



# End of the Road (SOS Hotel #10)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** Its the end! Again.

Being on the road has been fun an all (no, it hasnt). Van life is awesome (it sucks, theres no room for my fabulousness). But all good things must end, according to Fancy Fangs. Hes wrong. Good things should last forever.

Just so long as me, Victor and Adam dont end, right?

So after we solved a burly werewolf murder, got ourselves mixed up with an evil luxury hotel, were now in Florida! Sun, sea, and the troll mafia, a trap we walked right into, and did I mention THERES F\*CKING FROGS HERE?!

We all gonna die.

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## CHAPTER 1

Sun, sea, and sand. Okay, so maybe Zee wouldn't much like the sand, but after everything we'd been through, the beachfront villa in Florida surrounded by swaying palms and twinkling ocean was a slice of paradise we sorely needed. Finally, we were getting our vacation.

"Mi casa es su casa," Toby said, guiding us back into the spacious living room after our brief tour.

A pool, a TV bigger than our bed back at the SOS Hotel, a bed bigger than the TV, a well-stocked bar, and a view of the ocean from every front-facing window... and there were a lot of them.

I didn't know what to say. I'd never seen a house as fancy as this. Or one so close to the ocean.

"I mean yeah, it's alright, I guess." Zee's tail swept back and forth, attempting to play down his excitement.

Toby snorted a laugh. "It's probably not as grand as your hotel. But you guys saved me, so you're welcome to make yourself at home."

"It's great." I couldn't have hidden my grin if I'd tried. "Thank you." The shower had two heads. Two! For two people showering together. That's a thing humans had thought of. And this house had it.

“Thank you guys for saving my ass on the road. I mean it.” Toby grinned too, making the lines on his face crease. Trolls always looked older than they were. On the road, he’d told us he was the youngest brother in a big family. I hadn’t asked much more, fearing we’d get into sibling territory, and as mine wanted to eat me, my friends, and the rest of the world, family talk had been off limits.

“Oh, and hey.” Toby scooped up a remote and pointed it toward the big wall of windows. At the push of a button, the windows dimmed. “UV filters... for you know, the sun intolerant.”

We all turned to Victor, lurking at the back of the room near the open-plan kitchen, as far away from any sunlight as was possible in a house made from eighty percent glass.

“Appreciated,” he said, not sounding all that appreciative. He’d been unusually quiet on the last leg of our journey—quieter than his typically brooding vampire self. He was probably hangry, as Zee often said, because he hadn’t had blood in a while. With our unexpected guest tagging along, we hadn’t had the privacy to get up close and personal during the last few days.

“Gah, I gotta take this.” Toby plucked a vibrating phone from his pocket. “So uh, you guys get comfy, and I’ll be back later tonight to see how you’re settling in.”

“Okay, sure.” I followed Toby toward the main entrance at the back of the house, shoes squeaking on the smooth marble floors. “Thank you again. This is really... It’s super great.”

“Hey, you’re welcome, Adam.” Toby smiled one more time, opened the door, and stepped out. On the step, he hesitated and turned back. “So uh... just uhm... Maybe don’t wander too far, alright? There’s not much around here but palm trees anyway, but a few of the locals aren’t all that Lost Ones friendly and I wouldn’t want you to

get caught up in something... bad.”

“Oh, sure, that’s fine. What would we need to leave for anyway?” I laughed, brushing off his concern. “We have everything we need right here.” We had hostile locals in San Francisco too. We’d be alright.

“Yeah, that’s right.” He looked me dead in the eyes and repeated, “You don’t need to leave.”

“Uhm... sure?” Hadn’t I already said we wouldn’t? What was he waiting for? “Uhm... Thanks again?”

A quick smile dashed across his lips. “Later, gator.” And off he went, striding down the path, his creased suit jacket flapping in his haste. He hurried past our rusted pink minivan slumped on the drive and jogged down the sidewalk, disappearing along the road lined with palm trees and little else.

Was that warning weird? No. Probably not... Maybe?

I shrugged it off and closed the door. Since we’d fled the Pacific Northwest trying to outrun my brother, and ended up in not-so-nice Minnesota—leaving the hotel there in ruins, and maybe a murder charge hanging over my head—my mind wasn’t all that clear. But it was nothing a hot shower, fresh clothes, some good food, and the company of my two favorite people wouldn’t fix.

“Kitten. I iz in fuckin’ demon heaven!” Standing by the couches in the living room, Zee threw out his arms. His wings poofed into sight, raining fizzing sparks. “This is the best place we’ve visited, and no weird-as-fuck cameras or creepy concierges.” He tilted back on his heels and fell into the couch, demon-spreading all his fabulous self across the many cushions. With a huge sigh, all of him melted into place, molding to the couch. “Imma like Florida. I can tell.” He beamed.

“Adam, would you like a coffee?” Victor asked from the super clean and shiny open-plan kitchen.

“Oh, uh... yeah.” I headed over and watched him fuss about finding some mugs, then the bag of ground coffee.

“There’s whiskey in the minibar,” Zee said, lolling his head back and peering over at us through sleepy, half-closed lashes.

We’d only just arrived. Would whiskey be appropriate? “Oh, I don’t know if I should drink his whiskey.”

“You heard Toby, he’s grateful. It’d be fuckin’ rude not to partake of his kind hospitality.”

That was true. I didn’t want to be ungrateful. “Later, for sure.”

Zee sighed a long, relaxing sigh, then shot to his feet. “Imma check out the pool.” He slid open the tinted doors, letting in the sound of the ocean and rustling palms.

The air here smelled of damp salt and hot sand. It was heavy with humidity too, and I found myself wondering what it would be like to fly over Florida’s golden shores. I probably shouldn’t, though. People didn’t take too kindly to massive dragons overhead.

We were a long way from San Francisco, and hopefully from my brother. Maybe, just maybe, we could relax here for a while. Take a breather. Allow ourselves some much-needed personal time. And there was one among us who definitely needed some extra attention.

“Hey, you okay?” I asked Victor.

He stared at the coffee maker as though he could will the coffee from the beans.  
“Indeed.”

“It’s just... you seem a bit tense?—”

“Whoo!” A huge splash outside rained pool water over the windows. Zee had flung himself into the pool... with his clothes on. Although he wasn’t wearing much to begin with. I snorted a laugh, but Victor hadn’t looked up from the machine. Something was bothering him. Reaching out, I laid my hand on his where it rested on the counter.

He finally raised his head. “My apologies. I... have some concerns about our current situation, but I do not want to dampen your mood. You certainly deserve to enjoy yourselves.”

“So do you.” I tucked myself against his side, and his arm automatically looped around me, pulling me closer. “What’s on your mind?”

A whole array of micro-expressions crossed his typically stern face seconds before he stifled them. “Perhaps I am overthinking a few things. It’s likely nothing to be concerned about.” He smiled, and grabbing the coffee jug, poured me a cup. “Why don’t you freshen up. We’ll discuss it later.”

“I would, but now I know you’re overthinking something, I’m overthinking what it might be.”

“That was not my intention.”

“So tell me, and we can overthink together while Zee has fun.”

Victor inhaled, and poured a second cup for himself. “Very well. Adam, there are

some inconsistencies in Toby Skrinde's character that I believe warrant further consideration. I presume you noticed the weapon he carried?"

"Oh, the gun? Yeah, but I figured maybe Lost Ones have some issues here and might need some extra protection?"

"I had also come to a similar conclusion. However, Toby's attire is of an exceedingly good quality, and likely tailored to his smaller frame. Especially as there are few well-made suits that fit trolls. Personal tailoring is not cheap." Victor would know.

"It's clear he has some money." We only had to look around the living room to see that.

"Well, yes, but the car we passed on the side of the highway prior to rescuing him was an old, poorly-maintained wreck."

"So is our van," I snorted.

"But we do not have excess funds, whereas, if we assume the suit is tailored and this villa belongs to our host, then he clearly has the monetary means to purchase a newer vehicle."

"Perhaps he likes beat-up old cars?"

"Also possible. But several times during our journey, Toby discreetly used his phone while you drove and Zodiac dozed. He assumed nobody was watching, but did not account for the rearview mirror, or me."

When he laid all those little things out like that, Toby did sound a bit suspicious. "But is it also possible that all those things are just normal things and we're so used to running—being on the road—that everything starts to look suspicious when you

don't get much sleep... or blood?"

A small smile thawed the concern on his face. "As I said, I may be overthinking this."

"You're right, you're overthinking it, but also maybe not." I took his coffee from his hand and set it down on the counter beside me, then stretched onto my toes and wrapped my arms around his neck. Victor peered down, his dark eyes aswirl with silvery vampire power. "We'll mention it to Zee later. Right now, though, we really need a break from thinking."

The firm press of Victor's hands settled on my lower back, drawing me closer. He bowed his head and teased a kiss so close to my lips I imagined I could already feel his mouth on mine. He waited, and the heat of anticipation sizzled between us.

"You know what else I think?" I whispered.

"Hm?"

"That there's a double shower calling our names."

"My dear." His voice had dropped an octave into warm, smooth, chocolatey levels. "I desire nothing more."

I turned my head to catch a glimpse of Zee doing backstroke laps in the pool. Victor's firm fingers caught my jaw, but instead of turning my head, he held it still. The soft touch of his lips on the corner of mine summoned a smile and delivered a thrill that spilled all the way to my toes. He tilted my head, exposing my neck, and sent those fluttering kisses down my jaw to the beating pulse point, where his lips sealed and his tongue swept, but no fangs... not yet. He was teasing, and setting ablaze the embers that always burned between us.



Zee wouldn't mind if we indulged without him. In fact, he'd be all for it.

The wild, ancient part of Victor peered out from behind those intense eyes. "It has been some time since we were last intimate, and I fear, my dear, I will not be gentle."

My dragon heart skipped behind my ribs. "Do you hear me complaining?"

Would Toby mind that the first thing we did after he'd generously allowed us to stay in his house was to have desperate vampire-daddy sex in the double shower?

Too bad if he did, because this was happening, and nothing short of an earthquake would stop us.

### CHAPTER 2

Once in the shower, we didn't undress; there wasn't time.

Victor had me in his arms, and there was nothing in my head but need.

It still didn't seem possible that this brilliant, brave, and complicated man was all Zee's and mine. Sometimes I wondered—and I knew Zee did too—whether Victor would realize a relationship with an incubus and a dragon wasn't for him, and walk away. But now, as he scooped me close, soaked and trembling under the blast of warm water, those unfounded concerns poofed away like Zee's wings.

If there had been any doubt we'd needed this, that also vanished under the scrape of Victor's fangs against my neck, and the rough tug at my shirt that sent a few buttons pinging off.

He spun me to face the tiles, then pulled the whole shirt off in one swift yank, like a magician tugging a tablecloth out from under the wine glasses. He was a pro at this, even Zee would agree.

Victor always knew what we both wanted and needed. There would be no deviating from his plan of attack, and no way out. Which was fine by me. I didn't ever want to escape.

Now shirtless and drenched under the showerhead, I splayed my hands against the tiles as Victor's scandalous mouth trailed kisses down my spine, and I tilted my head back, arching away but wanting more, caught between pleasure and need.

