kicked him once or twice.”

Surprise lit Sid’s face.

“What?”

“It’s just, usually you’re the nice one,” Sid said slowly.

Lock shrugged. “He hurt you. Even my good manners only go so far.”

Sid grinned.

Then Ezra carried him out of the medical tent and we went to go find the others.

By the time we were finished, people were streaming out of the SOMA building. The fights were over and I wasn’t sure what the next step was. To be honest, I was having a hard time caring at this moment. I was exhausted, both physically and emotionally.

We walked out toward Lock’s van and that’s when I noticed that both vehicles were still there…and my father was nowhere in sight. Neither was Tally.

Olive, however, was leaning against the van, her arms crossed and her face pinched. She looked Sid over, quickly cataloguing his injuries.

“I’ll be fine, Olive,” Sid said. “You didn’t have to wait.”

“I know.” She said it dismissively, but I could tell she’d been worried. She turned her face up to me. “We’ve got a problem.”

“Of course we do,” I said on a sigh as I popped the trunk and tossed my stuff into the back of the rental. “Let’s wait until my dad and Tally get here and then we can go back to the apartment and discuss it.”

Olive shook her head. “That’s the problem. Tally and your dad—they’re gone.”

Fear exploded in my chest. “What do you mean they’re gone?” I stepped closer, towering over her and snarling before I remembered that Olive was still a child, and on top of that, just the messenger. I’d let the fear get the best of me. “I thought your drove was in the crowd, watching and gathering information.”

“We were,” Olive said. “I don’t know how they did it. One minute they were there, and the next they were gone. I never took my eyes off them.”

“People don’t just disappear,” I growled.

Edda put a hand on my arm. “These people have been throwing around some heavy duty magic since the beginning.”

“You’re right,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face. “Any chance they could have just left another way, a different exit and I don’t know, caught a taxi for some reason?”

Olive shook her head. “Your dad went to the bathroom and never came out, but Tally never left the bleachers. One second there, the next?” She held up a fist and flicked her fingers outward. “Poof. Gone.”

“They knew,” Grant said, his voice soft. “Despite our precautions, they knew Tally was there. They knew who your dad was.”

I didn’t think it was possible, but my fear grew, ice spiking out through my veins until I could feel it in my fingertips. “Which means they have to know what we are, too.”

“I wonder how long?” Edda asked, her expression thoughtful.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. I’m sure we’ll find out.”

“Now what?” Ava asked.

We all stared at each other for a second.

I pointed at Ava and her friends. “You all go back to the apartment. You’re wiped out, and you’ve done your part.”

She was already shaking her head. “Oh no, we’re invested now. They hurt Sid.”

“Who is currently wearing boots over healing leg fractures,” Grant argued calmly. “What are you going to do, piggyback him around? We promised he wouldn’t walk, and I don’t particularly want him to break his legs again for us.”

Garm woofed and the warg shuffled forward, his ears pricked, curious.

Ezra looked down at Sid. “Have you ever ridden a warg?”

“No,” Sid said. “But I’ve always wanted to.”

Ezra strode over to the warg and carefully seated Sid on the back. We waited a moment, our breath held, to see if the warg would change its mind and decide that Sid was the enemy. But it just stood there, tail wagging, as it looked happily at Garm.

“Okay, that’s one problem down, but we still don’t—” I cut myself off abruptly as I noticed one of the security guards walking towards us, an honest-to-god silver platter in his hands. As he got closer, I noticed that there was an envelope resting on the platter.

“You Team Ancile?” The guard’s voice was scratchy and deep, his accent more New York than Boston.

“We are,” Edda said, stepping forward. “Who’s asking?”

He didn’t answer, but held the platter out. “This is for you.”

She took it warily, watching the whole time. As soon as she had the envelope, he gave us a two-finger salute and turned, walking away.

“Wait—”

But Grant put his arm on me, stopping me from chasing after the guard. “He won’t tell us anything.”

I folded my arms and glowered. “But I could have yelled at him.”

“Yes,” he said, his tone oh-so-careful. “And while that might have felt nice, it would have wasted several minutes, which means your dad and Tally’s captors will get even more of a lead on us.”

He said it gently, but it still felt like a slap. Worse, he was right. I flicked my chin at Edda. “Open it.”

She tore the envelope open, her eyes quickly scanning the paper.

“How’re your ribs?” I asked, remembering how she held them after the fight.

“Just bruised,” she said absently. “I took some ibuprofen. I’ll be fine.” She scowled at the letter and handed it to me. “They have them. Team Ancile is cordially invited to a meeting.” She tapped the paper, in case I’d missed it. “And look who it’s addressed to.”

I hadn’t missed it. My name was there, in bold calligraphy, and so was Edda’s. Our actual names. They knew who we were. Which meant they likely knew *what* we were. I reached up and grabbed Loki’s necklace, tearing it off and with it, my disguise. It was of no use to me now.

“What are we going to do?” Olive asked.

I looked at Ava.

She shrugged. “She’ll just follow us.”

Great, now I was taking children into battle. “We don’t have a choice. We accept their invitation.”

And I just had to hope that my dad was safe. That they weren’t hurting him right now. He was mortal. Humans were so *fragile*. What if they—I closed my eyes and shut that thought down. My dad would be fine. I had to believe that until I knew any different.

I handed the invite to Ava. “Do you know where that is?”

“It’s black tie?” She showed it to Lock and Ezra, who nodded. “What is it with villains making everything fancy dress. I don’t just carry around a ball gown.”

“I do,” Ezra said absently. “I know where that is.” He looked at his phone. “We don’t have much time, either.”

 “We better get going,” I said, and pulled the ground in closer so we could plan.