When he reached my pants, they were quickly tugged down and tossed away with the same whip-like efficiency. A short, sharp bite on my ass definitely jolted electric lust through my veins. Zee would have said I was glowing; he could see when I was primed. Victor couldn't, but he knew in his own way. All I knew was that I ached from head to toe, to have either his teeth or his dick in me—preferably both.

“What do you want, Adam?”

“You,” I moaned. Words were hard—like the rest of me.

I saw him reach for the conditioner Toby had left, then relished the feel of his fingers kneading my ass. He'd been right when he said he wouldn't be gentle, but I could handle him at his strictest. Zee was a challenge, physically, but Victor was a lot mentally. He could throw his will around, using his voice to direct it. On people, it turned them into mindless puppets, but on me... it made my thoughts strum and my dragon self sing.

I'd missed this. It really had been too long since we'd come together, and uh... come together.

His hands gripped my hips and jerked me back, bending me over. I braced against the cool tiles and glanced over my shoulder. Victor was soaked through, his hair plastered to his face and shoulders, his wet, semitransparent shirt clinging to him, and a wildness on his face that betrayed the same kind of unhinged madness as when he unleashed on his unsuspecting victims. But I was no victim.

“Keep your eyes on mine,” he ordered.

Mercy. His voice weakened my knees, its promise entering some visceral part of my mind and turning it over to desire, and only desire. I held his unblinking stare, watched his eyes churn their silver as he spread me wide and dipped his fingers

inside, brushing over the part of me that had my dick desperate for touch, as though he knew my body better than I did. He reached down and wrapped his fingers around me, and the sounds I made were mostly dragon now. I really wasn't going to last, not at the rate he was ramping me up.

He knew that too, and freeing me, he gripped my hips again, positioning us just so, as he'd say. Then he was filling me up, but not with his fingers this time. Seated deep, he stopped there. I waited for him to move... may even have moaned or growled for more.

"Look at me."

I'd forgotten I was supposed to be watching his face.

I blinked, clearing water from my blurry vision, and found his burning gaze over my shoulder again. His fangs were out now, gleaming and deadly.

"How much do you want me—want this?" he asked.

Words? I had to form words and speak them in some kind of coherent order? I gulped and thought real hard. "Like..." A tremor got in the way, so I tried again. "You're the fire in my veins," I rasped. "I want to burn for you. Set me ablaze. Light me up. Do it."

He snarled and thrust, rocking us both... thrust again, and again... and each time pleasure climbed, building higher, turning into a surging molten wave of flame. I couldn't look at him now, had to bow my head. If I touched myself, I'd come, and I wasn't ready, even though I really, really was. Power, raw and cool, slipped from my skin. Victor must have felt it too, because he swept an arm under my chest, scooped me upright, and with his dick buried in my ass, he sank his teeth into my neck. That same power that had been spiraling around my pleasure crested the surface, spilling

out... undoing me. In the past, whenever our chain reaction of powers had been triggered, I'd lost consciousness. But not anymore. I gave it to him, all of it, whatever it was, whatever power we ignited between us whenever we were together.

Victor staggered, grunting.

The flow from the showerheads spluttered, the lights flickered.

He caught me, pressing us both against the tiles, and moaned into the bite as he came.

Yeah, okay, we'd really needed this. More than either of us had realized.

Sliding his teeth from my neck, he lapped at the bite, unleashing a little wave of shivers through me, and we stood for a while, panting, coming down off the high of being together.

"Are you well, my dear?"

I should have been asking him the same. Turning in his arms, I reached up and smacked a messy kiss on his lips. A kiss that turned even more ragged and wild when he devoured me back. We were both definitely well.

Zee's chaotic knocks landed on the bathroom door. "Uhm, guys? As much as I'm secondhand getting off on your fuckfest, we're kinda on the TV."

I was tempted to ignore it. Whatever it was could wait. Victor and I were enjoying a moment.

"You know what?" Zee added. "Meh, never mind. It's just boring pictures of Adam. Probably not important."

Victor bumped his forehead to mine.

“Wait, actually—fuck—so we should probably not go out for a while,” Zee continued to narrate through the closed door. “Wanted for murder... yaddah yaddah . Was Gideon Cain the real hero... blah blah . SOS Heroes or villains? Fuck, that one’s just rage bait.”

I closed my eyes. “Oh dear.”

“Stop the SOS Threesome,” he went on.

Victor sighed. “Alright, we are coming.”

“You already came, Daddy Spice. But best get your fine ass out here. Looks as though we’re about to go viral for all the wrong reasons.”

I turned the shower knobs, switching off the water, and took the fluffy gown that Victor held out. He stripped out of his wet clothes and wrapped a towel around his middle.

“One post on my socials will clear this right up,” Zee continued.

I yanked open the door to find Zee tapping at his phone and a huge picture of me on the massive TV on the living room wall. Victor zipped past, snatched Zee’s phone, and tossed it out the open sliding doors. It landed with a plop in the pool.

“Excuse moi?” Zee blinked at Victor, his hand still out as if cradling the missing phone.

“Did you learn nothing from the Oreo misadventure?” Victor snapped. “One misplaced word or image and our location is compromised.”

“Nuh-uh. You did not just toss my phone.” Wagging a finger, Zee frowned. “Stop distracting me with your washboard abs dappled by tiny droplets of water that make me wanna come over there, drop to my knees, and lick every one of ’em right off—am I saying this out loud?”

“Perhaps use your thinking voice?” Victor suggested. “The voice in your head, that you don’t have to share with everyone?”

“Ha, that’s where you’re wrong, Fancy Fangs. You assume I think before I speak.”

“Alas, of that personality flaw, we are all very aware.” Victor stopped in front of the TV and we took a moment to watch the report. We were being blamed for the murder of the chef at the Stephanie Hotel. But also, suspicions had fallen on the whereabouts of the well-known Razorsedge businessman, Sebastien, and whether the sorcerer Gideon Cain had actually been trying to stop Victor Reynard from using his company, Reynard Technologies, for nefarious purposes.

“This reporting is most unsettling, and rather damning.”

It did look bad. “And we’re not there to defend ourselves.”

“And oops , we can’t even call Leomaris to back us up, because thanks to Shirtless Daddy my phone is taking a fuckin’ swim.”

“Where’s your phone?” I asked Victor.

“The battery died days ago. I did not bring charging equipment, and the minivan is poorly equipped with such things. There’s no need to be concerned, though. We will find a public phone.”

Zee scoffed. “What are you, like nine hundred and ninety-nine years old? There are

no public phones.”

“Okay, so let’s ask Toby if we can borrow his?” I suggested. “He said he’d be back later.”

“Assuming he has not turned on a TV or seen any headlines regarding the SOS Threesome .” Victor quoted that last part as the ticker slid across the bottom of the screen. “ Oh dear, indeed.”

Zee snorted. “Our villain name needs work. Terrible Trio? Horrible Hoteliers? Ugh. Nope.”

“If we can call Leomaris, I’m sure they’ll get this all straightened out, right?” I asked them both, and received two blank faces in return. “Right?”

“We have been on the run for over a week,” Victor said. “We left without warning and no explanation.”

“On vacation ,” Zee clarified, air-quoting.

“And it will not have escaped Agent Leomaris’s attention that the Heroes of the City are not in the city, or anywhere near it.” Victor began to pace, and the swish of the towel and sweep of his bare legs was admittedly distracting... “We are, in fact, on the other side of the country. Agent Leomaris is no fool. Our sudden absence will ring alarm bells.” He did look fine, all worked up, his muscles in motion... “Their reputation is also on the line. With us gone, into that information void steps Syros.” His wet hair dripped water down his fine back... “Who is also no fool. It is highly likely Leomaris has already spoken with Syros, and it is safe to assume your brother will use lies and manipulation to undermine our good standing with the SSD—Adam, are you listening?”



“What? Yes. No. Absolutely. Wait... I may have missed... some parts. What was all that again?”

Zee snickered, understanding the gutter my thoughts had dipped into. “He said we’re fucked.”

My heart began to sink. “Is it that bad?”

“Pfft, no. Agent Fae ain’t gonna believe some shady dragon claiming to be Adam’s brother,” Zee dismissed with a laugh... But the laughter trailed off.

“Adam himself spent many years disguised as a human. Dragons are—forgive me, my dear—manipulative by their nature.”

“It’s going to be alright,” I said firmly. “I’ll talk with Leomaris, straighten this out.”

“Breaking news,” the anchor on the TV said. “This just in. The vampire council has suspended Victor Reynard’s position after discovering some disturbing phone footage taken several months ago at the vampire queen’s royal estate.”

The screen then switched to grainy phone footage of someone who looked a lot like Victor holding someone else against a tree, their feet off the ground, clearly choking the life out of them.

“That could be anyone,” Zee snorted. “Snarly old vampires all look the same.”

A familiar voice from somewhere in the gloom said, “Hey, Fuck-Hard, get it done already, we got more suckers to slay.”

Zee blinked and nodded. “That could also be anyone with a beautiful, rich singing voice. Wow. I wish I had a voice like theirs. What a curse it must be for them,

whoever they are, to go unrecognized in their vocal glory.”

“Believe me, demon, there is not a single soul on the planet who has ever called me Fuck-Hard, except you.”

Zee scratched at his smooth chin, trying to think up an excuse. “That is valid.”

“This was taken the night we decapitated the first vampire queen,” Victor said. “If any more footage is leaked, we will have more to worry about than a few bad news stories. The entire vampire race will assume we killed the queen.”

“Which we uhm... did,” I clarified. “We did that.”

“Uh, hello? It was a fuckin’ accident,” Zee added.

“I agree with Adam. We must borrow Toby’s phone as soon as possible and alert Agent Leomaris to everything that is happening.” Victor fixed his gaze on me. “Everything, Adam.”

“Alright. All of it. Okay.” It was time for the truth about our vacation to come out. “That’s assuming Toby is coming back.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Zee asked, then saw me glance at Victor. “Oh fuck, what’s with the face? Have I missed something?” He rolled his eyes. “Is Toby a fuckin’ axe murderer who collects body parts, or a shape-shifting ice queen with relationship issues, or some other fuckin’ murderly thing that’s gonna try an’ kill us?”

“Erm...” I shrugged. “Probably not. But also... maybe?”

### CHAPTER 3

One good thing to come out of the news was that if Syros was in San Francisco actively spreading bad news about us, then he wasn't in Florida. We had some breathing space.

As the sun set, Victor—now regrettably wearing clothes—gathered some drinks from the minibar and we sat out on the dusk-lit deck, with the ocean stretched along the horizon and palms swaying on either side of the house. Stars sparkled in the great expanse of black above, interrupted by just a few sweeping clouds. Crickets chirped in nearby grasses. It truly was magical.

After telling Zee all about our Toby suspicions, and him agreeing it was peculiar, it didn't change much. We still had to wait for Toby to show so we could borrow a phone.

I sipped my whiskey and watched Victor teaching Zee how to fold a piece of paper into a swan. Victor was back in his tired suit, and Zee had thrown on some kind of threadbare half top that showed his middle, and slim black pants. Getting Zee to sit still for any length of time was a miracle in itself, so he had to be really into the origami making. He dutifully folded each crease just like Victor beside him, but somehow, when they both produced their swans...

“Eh, voila!” Zee announced, then screwed up his face. “Why the fuck does mine look a demented duck?”

“It requires some practice, that is all. Your... attempt is an... ambitious first try.” Of

course, Victor's swan was paper perfection.

"You're just sayin' that because you're in a good mood from fuckin' Adam earlier."

Victor's lips ticked and his gaze skipped to me. "I'll not deny it."

Zee picked up his paper swan and flicked it into the air. It spun, then flopped into the pool and sank like a rock. "You gonna tell me, then?" he asked with a smirk, sharp demon teeth catching starlight.

"Tell you what?" Victor asked. He did look good in the evening light, reclined in the chair, all smooth sophistication and masculine elegance. Red hues from the dying sunlight touched his pale face, igniting a spark of heat in his cool eyes.

"You're sitting there glowing with post-sex smugness, an' you ain't gonna tell me what superpower you got from fuckin' Adam without me?"

I'd forgotten about our power-up situation. Back in Minnesota, Zee had gotten a massive boost when he and I had been intimate. Something about my dragon abilities enhanced Zee's natural incubus skills, turning him into a sex god—much to his delight—but only when we were alone. We'd wondered if Victor would get the same. But Victor wasn't an incubus, and none of this was an exact science.

"I admit to feeling refreshed, but I cannot say either way whether I've gained any additional abilities."

Zee narrowed his eyes. "I knew it. You got extra boring powers."

I chuckled and even Victor made a strange, deep rumbling sound that was almost like laughter.

“Maybe fantastic Adam sex makes you less grumpy?” Zee grinned.

“It certainly did that.”

“You know that thing Adam does, when he’s getting all fired up—” Zee leaned closer to Victor. “Starts to mumble, then gets all growly, right?”

“I do indeed.” Victor smiled.

Oh, okay, we were doing this. Heat touched my face. “Guys, I’m sitting right here.”

“Then scoot off.” Zee fluttered his fingers with a smile. “Me an’ Sexy Fangs gonna compare notes.”

“I’m going to get a refill.” I grabbed my empty whiskey glass and returned to the living room, chuckling while they discussed the noises I made during sex.

The clock on the wall read nine p.m. Toby would have to be back soon. Hopefully. He’d let us use his phone, and then Leomaris would know all about me, my brother, and the danger he posed. I should have told the SSD agent long before now, but I’d been afraid Leomaris, like the others, would try to stop Syros... and fail. Nobody else should die because of my mistakes.

Zee had Victor openly laughing, and I stopped at the kitchen counter and watched them through the glass doors. We might have been in a sticky situation, but there was nobody else I’d want to be on the run with.

Something small, cool, and hard pressed against the base of my skull. “Easy now,” Toby whispered. “I hear dragons can heal almost anything, but a gunshot to the back of the head is gonna ruin your night.”

I slowly raised my hands, my gaze fixed on Zee and Victor. If they looked this way, they'd see Toby.

“Not a wo?—”

“You don't want to do this,” I spoke over him. “You see those two out there? They don't look like much, but they will tear you in half for this, without stopping to ask questions.”

“That's why I brought backup.”

I saw them then, shadows moving along the walls. Victor and Zee were distracted by each other. They'd see the movement too late.

I opened my mouth to yell a warning. Toby swung the gun, smacking the back of my head. Pain bolted down my neck. “Gah.” I stumbled against the kitchen counter, more irritated than hurt.

Glass shattered. I heard it explode, saw its shards tinkle against the floor. Victor had moved. But I didn't get to see the result. I spun, grabbed Toby by the neck. His gun fired. A punch to my gut. Didn't matter. I pinned him to the wall. “You should not have done that.” My voice was no longer that of the nice human, Adam, but something darker, deeper, and far more deadly.

“STOP!” The command hit like a physical blow. Its intent washed over me, but Toby, in my grip, turned stone-still. Only his eyes moved, blinking furiously. The rest of him was frozen in place.

I set him down on wobbly, uneven legs, and rested his rigid body against the kitchen countertop. His eyes darted about in panic.

“Holy frozen frog’s balls,” Zee gasped.

Stepping back so I could keep Toby in the corner of my eye, I turned to find we had at least six new guests. All of them trolls, all armed, and all frozen in various poses of attack. They’d used the shadows to hide themselves, but they were out in the open now.

“It’s like a fucked-up Snow White and the Seven Dwarves , ’cept Fancy Fangs is a whole lot sexier than that apple-lovin’ pale chick.”

Victor’s silver eyes blazed, fangs bared in a snarl. He was a twitch away from going feral. Had he frozen them with one word?

“You can’t call them dwarves, Zee,” I mumbled, still trying to take in what was going on.

“Oh, excuse moi. Maybe they shouldn’t fuckin’ try an’ ambush us, then.” He cocked a hip, looking sassy in the broken door frame. “Ha, jokes on them. Didn’t know Fancy Fangs could do this, did yah?” Zee strutted to Victor’s side. “This was you, right?”

“It was.” Victor straightened, calming himself. “I can break their necks in a blink. It’s quite the... thrill.” Oh-kay. A bit too calm, maybe?

“Fuck... Daddy Fangs has the scent of blood,” Zee drawled. “I would not wanna be you guys right now.”

“Don’t kill them,” I warned. “We need to know why they’re doing this.”

“Uh, because they’re assholes?” Zee strutted up to the nearest uninvited guest and poked him in the cheek. The troll didn’t move, his cheek just dimpled and sprang

back. His eyes revealed his terror, though. “This is some badass superpower shit, Lord Murder Fangs. I like it.”

This was powerful, and a little unnerving. “Victor, can you maybe unlock Toby so we can talk to him?”

Victor switched his glare to Toby, and whatever he did, it freed Toby’s head from the voice spell... but just his head. He gasped and wheezed, but the rest of him remained solid and immobile.

“By the Bridgekeeper, keep me safe. By the Bridgekeeper, keep me safe,” Toby prayed.

“You should have thought of that before holding a gun to my head.” I clamped a hand to my middle and winced at the blood that came away on my fingers. “Another sweater ruined.”

“He fuckin’ shot you?!” Zee poofed to my side, saw the blood. His nostrils flared. “You all gonna fuckin’ die now.”

Victor’s growl rumbled like thunder through the house.

“Wait. Guys. Relax a second.” I sighed at the whimpering Toby. “You brought this on yourself.”

“We helped you, numbnuts,” Zee huffed. “And you shoot Adam? This is very bad for you. Level fuckin’ eleven bad, you feel me?”

“S-s-sorry?” Toby whined. “Please don’t... kill me... Dad will be... so mad.”

“You know who else is mad?” I asked, then pointed to our murder vampire primed



and ready to be unleashed. “He’s had a thousand years to perfect his torture, just so you know. So tell me what’s going on and maybe he’ll let you have your body back.”

Zee’s smile turned wicked. “You made the same mistake everyone does, didn’t you? Thought we were weak, huh? Sucks to be you. Vic’s gonna take those small balls of yours and pop ’em like grapes.”

Sweat beads glistened on Toby’s face. “Alright... I... I just know I was supposed to follow your van.”

“Huh?” Zee asked.

“On the highway. But the cops pulled me over. They know my family, know my face, but I saw you drive by and so I bolted to catch up?—”

“Who told you to follow us?” I asked,

“My dad, he’s uh... he’s kinda the boss of the family business, you know?”

“And your family business is...?”

“Uh,” Zee stepped in. “The house, the gun, the suit? It’s drugs, Kitten. It’s always drugs... or vampires, but mostly drugs. You got any in this house?” he asked Toby. “For... evidence. Actually, it’s for me. Don’t judge. This peak incubus got needs.”

“Uh, no, but I can get you some if you let me go?” Hope pitched Toby’s voice higher.

“Yeah, no, I’m good. You can die.”

“So, your dad...” I asked Toby, steering us back on track. “The drug boss?—”

“Drug lord,” Zee corrected. “Troll mafia don, head honcho, bossman.”

“Thank you, Zee. I think I’ve got it.” Facing Toby again, we all tried to ignore Victor’s growling that seemed to suggest our attackers didn’t have long left. “He told you to bring us here, right?” Toby nodded. “Why?”

“No idea.”

Zee snorted. “Liar.”

“No, I don’t know! I just do what he tells me to do, go where he tells me to go. He said to follow you. I was supposed to sabotage the van so I could offer you a lift back here, but then you kinda offered first, so...”

Zee huffed. “You ungrateful dickface.”

“Yes, thank you, Zee. Alright, so Toby... you don’t know why your drug-lord boss dad wants us?”

“No, I don’t know, I’m just a grunt. By the Bridgekeeper, please don’t kill me. You can kill everyone else, but please, not me.”

“How’d you know we were even on that road, huh?” Zee asked. “We never know where we gonna be.”

“You uh... you s-stopped at the cowboy museum,” Toby stuttered. “They uh... posted it on social media. A visit from the famous h-heroes...”

I sighed at Zee. “I told you we shouldn’t have stopped.”

Zee fluttered his lashes. “I needed a cowboy hat, Kitten. It was an emergency.”

I'd begun to wonder if we were just not very good at being on the run. Or hiding.  
“Why didn't your dad just ask us to meet him, instead of going to all this trouble?”

“I don't know...” Toby sobbed. “I don't know anything!”

“Then you are of no further use to us,” came Victor's ominous growl.

“Wait.” I raised a hand. “Let's not get ahead?—”

A boom sounded from outside on the deck and a whole lot of things happened at once. All the frozen trolls dropped to the floor, including Toby, their heads bent at awkward angles. But Victor fell forward too, staggering, teetering on unstable legs. Zee poofed in front of him, and caught Victor in his arms. Blood stained the tattered remains of the back of his shirt.

On the deck stood another troll, smoking shotgun in hand.

He'd shot Victor.

I didn't hesitate, didn't slow. I strode toward the troll, who smirked back at us, so proud he'd blown a hole in our vampire's back.

He swung the shotgun toward me and pulled the trigger.

Boom!

Even as fiery buckshot scorched my chest, I kept right on walking toward him.

He squeezed the trigger again.

Click.

“All out? Oh dear,” I said.

Click, click, click.

He looked at the gun, as though shocked it had let him down. I grabbed it, tore it from his hands, flipped it around so I had hold of the handle, then swung it like a bat.

The troll wasn’t smirking anymore. No, he lay on the deck with his neck broken like the others.

Silence settled around us. Just the breeze through the palm trees and the distant sound of waves.

I dropped the gun, and turned back to find Zee had scooped the unconscious Victor off his feet and was cradling him in his arms. Around us lay eight very dead trolls.

“Uhm... Kitten, did we just murder a mafia don’s son and a whole bunch of enforcer bros?”

I chewed on my lip as the reality of the last few seconds began to sink into my thawing thoughts. It did not look good. “Yeah?”

“Okay.” Zee blinked. “Maybe we should... run? Just a thought.”

“Yeah, I think that’s probably a good idea. Is Victor...”

“He’s okay, I think. Just bloody and out cold again.”

I sighed. “Okay, uhm... to the van?”

“To the van.”

Zee took Victor outside, and after I stuffed all our belongings back into our bags, I found him out there, with Victor still in his arms, standing beside the van.

A van with four slashed and very flat tires.

“So... I guess we walkin’?” Zee mumbled. Sirens sounded far off, but getting closer. “Sure, because why the fuck not add some cops right now?” Zee eyed the one road, and our only escape route unless we wanted to swim. Our only choice was to follow the road—on foot—away from the sirens and into the gloom, where more palms swayed and not a single light lit up the dark. “I guess we go thaddaway.”

I spotted the blue lights now. If we were caught with eight dead trolls, on top of all my brother’s bad publicity, Syros’s lies would see us arrested. We couldn’t get caught. “Yeah... Let’s go.”

With our bags in my hands, and Victor in Zee’s arms, we headed into the humid gloom where hopefully nothing else bad waited.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:39 am*

### CHAPTER 4

The road twisted and turned, but the night was warm and the stars were bright, so it wasn't all bad. Huge leaning trees muscled out the palms now, and a whole chorus of things chirped and chattered in the dark.

"Is he awake yet?" I asked, peering over at Victor draped in Zee's arms.

Zee jiggled him. "Does he look awake? No, he's not awake, and he ain't gettin' any lighter. Skinny as a pole does not mean he's as light as one."

"Shall I take him?"

"No, I got him." He shifted Victor's position. "What? Why you smirkin' like that?"

"Nothing." I smirked.

"Spit it out, Kitten."

"It's cute, that's all. You carrying him, like you always do. You know, after we first met him you claimed to hate him, but it was so obvious you were secretly in love with Victor the whole time."

"Ugh, I was not. If you remember correctly, you were in love with his power-daddy vibes, an' I caught them feels off you... like an STD."

"I don't think love works like an STD."

“It fuckin’ does,” he snorted, not believing it for a second. “Else why would I love such a stuffy, boring, neck-sucking, furniture-making fossil?”

“Sure.” I chuckled back. “You caught love off me.”

We ambled onward. The road had to go somewhere, right? Maybe somewhere with a phone so I could call Leomaris and explain all this.

“Shouldn’t Sleepy McFang Face be awake by now?” Zee asked.

I tucked my thumbs into my pants pockets. “I think he got a power-up like you did, and that’s why he was able to freeze the mafia trolls with only a word. And it seems like maybe the boost at the same time as the shotgun blast to the back knocked him out. Like you uh... you know...”

“Like I passed out when your tongue did the dirty on my dick back at the Stephanie Hotel an’ I got god powers?”

“Uhm, yeah. Like that.”

“So you think he’s alright? We don’t need to take him to a vampire vet or something?”

He didn’t look bad, but with only the light shining from the stars it was real hard to tell. “Maybe we should see if he’s healed that gunshot wound? It did look bad.”

Zee stopped. “Okay, imma pass him to you.” He dropped Victor’s feet, propping up his limp body on the asphalt. “You grab him, an’ I’ll take a look at his back.”

“Okay.” I widened my stance, and held out my arms—like a trust exercise, but the person who was supposed to trust us was unconscious.

“You got him?” Zee asked, holding Victor under the arms, readying to hand him over.

“Yup. Pass him to me.”

Zee shoved, and Victor dropped like a stone. “Wait!” I lunged, sort of caught his wrist, and jerked Victor up into my arms with his arm flung over my shoulder. His center of gravity shifted, threatening to flop him out of my arms again. I twisted, scooping him around the waist.

“How am I gonna see the hole in his back if you’re dancin’ with him? Hold still.”

“I just... need...”

Bright high beams blasted out of the gloom, illuminating the three of us in a flood of blinding light. Zee screamed. His wings popped out, and for some bizarre reason he covered his crotch, despite the fact he was wearing clothes.

Light burned to the back of my night-adjusted eyes. I tried to shield them from the glare, and caught sight of a figure behind an open car door. A figure with a gun.

A shot barked.

Zee yelped again, then grabbed my arm and dragged me—with Victor heaved over my shoulder—off the road, down a bank, and into a ditch. Water sloshed around my ankles, slurping at my shoes. Victor slipped from my grip and flopped against the bank. I grabbed him and slung him over my other shoulder. Not easy, considering he’s real tall and I’m not.

“C’mon, run, Kitten!”



“Wait—” I stepped after Zee and dropped, up to my knees in slurpy water. What was this place?

Shouts sailed behind us, chasing us down. Maybe it was Toby’s family come to avenge him or the cops chasing us down or a pitchfork-carrying mob. I really did not want to hang around to find out why they’d shot first instead of asking questions. If we could get some space between us, we could stop and regroup, then once Victor was safe and awake, I’d go back and eat them all. Or not. Depending on whether they were good or bad people.

We waded deeper. Water climbed up my thighs, sloshing from Zee’s splashing ahead.

Finally Zee stopped our retreat, and leaned against some kind of enormous tree with knotted roots that looked like frozen worms reaching down beneath the water’s black surface.

“We’re far enough away, right?” Zee pressed a hand to his chest, panting.

“Uhm, I guess?” Everything around us was black—black water, black trees, black sky. No stars. Nothing.

“A sign back on the road said no swimming alligators, so we’re good,” Zee said, mostly to himself.

“There was a sign about alligators?” I hadn’t seen any sign.

“Yeah, they can’t swim ’cause of their fur.”

“Oh yeah, sure, probably.” Zee had asked me what an alligator was a few days ago, when Toby mentioned Florida had them. The hotel’s reference books had been very clear, and had a whole section about alligators being small furry creatures that ate

grains, like mice.

“Furry things can’t swim,” Zee said with confidence, so he must have been right.

“Oh. Okay.” I wasn’t sure why there needed to be a sign telling everyone alligators couldn’t swim. Maybe it was a Florida thing.

We fell quiet... and everything else had fallen quiet too. Earlier, it had seemed like there were a million critters chittering out here, but not anymore. The silence was... weird. Wasn’t it? Maybe we’d disturbed them. Hopefully they were all very small, cute, and harmless. Like alligators.

“You think we’re safe?” Zee whispered.

I couldn’t hear the people anymore, or see any headlights. “Maybe.”

“Okay, imma turn my lights on.” Gradually, a soft purple hue illuminated the waist-deep water around us, radiating off Zee’s wings in gentle purple waves.

“Wow...”

“I know, I’m fuckin’ amazing. But also, Fancy Fangs’s head is underwater, so you might wanna?—”

“Oh!” I hitched Victor up, creating a waterfall from all his messy hair. Zee reached out, offering to hold him, so I scooped our limp, very wet vampire into his arms.

Victor’s head flopped face first into Zee’s shoulder, but I could see all of his back now.

“Okay, so his shirt is all torn,” I said. “But his skin’s all healed up, which is probably

good because there's weeds and green slime all over him, and me, and your wings, Zee. But he's definitely not dead."

"Not dead is good." Zee grinned, and I grinned back, only now realizing how worried I'd been.

Our bags were back on the road. We were in the middle of some kind of swamp, in an area we didn't know, with nothing but the wet clothes on our backs... but we had each other. If we had each other, we could accomplish anything. We were going to be just fine.

Zee's grin froze on his face, then crack by crack, fell away. "So, maybe don't look," he mumbled through firm lips. "But there's fuckin' glowing eyes... everywhere."

"What?" Of course I looked.

The purple glow from Zee's wings lit up what appeared to be a thousand eyes shining from the gloom. Small eyes, biggish eyes, oddly blinking eyes. I swallowed hard. That was a whole lot of critters. And we were in their back yard.

"Whadda we do?" Zee whispered.

If these little guys were anything like gremlins, then we'd need a Little Jimmy to talk to them. But being all out of pixies, our best option was to get out of their territory. "You know... I think it's best if we keep moving."

"Yup, uh-huh, okay." Zee flopped Victor over his shoulder and we inched backward, around the big tree and away from the army of eyes. Zee dimmed his glow, hiding us from the thousand eyes, but without his glow, we also had no idea where those creatures the eyes belonged to had gone. Which was worse.

A chirping sound tittered somewhere off to our left. Then another, a little ways behind. Then a throaty croak from our right.

A chill skittered down my spine, despite the warmth. “We need to get out of the water.”

“Trees are too thick. Can’t...”

I could have shifted, but it would have been like setting off a dragon bomb, and not the best way to make new friends. We could really have used Victor’s expertise on this. He would have known whether anything watching us was dangerous or friendly.

“Wait, I think I see a light...” Zee whispered, changing course through the gloom.

The water had risen above my waist and tugged on my shirt. Something bumped my leg. Probably a rotten log. Nothing to be concerned about.

Zee stopped. “Summink touched my leg,” he hissed.

“Mine too. Just keep moving.”

“That’s easy for you to say. I’m the bait out front.”

“You want me to go in front?” I was a big scary dragon, after all.

“Yup, you die first. I’m carrying the vampire.”

I shuffled around Zee and waded through the soupy water toward the blinking light in the distance.

“You think he’s faking bein’ asleep and fuckin’ laughing inside right now?”

It was possible. Victor's humor did skirt toward the darker side. He'd probably have been finding all of this hilarious had he been awake to enjoy it. Although... he did not like getting messy or having his hair tangled, so he wasn't going to be too happy about that when he did eventually wake?—

“Do not move,” Victor said, still slung over Zee's shoulder.

I stopped.

Zee bumped into my back. “Oof.”

“Demon, there is an alligator approaching?—”

Zee chuckled. “The fuck—I thought you were gonna say something is gonna eat us. Alligator? Pfft. You have no idea what we've had to deal with, and your ancient ass is worried about a cute, fluffy?—”

Zee and Victor vanished in a thrash and splash of water.

Gone.

Both of them.

Suddenly alone, I stared at the rippling black water that had just eaten my demon and vampire.

“Guys?!”

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:39 am*

### CHAPTER 5

Fortunately, I didn't have to figure out how best to fight an alligator—if that's what had taken them?—

Zee shot from the water like a bullet from a gun and clung to a nearby tree, wings flapping, whipping up a chaotic storm of twigs, slime, and whatever else lurked in the swamp.

Behind him, Victor wrestled some kind of hideous, long-tailed, big-clawed, scaly-skinned, reptilian-eyed... wait a second...

“Hey!” I stomped forward. “Hey, you!”

The alligator—if that's what it was—stopped thrashing and glared its cold eyes at me while keeping Victor's arm firmly lodged between its teeth.

“He's my vampire,” I told my distant—very distant, waaay back several million years—kinda cousin. “Bad alligator. Drop Victor.”

The alligator stared some more. It's vertical black slits getting narrower.

“Adam, if I may continue wrestling for my freedom, as my arm is exceedingly painful trapped between its jaws.”

I stomped the rest of the way and pointed a stern finger at the alligator. “Bad. Drop. Now.”

With its cold glare locked on mine, the alligator dropped its lower jaw. Victor jerked backward, holding up his arm, and blood dribbled down his pale skin, soaking his torn shirt.

“It is very rude to eat people without their permission,” I scolded, reptile to reptile. “Don’t give me those sad eyes, mister.”

“Those are fuckin’ murder eyes, Kitten,” Zee said from his perch in the tree.

“Go on now.” I shooed the alligator away. “And tell your friends out there to leave us alone, or there’ll be real trouble—you know the trouble I mean.”

The alligator whipped its head around in a huff, thrashed its tail, and disappeared under the water.

“Victor, are you alright?” I waded over and winced at the mincemeat his arm had become. “Oh dear, that looks bad.”

“It will heal, but I should keep it out of the water.” He blinked through wet, algae-strewn bangs. “Where by the grace of the vampire queen are we, and why is Zodiac in a tree?”

Zee cleared his throat. “There was a uh...” He twirled a finger in his hair and his tail coiled around his leg. “Another one up here. I scared it off.” He vanished his wings, clambered down the tree, and shivered as he sank back into the water with us. “Ick. The water is hugging my balls. And I am not wearing the right heels for this soupy shit.”

“I’m so sorry, guys. I didn’t realize that was an alligator. But don’t worry, he won’t bother us again.”

Zee narrowed his eyes. “You speak fuckin’ alligator?”

“Kinda...” I shrugged. “It’s more about tone of voice. And I’m sort of at the top of the reptile food chain, I guess.”

“Chompy McBitey Face was not small, furry, or fuckin’ cute, Adam,” Zee pointed out, with special emphasis on the small and furry parts.

“I know. Yikes. I really got alligators wrong, didn’t I?” That was the last time I paid attention to any of the hotel’s books.

“I saw my life flash before my eyes—again! I had to drop Sassy Fangs or I’d have died!”

“You dropped me like bait,” Victor snarled.

“What else was I gonna do? Also, you’re like, chewable or something. My skin is precious. Did you see the size of its teeth?”

“Actually, I did, while it was thrashing me back and forth trying to dislocate my arm from my shoulder socket.”

“Pfft, you’re a million years old, and look... you’re fine. It probably would have dropped you anyway. Everyone knows vampires taste bad.”

“Actually, they taste like chicken.” Having been the only person here who had eaten a vampire, I could add some perspective to this conversation.

The pair of them fell silent and looked at me.

“As bewildering as this conversation is,” Victor sighed. “Perhaps we should get to



dry land so I can tend my arm and my back, which also appears to have undergone some kind of trauma.”

“Yeah, you got shot in the back by a troll and slept through your own murder spree. Keep up.”

Victor stared. “Please, explain everything that has transpired since I lost consciousness.”

“Sure.” Zee waded ahead, toward what appeared to be a gap in the gnarly tree roots we could use to escape. “You used your new superpowers to freeze Toby’s gang, but missed one outside. He snuck in with a gun, shot you in the back. Snap .” Zee clicked his fingers, then clambered up a marshy bank, out of the water. “You killed all of ’em and knocked yourself out cold.”

“Well... that’s a development.” Victor took Zee’s offered hand to be hauled out of the swamp water.

Zee dragged me out next. “Thanks.”

“Cops showed up, so we scarpered into this hellscape?—”

“Everglades, I presume,” Victor said, looking around.

“Everglades sounds cute and nice, like it should be filled with fuckin’ fluffy bunnies, Disney princesses, and gay rainbows. This fuckin’ hellhole smells like Seb’s lube jar and has slimy fanged things livin’ in it. Also like Seb’s lube jar.”

As if to prove his point, a fat, dangling-legged bug bumbled its way through the air between us. Zee yelped, and swatted it. It plopped into the water somewhere out of sight, then something in that water sloshed, ending the flying thing’s life. Everything

here was food for something bigger.

“This is not the tropical paradise I ordered, Kitten.”

“There’s a house up ahead...” As soon as I said it, I wasn’t sure house was the right word. A lamp glowed outside its door, illuminating a long deck over the water. Among all the croaking and ribbiting going on around us, I could just make out some tinny music that sounded as though it was playing from a cheap TV or radio. Someone was home. A few someones, if the trucks parked behind the shack were any indication of who was inside.

We were almost at the dwelling when Zee stopped, and in the dull lamplight he pointed down at his extended leg. “What...” Just below his knee, where his pants had torn, a black thing about an inch long appeared to be stuck to his skin. “What. The fuck. Is that ?”

“That is a leech,” Victor said, tugging weeds from his hair and snarling before tossing them aside.

“A leech?” Zee blinked. And blinked again. “Why is it on me?”

“I suspect it’s partaking of a free meal.”

“Excuse moi. What the fuck does that mean?”

Victor sauntered over to get a closer look. “Marvelous. You can’t feel it because—rather amusingly—like vampires, the leech is an amazing creature that secretes an anesthetic agent so its host is unaware it has latched on using three jaws and over a hundred teeth. Isn’t it glorious?”

Zee blinked some more. Was he pale? Or was that just the weird hue of the lamp?

“That industrious little champion also produces an anticoagulant,” Victor continued. “Preventing your blood from clotting so that it might feast until bloated, at which time it will harmlessly fall off.”

“Imma just... I just gotta... go over here...” Zee staggered, swayed, and collapsed. He would have hit the muddy ground had Victor not dashed in and caught him.

“Adam, my dear? It may be best if you remove the leech from Zodiac’s leg before he regains consciousness.”

“Me?” I squeaked.

“Well, I am rather stuck in this position of support until Zodiac recovers from his swooning.”

I approached carefully, in case the leech lunged at me. The thick black worm thing was definitely stuck to Zee’s skin. It would be fine, right? Just pluck it off. Done. I’d once unclogged a gremlin from the hotel’s sewer system, so... one little leech should be easy.

“Please do not also pass out. I doubt I can support the both of you.”

“No, I’m good, I just...” I pinched the leech, or tried to, but it was real slippery and the slimy sucker was properly rooted in Zee’s flesh.

“Before he wakes up, preferably.”

“Okay... I’ve got it.” The black slimy leech stretched thin, then slipped from my fingers, still latched on. “Yeah, uhm...” My stomach flopped. I puffed, flushing hot and cold. “I just need a second here...”

“You fellas havin’ some issues?” A drawling voice alerted us to the fact we were no longer alone.

“Oh, hey uhm... so... we uh... we got lost.” I had to say something about why we looked as though the swamp had spat us out at the back of this man’s shack. “And uhm, we saw your light, and my friend here... he uh... he’s a bit squeamish, I guess.” I gestured at the leech, still snacking on Zee.

“You got a hitchhiker.” The rotund guy pulled a lighter from his bib-overalls pocket, flicked the flame alight, and approached Zee—still out cold in Victor’s arms.

The little flame reflected in Victor’s silvery eyes, highlighting their warning, but the guy didn’t seem to notice or care. He held the flame against the leech, for just long enough that the critter curled up and plopped to the ground.

“Bring him inside. We’ll get that wound cleaned up.” The big guy turned around and strode back onto the front deck. When he noticed we weren’t following, he urged, “You comin’? I don’t bite.”

I glanced at Victor, who after a few seconds thought gave a small nod and scooped Zee’s limp body into his arms.

Following the friendly leech wrangler, I shoved open the shack door and blinked into the gloom inside. Several other heavysset people sat around makeshift tables made of cut wood, used pallets, and steel drums. All eight faces turned toward us.

“Oh, hello.” I smiled, and raised a hand in a small wave. A few waved back, then returned to their conversations. Was this some kind of meeting place, or a bar? In the middle of the swamp? Whatever it was, the locals seemed friendly enough.

“Let’s get your friend fixed up back here,” the leech wrangler said, waving us toward

the back of the shack to a makeshift bed of wooden pallets and old blankets.

Victor laid Zee on the bed but Zee's height meant his legs hung off the end. He may only have fainted, but concern squeezed my heart at the sight of him out cold and vulnerable. Zee was always in motion, always flouncing here and there, tail flicking, head tilted, lashes fluttering. Even when sleeping, he twitched and mumbled. Being still wasn't in his nature.

The leech wrangler approached with a piece of rag and an unmarked bottle. He poured the bottle's contents onto the rag and reached for Zee's leg.

Victor got between them, grabbing the man's wrist. "Explain."

"Just a bit of rubbing alcohol. It'll hurt, probably wake him up, but as you guys have been swimming in nature's pea soup, you're gonna need it to make sure that bite don't get infected."

"It's alright, Victor," I said. We were safe here, I felt that much. Something about this place and it's people... It sort of felt right. More right than Toby's house, or the Stephanie Hotel, or even the Pacific Northwest. It felt like the safest place we'd been since leaving the SOS Hotel.

Victor freed the man's wrist. "What is your name?"

"Hooper," the big guy drawled. His tufty chestnut hair stuck out at different angles, as though he'd been wearing a hat that had flattened the top part. His large eyes were kind. "This is my place... a safe place. No harm will come to you here."

Reluctantly, Victor nodded and leaned back, letting Hooper kneel down and soak the rag with alcohol.

“You may wanna hold him,” Hooper suggested.

Victor gripped Zee’s shoulders from his position behind his head, pinning him down.

“Ready?”

Hooper waited for his nod, then pressed the rag to Zee’s leg.

Zee bucked. His eyes shot open and saw me.

“It’s alright.” I held his other leg, but it was Victor’s soothing words in his ear that instantly calmed him. Panic faded from his eyes, replaced by confusion, then skepticism.

“Easy there, friend,” Hooper said, his deep voice comforting. “Just a little ol’ fashioned antiseptic.” He rocked back on his heels. “Now then, anyone else got some unwanted hitchhikers you want seein’ to?”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:39 am*

### CHAPTER 6

After checking each other over for leeches and cleaning up Victor's arm, we began to feel half way to normal again. Normal for us, anyway. The shack was cozy, although it did feel as though we'd stumbled into bookclub night, with fewer books and more pickup trucks.

The people chatted like old friends or family members. They didn't seem to mind us, but didn't go out of their way to introduce themselves either. We were obviously outsiders.

Hooper vanished into a kitchen area at the back of the shack, then returned with tumblers on a tray, offering the drinks to everyone. When he got around to us, Victor took a glass and discreetly sniffed it while Hooper was offering one to me. Victor's slight nod said it was okay to drink.

After our last stop on the road had us encountering drugged lollipops and sandwiches, we'd become a bit suspicious of freebies.

"Do uh... do you have a phone we can maybe use?" I asked, after setting my glass down.

"No signal out here," Hooper replied, then nodded at the small TV mounted high on the wall. "Barely get a signal for that."

A baseball game showed on screen, but the interference blurred out most of the details.

“May I ask... where are we exactly?” Victor spoke up.

“South of Gator Park.”

Zee gulped and whispered, “Gators have a whole fuckin’ park?”

“I see,” Victor continued. “And how far is the nearest town where we might find a phone?”

“A few hours’ drive in that direction.” He thumbed over his shoulder, then blinked oddly out of order, one eye blinking at a slightly different time to the other.

“Is anyone leaving later? Someone we might get a lift with?” Victor asked.

“Apologies friends, but not tonight. Wait till morning, then maybe.” Hooper headed back to the kitchen, leaving me, Victor, and Zee to huddle closer. We really did need to get to a phone, and waiting until morning wasn’t an option if we wanted to get ahead of the massacre we’d left behind.

“A few hours’ drive is likely a day’s walk,” Victor said. “I’d rather do so at night, for obvious reasons.”

“Yeah, okay. Zee, you up to it?”

Zee looked up from fishing a speck of something out of his glass. “Huh? Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Uhm, your leg?—”

“You fainted,” Victor pointed out.



Zee's expression blew wide with disbelief. "The fuck? I did not."

"I was there, and you did." Victor blinked slowly, hiding his smugness. "Into my arms, precisely."

Zee snorted a laugh. "Fuck off, that did not happen. I would know if I'd fainted, and nope, don't remember that."

Victor arched an eyebrow, but left it at that. We all knew it had happened, including Zee. "Are you up for a several-mile trek?" Victor asked him.

Zee rolled his eyes. "You guys do know I have these amazing things on my back called wings, right?"

"Okay, so we walk out of here, find a phone, call Leomaris, and hopefully they send some help. We can explain the whole Toby incident then, and get this all cleared up."

"You mean explain how Victor murdered a mafia don's family?" Zee said. "Igniting a blood feud that'll last for generations? Netflix gonna love it."

"It was an accident," Victor grumbled. "I was not expecting the shotgun blast to my back. It was an easy mistake to make."

"Uh-huh, sure. I'm sure Toby's crime-boss daddy is goin' to be totally fuckin' fine with you twitching and accidentally snapping his son's neck in half."

"He has other sons," I said, then shrugged when they both looked at me. "I'm just sayin', it's not as though we wiped out his entire family. Just that one guy."

"I doubt that will ease his thirst for vengeance, but at this stage we can hope," Victor agreed.

“Okay, so I guess we’d better get moving...” Hearing my name from the TV’s crackling speakers, I looked over... and spotted a vague outline of someone who looked a lot like me on the screen. The words WANTED FOR MURDER scrolled across the bottom. Of course the signal had improved, so the words were crystal clear at that precise moment.

The heads of all eight people in the shack swiveled toward me.

“So uhm... we’re gonna uh... go...” I got to my feet and heard Zee and Victor do the same. “It was nice meeting you all.” While I was crossing the floor, the glares stayed locked on me, but the TV had gone back to unrecognizable static. “Enjoy the rest of your uhm... meeting.”

Hooper made his way over and escorted us back outside to the dirt lot and the parked trucks.

“Stick to the road,” he said. “There’s a whole lot of critters in these waters that’ll chew you city folk up like candy.”

I couldn’t really explain that I was the biggest critter of them all, so we just thanked him and headed up the dirt track, away from the little shack and its lonely light. Gloomy darkness quickly swallowed us, but there was just enough light from the stars to illuminate the track ahead.

We didn’t talk much. Our situation wasn’t great. We were a long way from home, and the story out there about us wasn’t a friendly one. If we got picked up by local law enforcement, or even the local SSD, things would get rough unless we could get hold of Leomaris. Some places didn’t like Lost Ones, and sometimes the people who were hired to help folks made them disappear instead.

“I can fly on ahead... see if there are signs of life anywhere...” Zee offered, then

plucked a bit of dried algae from his purple hair.

“We already know it’s going to be a long walk, and I imagine from above we’ll be difficult to see on your return. I do not want you to get lost in this environment. I believe we should stay together.” Victor walked on, his footfalls a lot lighter than Zee’s and mine behind him.

Zee jogged to fall into step beside him. “Wait, are you looking out for me, Fancy Fangs?”

“Of course.”

“Huh.” Zee ambled along, curiously quiet. Quiet enough for Victor to notice.

“This is typically the point at which you ignore my advice and proceed with whatever dangerous or risky idea you have already decided is the best course of action.”

“Nuh-uh, I don’t ignore your advice .” Zee’s Victor voice was spot on. “I listen to it very carefully and go do the exact opposite.”

That got a chuckle out of Victor. “I see. Then your willful disobedience is deliberate.”

“Exactly. Now he’s gettin’ it. It’s almost like you be learnin’. Not bad for a fossil.”

“Thank you. I think.”

Zee snorted, and at the same time, ruffled his wings open into the visible spectrum. “Willful disobedience, here I come.” He flapped a few times, whipping up dust and grit, then took to the air. “My wings glow, Fossil Fangs,” he called back. “When you see me, call out, an’ I’ll find you again. Night-flying problem solved. Be right back,

Kitten.”

Victor and I stopped to watch Zee’s purple glow vanish into the sky.

“At least his willful disobedience is predictable,” I said.

“I should know better than to advise him when he’ll do what he likes regardless.”

“He’s sort of right, though.” We began to walk again, listening to crickets chirp and other things croak and chitter. “His wings do glow, so we can spot him.”

“If we can see him, so will others. There is risk to his plan.”

“I guess, in his mind, there’s always risk.”

Victor waited a beat and said, “Zodiac is not immortal.”

A slight quiver in his voice had me looking over. Much of his face was shaded by the darkness, but I caught the concern in his night-shining vampire eyes. He really did care, just like Zee had picked up on. Despite Zee’s strength and bravado, he was the most vulnerable of us. I could heal almost anything—Victor too—but Zee only healed bad wounds when we were intimate. Yet he still threw himself into danger without much thought for his own safety.

“He’ll be fine,” I said. “He’ll come right back, I’m sure.”

“Yes, of course, you are correct.”

I knew how Victor was feeling, because I felt the same when I thought of how they’d have to face my brother. Victor’s immortality wasn’t going to stop Syros, and despite Zee’s new godlike powers, Syros would still be able to crush him like a bug. When

the final battle came and we faced Syros, I'd be terrified for them.

I already was.

Victor stopped. "A vehicle... You hear it?" He tilted his head. "Headed this way."

We hurried off the road, skidded down the bank, and pressed ourselves low in the brush, so we could see the vehicle but hopefully they wouldn't see us.

The grumble of an engine grew louder, then a bang as it backfired. Headlights swept through the gloom, washing the track and everything along it in pale white light. We hunkered lower. The pickup truck raced by, kicking up grit, and as the sound of its engine faded into the night again, I frowned. In the back had been three figures, each carrying guns.

"Hooper's friends?" I whispered, staying low just in case there were any more on the way.

"Possibly."

A glowing meteor of purple glitter shot from the sky, landing dramatically on the track. Panting, Zee straightened, ruffled his wings and his hair around his horns. "D'yah miss me?"

"You've been gone for all of four minutes," Victor said, straightening and joining Zee on the track.

"Yeah, I know, so—" He took a breath, and lowered his wings, reducing their glow. "Those guys? You know how I feel emotions? When I spotted them below, I got muchos bad vibes off 'em. Also, they took a shot at me. Missed... mostly." He flung out his left wing, where a little bit of the membrane had been torn free.

Victor's growl silenced all the nearby chittering.

"Easy, Vic. I'm fine. But those guys are headed out to Hooper's love shack with bad intentions. Since they kinda helped me, and we're supposed to be heroes an' all, my gut says we should maybe go back there... just in case."

I checked Victor's expression.

"At the very least, we do not want to be blamed for two massacres in one night," he said.

"Good points, both of you. Let's go back."

"And bonus, maybe one of 'em will have a phone." Zee shrugged.

We started back, walking faster now.

"I can fly ahead an?—"

"No," Victor snapped.

"Easy there, Bossy Fangs. I like the sass between the sheets, but out here you ain't the boss of me. Remember?"

"You are already wounded?—"

"'Tis but a scratch."

"No. While I know you are a capable warrior, those people were carrying multiple shotguns, and having recently been on the receiving end of a shotgun blast, I strongly advise you not to put yourself in front of one of them."

“That’s a lot of fuckin’ words for I love you an’ I don’t want you to die . You can say it. We’re all grown-ups. Say the words. . . I love Zodiac . See, so easy. Copy after me?—”

Victor stopped. “I do love you, and I don’t want you to die, and frankly, your insistence on throwing yourself into peril is?—”

Zee grabbed Victor’s face and slammed a kiss onto his lips that had Victor instantly melting into his embrace and clinging to Zee as though this might be their last moment together. Zee parted from him with a chuckle. Lust flashed purple in his eyes, and with a lick of his lips, he laughed and shot into the sky.

“He is infuriating !” Victor growled, coming as close to a tantrum as I’d ever seen from him.

A shotgun blast boomed in the distance.

“Go!” I told him. He and Zee could reach Hooper much faster than me.

Victor was gone in a whip of hair and vampiric blur, leaving me to sprint up the track and hope I didn’t arrive too late to make a difference.

### CHAPTER 7

The sounds of cracking wood reached me before I reached the shack, but I expected to find Victor and Zee neck deep in some kind of fight. What I did not expect was Zee, arm out, blocking Victor from going inside.

“What is it?!” I panted, skidding onto the deck. “What’s going on?” The crashing noises still sounded from inside. We had to get in there to help Hooper and his friends.

“Kitten, we cannot go in there... There’s a frog.”

Oh dear. “A frog?” Why would there be frogs here?

“I know!” Zee’s tail whipped back and forth. “I’m tryin’ to tell Victor McKnow-It-All it’s too dangerous, but he says frogs aren’t dangerous, like he’s some kind of frog expert?—”

Victor growled again. “There is clearly a ruckus happening?—”

“We gotta let it happen. Frogs are bad news. If we go in there, it will eat our faces.” Zee spread his other hand—the one not holding Victor back—over his own face, then Victor’s face. “All our faces. Gone. You like your face? I like your face. I want us all to keep our faces.”

“It appears there’s been some misunderstanding regarding frogs, and while now is not the time to go over it in any depth, you seem to have mistaken them for some kind of



deadly creatures,” Victor explained, eyebrows pinched in an impatient frown. “I’ve let it go in the past, as I wasn’t entirely sure if you were deliberately trying to make me believe frogs are dangerous, or whether?—”

“Frogs are dangerous!” Zee snapped. “They killed the fuckin’ dinosaurs.” His wings began to shimmer, lighting up the deck. Another crash sounded from inside. “If we go in there, we’ll fuckin’ die like the dinosaurs died. You wanna be extinct too?”

Victor seemed puzzled by this. Puzzled enough to take a step back. “Zodiac, how big do you believe frogs are?”

Zee looked to me, as though I were the frog expert. I did know a little bit... from the hotel books. “The size of dogs?” I suggested.

“Some are bigger.” Zee nodded. “Like ... scary big. Like the size of a bus.”

We all winced as something else smashed against the inside of the shack walls.

Bemusement softened Victor’s frown. “I don’t know whether I’m alarmed you believe this, or ashamed I did not clarify the misunderstanding sooner. Frogs are small amphibians. Most are no larger than your palm.”

Zee snorted. “What kinda fake frog news have you been reading, Fancy Fangs?”

“No,” I said, shaking my head. “That can’t be right. The books said?—”

“Frogs are responsible for most of the murders in Ohio,” Zee added.

Victor sighed. “Perhaps we should discuss this later, after we’ve helped?—”

Zee thrust out a hand again, pushing Victor in the chest, jolting him back. “You’re

not going in there. You looked out for me, an' now it's my turn."

"There are no dangerous frogs in there, Zodiac. Sometimes..." Victor wet his lips and tried again. "Sometimes... and I know this will be difficult to hear... but sometimes you are wrong."

Zee glared back. "I'm not wrong . You wanna know how big frogs are? That one in there is the same height as Adam. It's fuckin' weird-ass eyes are as big as your skull, and it's tongue is probably the length of both of you combined, but I didn't stick around to find out. I ain't never letting you go in there to face that monster alone. You're gonna have to fight me, Victor ."

Victor glared back too. "This is absurd."

Zee folded his arms, his wings spread out, deliberately blocking the door behind him. Nobody was getting by him.

Victor faced me. "Adam, if we wish to help these people, we must act now."

What was I supposed to do? Frogs were terrifying, and Zee was warning us not to go inside. But Victor had warned us about the alligator, and he was old. So he did know a lot of things too. Who did I believe?

But looking at Zee blocking the doorway, he wasn't joking. He really did mean to protect Victor, and if Zee said he saw a frog as big as me, I believed him. "Look at Zee," I told Victor. Victor nodded and did as I asked. He tilted his head back a bit, since Zee was so tall. "Whatever is in there, Zee is protecting you," I said. "You trust that, right?"

The defiance in Victor's glare fizzled out, and his expression softened. "I do."

“Thank you, Kitten. At least someone believes in me. You’ll thank me when you realize it’s a massacre?—”

The side of the shack blew apart. Bits of timber flew across the swamp, and a man tumbled onto the deck beside Victor and Zee. He groaned, then blinked, shaking the shock from his head, and when he saw us his eyes widened. “Help me!”

He reached a hand toward us.

A thick pink ropelike tendril flew out of the shack, looped around the man’s reaching arm, and snatched him off the deck.

I’d never seen anything like it. Like a giant pink scaleless snake thing.

“ Yoink ,” Zee said.

I moved the few steps across the deck to where the side of the shack had been smashed open, and saw a humanoid creature as tall as me use its long, flashy pink tongue to haul the man into the air. The man screamed, and I would have too if I were peering down into the open mouth and throat of a frog... And it was definitely a frog.

The frog—huge, and wrapped in clothes that looked a lot like the bib overalls Hooper had been wearing—threw its large head back and used its tongue to dangle the man over its open mouth. Then that muscular tongue shoved the man straight into the frog’s gullet ... whole. Stuffed him right in there. Arms and legs poked at the stretching membrane around the frog’s mouth. The frog opened up again, and using its weird, fleshy, toelike fingers, maneuvered the man around in its mouth. Then, with the help of its protruding eyes, it blinked one then the other, and forced the man-snack down its throat.

“Well...” Victor said beside me. “That is indeed a large frog.”

The shack was in disarray, but the big frog wasn't the only frog here. As the dust settled, more frogs emerged from the back room. Not as big as the man-eating one, but big enough to make me feel small. And outnumbered.

The man-eater slapped its thin lips together, its mouth fixed in a smug frog smile.

We'd made a mistake coming back.

These frogs did not need our help.

They'd been just fine without us. As was made clear by the unconscious—or maybe dead—guys strewn around us, their guns kicked out of reach. They were definitely the guys from the truck.

“Uhm... hi again? So... we thought you maybe needed help, but it looks like you have everything under control.”

“Ribbit,” the man-eater said.

Zee gulped loud enough for me to hear. “Kitten, you speak frog, right?” he whispered. Although in the quiet of the shack, everyone heard him.

“Uh, no, I don't think so.”

“You speak fuckin' alligator. It's the same.”

“Frogs are amphibians, not reptiles,” Victor clarified.

“I don't wanna hear any frog facts outtah your face when you were wrong this whole time, Fancy Fangs, an' I was right.”

Victor blinked slowly, and with a stiff nod, said, “Understood.”

The man-eater stepped forward. His huge belly jiggled, full of... person. It rolled its broad shoulders, and the exposed green flesh of its arms and legs began to change color, gradually shifting to a more typical human skin tone, baked by endless hours under the sun. The big frog eyes shrank back into human eye sockets, and the enormous mouth reduced down to just human lips. Hooper adjusted his belt and coughed the croak from his throat. “Sorry you had to see that.”

“Are you gonna murder us too?” Zee asked, a twitch away from launching himself through the roof.

“Only if you mean us harm.” Hooper’s deep voice bubbled, as though wet. “Like these guys.”

The others gradually shifted back to human forms too, but still squat and round, with big eyes and no necks, which made more sense now I knew they were actually frog people and not human people. They collected the dead guys and dragged them out through the new hole in the side of the shack.

“Gators will take care of the cleanup,” Hooper said.

Zee shared a quick glance with me and Victor without Hooper seeing, and gestured for us to run.

“They keep comin’ round, an’ we keep dealing with ’em, but it’s gettin’ worse. Ever since we refused to sell...” Hooper was saying as he began to set right the broken make-do furniture.

Zee gestured wildly for us to leave .

I picked up a fallen barrel and rolled it back to where it had roughly been before.  
“Who are they?”

In the corner of my eye, I saw Zee rapidly shake his head and tap his wrist where he'd have been wearing a watch if he owned one. Then he mimed flapping motions.

“Bad people,” Hooper said. “They want our land. Want to put a resort of fancy houses here. We won't sell, so they think they can scare us out.”

“Bad people, huh...” I'd known a few of those. Eaten a few too. We had that in common. “They wouldn't be related to Mr. Skrinde by any chance?”

Hooper turned his big bulk to face me and loomed, as though he might use his tongue to whip me into the air and shove me down his throat. “What do you know about Skrinde?”

“He tried to kidnap us. Used his son to trick us. I don't know why. We uh... we sort of accidentally uhm... might have upset him with something we did.” Probably best not to mention we'd made the bad people angrier. I didn't think this attack on Hooper's shack was related to what we'd left behind in Toby's house, but I wanted to speak with Victor and Zee before getting us more involved.

“Seems like we have the same enemy,” Hooper said, righting the last table.

“That's nice... Time to go, Kitten,” Zee urged. “Sunlight makes Vic crispy, an' we gotta make a call, remember?” He rapidly blinked wide eyes at me.

Zee was right. We had our own problems. But had we just made Hooper's worse by accidentally murdering Mr. Skrinde's son and a whole bunch of his employees? Could we really walk away from this? I glanced at Victor, and caught that little knot in the middle of his eyebrows, above his nose. The knot he got when his furniture

making wasn't going so well. The knot that said he didn't like this and he wanted to fix it.

Zee caught the look on my face and rolled his eyes all the way to Victor, who also had the look on his face. A different look to mine but it meant the same. We were staying. Zee poofed his wings away and dropped onto one of the rickety chairs. "We all gonna die."

"We can help," I suggested. "If you want us to."

Hooper studied me, then Victor as he approached, and Zee, flopped in the chair, head back, massaging his temples. "We saw the news report. You're wanted for murder."

"It was self-defense." Hands in pockets, I shrugged. "A chef came at me with a cleaver."

"A chef who tried to poison lots of folks," Zee said, leaning forward to get involved in the conversation. "Adam didn't kill him, I did."

"I would have." I shrugged. "Some people need to die."

"Put it this way," Zee said, apparently coming around to the idea of working with the frogs, perhaps so we could leave as quickly as possible. "We got a drug lord after us, and he's also after you guys. If we go it alone, we might fix it. But together, we got a better chance of getting it done the first time."

Hooper looked around at the rest of his people. They'd all stopped cleaning up the dead bodies to listen.

"You saw... we're pretty good in a fight," Hooper said. "Maybe we don't need outsiders... You don't look like much, and this one fainted." Hooper nodded at Zee.

“Okay so, to be clear, I temporarily checked out, alright? I have a high metabolism. It’s a thing. Look it up. Nothing to do with fainting. I’m fine with leeches. Some of my best friends are suckers. And frogs. No issues with frogs, whatsoever. I have always said frogs are fine.”

“Also, if I may explain something that could swing the argument here,” Victor interrupted. “Adam is a dragon.”

All eyes swiveled to me.

“Oh yeah... I forgot that part.” I smiled sheepishly.

“Trust us, it’s always better to have a dragon on your side,” Zee said.

Hooper studied us for a few seconds longer, then nodded, which, as he didn’t have much of a neck, meant he sort of bobbed his head and shoulders together. “Alright, then... Sounds like we could use each other’s help.”

“Okay, then. Heroes of the City back in action.” Zee stood and strode over. “So, no time to waste, let’s point Adam in the right direction an’ he can barbeque Skrinde. Problem solved. Where does this drug lord hang out? He got a favorite country club we can crash? Golf course Adam can land on an’ deep fry him? If we can avoid nosy witnesses, that’d be great, as we’re kinda on the run right now. Our fees are a lifetime’s supply of mac and cheese, and any cat ornaments, if you have ’em.”

“Your fee is... mac and cheese?” Hooper asked.

“Yup. So where’s this Skrinde guy live?”

Hooper nodded at the TV, which showed—behind the static—a glistening collection of high-rises and miles of white sandy beaches. “Miami.”



Oh dear.

“That makes things a little more difficult,” Victor said grimly.

### CHAPTER 8

Victor explained that he hadn't been to Miami since the eighties, when the city had been known as the cocaine capital of the US. Zee added that those "free and easy" times were long gone. He had friends who lived in Miami today, he explained, who claimed the city still thrived on drugs and sex, but now it happened underground.

I couldn't tell if he meant the drug and sex clubs were all below street level, or if it was done in secret. Either way, Miami sounded risky. It would have been easier if we could lure Skrinde out to the Everglades, but according to Hooper, Skrinde senior had only visited the beach house once, years ago when he'd first bought it, after which he'd decided to buy up all the land around it. Unfortunately for Hooper and his friends and family, Skrinde didn't much like frogs as neighbors.

As we couldn't think of a way to lure the mob boss to us without it being obvious it was a trap, we decided we'd have to go to him.

"Miami, here we come," Zee said from the back seat of the borrowed pickup's cab. "Fancy cars, beach bods, all the drugs... Maybe this won't turn out to be our worst stop yet."

Victor drove, while I rode in the front passenger seat and kept an eye out for trouble.

Hooper's friend had loaned us the truck so we could get to the nearest town and see if a gas station or rest stop had a phone. We did still have to call all this in to Leomaris, before events with my brother and his twisted truths about the Heroes of the City got any worse. Each crisis needed to get in line so we could handle them one at a time.

“Adam, do you think you may be using this latest detour into Miami and our endeavor to save Hooper and his friends as a delaying tactic?” Victor asked casually.

“Delaying what?”

“Dealing with your brother?”

“Uhm, no? We can’t leave Hooper to clean up the mess we made at the beach house.”

“Alright, my dear. As you say.”

He clearly didn’t believe me. And maybe he was right. Maybe I was grasping at anything to keep me from going back to the SOS Hotel. Could we tour the USA forever? No, of course not. I knew that. I just wasn’t in a hurry to put Victor and Zee in danger. Telling Leomaris everything that had happened so far would buy us a few more weeks on the road. I hoped. Either that, or Leomaris would arrest us. But I had faith that the SSD agent knew to ignore baseless gossip... Mostly baseless. I mean, people had died, but it hadn’t been intentional.

Victor pulled the truck into a gas station. The headlamps swept over a few tired buildings and came to rest on some gas pumps. The neon OPEN sign in the window of the diner next door flickered on, though I couldn’t imagine they got much passing trade in the middle of the night.

I opened the cab’s door and hopped out. “I’ll go see if they have a phone.”

“Would you like me to accompany you?”

“No, it’s fine, there’s nobody about. I got this.” I sauntered across the lot and headed into the diner. A bell above the door dinged and a few large ceiling fans barely circulated hot sticky air.

A bored server behind the counter nodded a sleepy hello.

“Oh yeah, uhm... do you have a phone I can borrow?” I asked, heading over. He looked at me as though only weirdos didn’t have mobile phones. “An alligator uhm... ate mine.”

He grunted, reached under the counter, and tossed me a greasy phone. “Gotta buy something, though.”

“Oh, sure uhm...” I read his name badge. “Jake. Can I get a coffee?”

“Whatever, man.” He rolled his eyes, grabbed the pot, poured me a cup, and shoved it across the counter.

I thanked him for the coffee and the phone, and chose one of the empty booths to sit at.

I’d seen Leomaris’s phone number on Victor’s phone so often that I remembered it, and dialed. What time was it in San Francisco? Wait, what time was it here? I glanced around for a clock, and spotted a TV on the wall. The volume was down, but I didn’t need to hear it to see myself, standing outside the SOS Hotel doing an interview with a reporter I’d never seen before and never met.

Wait... How was that me up there?

I ended the call and stared at the TV.

“Hey, that you?” Jake called over.

“I guess? Can you turn the volume up?”

“Sure, man. You famous or something?” he asked, more interested now he might have someone important in the diner. He grabbed a remote and unmuted the TV.

“Well, there’s been some misunderstandings over the past few weeks, but I can assure everyone we have events under control. There’s no need to panic.”

I was panicking. He wasn’t me.

What was going on?

“So these reports of a dragon terrorizing a town in the North West aren’t about you?” the reporter asked.

“No, I’ve been here this whole time.” Not-Adam smiled and shrugged, looking friendly and approachable on my hotel’s front porch.

“What the heck?” I muttered.

“Then the SSD have it all wrong, and you weren’t in Minnesota?” the reporter pressed.

“Oh that?” Not-Adam laughed. “Oh well, uhm... I did go away for a few days, I guess.”

I blinked at the TV. At me. On TV.

“And the dragon seen on social media that turned a hotel to rubble? That wasn’t you?”

“Hey, bro, you that dragon?” Jake called, eyeing me suspiciously.

“What? No. Yeah, I guess. I mean, not him. That’s not...” I stared at the TV, my thoughts racing.

“What?” Not-Adam on the TV chuckled. “Ruin a hotel? Me? Pfft. That’s crazy.”

What was happening here? How could I be sitting in a diner in Florida, but also be at the SOS Hotel? This had to have been recorded recently—yesterday maybe. Someone was pretending to be me. Not just a lookalike, but someone who could change their appearance to look exactly like me...

A shapeshifter.

Someone who could look like a werewolf, or a Gen X No Tel Motel owner who liked plastic plants and killing people.

Jenny, the loup-garou, had not died when she fell—okay, I maybe dropped her—off the cliff.

I had to tell Victor and Zee right now.

Jake shoved a wrinkled, finger-marked piece of paper under my nose. “Hey, can you sign the menu?”

“Huh?” I looked up at his curious face.

“This menu, man. Can you sign it? I’ve never seen a dragon before. You’re pretty small.”

“Small? I’m not a dragon right now.”

“Whatever.” He flapped the menu. “Just a scrawl will do.”

He was blocking my exit from the booth. “Sure. Fine.” I grabbed the pen he offered and scrawled across the menu. The diner’s phone on the tabletop rang.

Jake scooped it up, and the menu. “Awesome.” He headed back behind the counter, raising the phone to his ear.

I had to get out of here. Had to talk to Victor and Zee. If Jenny was pretending to be me, she could do all kinds of damage to the hotel—to my friends, my life.

“Dine for a Dime—what? Oh...” Jake chatted into the phone.

I scooted out of the booth and headed for the door.

“This is like the most exciting thing that’s ever happened to me,” Jake was saying. But my thoughts were so focused on Jenny I only half heard him. “I didn’t call you... the dragon guy... Yeah, I’ll put ’im on. Hey! Dragon man. It’s the SSD for you.”

I hesitated, my back to him. The door was right there.

If the loup-garou was at the SOS Hotel, pretending to be me, that meant she could have met Leomaris, could have spread more lies. What if Leomaris was no longer a friend? No, no, they were clever... But we had also disappeared with no warning... and left a few bodies behind...

This was awful.

I had to speak to Victor. He’d know what to do. “I’ll uh... I’ll call Leomaris back.”

“Wait, what?”

I dashed for the door, and heard Jake say into the phone, “He just ran off.”

Okay, that was bad too. “I’m not running. I just...” Stopping, I whirled on my heel. “You know what, it’s fine. I’ll take the call.”

“Oh.” Jack frowned at the phone, then me. “The agent just hung up.”

I whirled and headed for the door. Again. Talk to Victor.

The loup-garou was in my home, being me. What if they’d hurt Madame Matase? Would they fool Tom Collins? Would Tom Collins even care if I wasn’t me?

Victor... I had to get to Victor... I grabbed the diner’s door handle and looked up just as the roar from a parade of shiny pickups pulled me up short. The line of trucks stopped at the pumps, cutting off my route to Victor and Zee. The people inside these trucks were different to the men who had attacked Hooper. These guys were shorter, for one. Better dressed. Riding in expensive, identical trucks.

The troll mafia.

Ducking my head, I turned on my heel again .

“You want me to call the agent guy back?” Jake asked.

“Uhm, no, thanks.” I dropped back into my booth. “I forgot my coffee, is all.” Keeping my head down, I sipped from the mug.

The diner’s bell dinged as the gang of trolls filed in, rowdy and in good spirits.

Jake didn’t look pleased as he headed over to take their orders.

I counted nine new customers. Some of them had handguns tucked into the back of their pants. Were they looking for us? I could probably slip by them unnoticed, but



Zee was too conspicuous. Victor was pretty distinctive too. The three of us together would be unmistakable.

But if I could slip out the back now, without anyone noticing...

There had to be a back door...

“You alone tonight, Jake?” one of the trolls asked the server.

“Oh, you know, not really. Cal’s in later.”

Jake’s mumble sounded like a lie.

“Sure you are. Kim’s too tight to pay two for a night shift when hardly anyone comes in here.”

Jake laughed along, probably just trying to get through this. Nobody had noticed me. Yet.

I spotted a sign for the restroom, and figured they’d at least have a window back there, something I could squeeze out of. Or I could make my own exit in a wall, if it came to that.

I scooted out of the booth, and with my hands in my pockets and my head down, I headed for the restroom door. Nothing to see here. Just a boring, average guy.

“Oh hey, you guys know we’ve got a celebrity here?!” Jake announced, eager to switch the trolls’ attention off him.

“Is that so?”

I could feel their gazes settle on me. Oh dear.

“Yeah, this here’s the dragon from San Francisco,” Jake announced.

Hands still in my pockets, I turned and attempted to look a bit confused, and not all that interesting. A whole lot of curious faces peered at me from across the diner. “I’m uh... just gonna use the restroom.”

“We’re looking for a dragon, as it happens,” the chatty troll said. “Can’t be that many around.”

“A dragon, a vampire, and a demon,” one of the others added.

“You wouldn’t happen to be traveling with anyone like that?” Chatty asked.

“Oh uh, me? Nope.”

“You see anyone else here? Know any other dragons?” Chatty pushed away from the counter and sauntered toward me. “Mr. Skrinde wants a word... about his dead son.” His smile thinned, making his face serious. “You know anything about that?”

“Oh, that’s sad, but uhm... it’s not me, no... I’m just going to the restroom?—”

The TV piped up again with that interview. This time the beginning part, which I’d missed earlier.

“Everyone’s interested in the most popular man around town right now, and that’s Adam Vex. Here with us today on SFNA’s morning news. Adam... Can I call you Adam?... How do you feel about these accusations of murder ? —”

“Wow,” I chuckled. “That guy sure looks a lot like me. But I’m here and he’s there,

so he can't be me. Anyway. Really gotta pee... so... I'll be right back." I dashed for the back door.

"Stop that dragon!"

I charged through the door, shot down a corridor, and plowed into the restroom. No windows. No way out. My alarmed face looked back at me from the mirrors above the basins.

"Okay, I guess we're doing this the dragon way." I balled my fingers into a fist and hoped the wall was thin.

### CHAPTER 9

Breaking the wall turned out to be less of an issue than the trolls chasing after me. After scrambling over the rubble I'd made, I sprinted across the lot and yanked open the pickup truck's rear cab door. "Uh guys? We have a problem."

"Is it an Adam Vex and the seven dwarves chasing him kinda problem?" Zee said, spotting the problem through the windshield, charging fast toward us.

"Uh, there's nine," I panted from the back seat. "And they're trolls, Zee, not dwarves."

"Fuck, right. Wow, they look angry. Like cute angry yard ornaments."

"With guns," Victor added.

"Uh, guys, actually, that's not our problem."

"It looks rather like a problem," Victor said, eyeing the incoming trolls.

The lead troll pulled a gun and fired at the truck. A neat little hole appeared in the windshield.

"Yikes!" Zee squeaked. "Drive, vampire! Like your fangs depend on it."

Victor gunned the truck's rattling engine and lurched us out onto the road. But the mafia trolls changed direction, heading for their much faster and shinier trucks.

“Can’t you eat them?” Zee asked me. He glanced behind me, through the back window.

“Not near the gas station, unless you enjoy out of control explosions?”

“Okay, so... we lure them away,” he thought aloud. “Back out into the leech-infested neverglades and you can eat ’em there? They look crunchy.”

“I would suggest that eating every problem we encounter is not going to help when we plead our innocence to Agent Leomaris regarding the unfortunate trail of murders we’ve already left behind.”

“Alleged murders,” I added for clarity.

“Some folks were definitely murdered,” Zee also added, for even more clarity.

I eyed the string of trucks in the side mirror. Their high beams latched on and lit us up. “This Skrinde guy really wants our attention. Maybe we should try talking to him?”

Victor’s side-eye suggested he perhaps wasn’t too keen on that idea. “Talk to the drug lord whose son I killed?”

“By accident.”

“I doubt he’ll be concerned with whether it was an accident or not.”

We didn’t have many options. “We talk, or we murder all these guys too, I guess. Because they don’t look like they’re going to stop anytime soon.”

“They started it,” Zee said.

“Did you at least call Leomaris while inside the diner?” Victor asked, skidding the truck off the main road, onto a dirt track that hopefully led somewhere remote so I could get my dragon on without too many witnesses. I still planned to try and talk us out of this, but eating them all was a strong—and let’s face it, likely—Plan B.

“Uh, well, that’s the real problem I mentioned. So um... there’s another Adam.”

The truck hit a rut in the road and rattled us in the cab like peas in a can. Victor wrestled the wheel, but eventually wrangled the truck back under control, bouncing it through and around potholes.

“Apologies. I became momentarily distracted by the terrain. Adam, repeat your statement,” Victor asked.

“Yeah, so, there’s another Adam at home. A me, but also not me.”

“That doesn’t make sense, my dear.”

“I know. ... but I saw him on the TV. He looks like me, talks like me.”

“Cosplay?” Zee suggested. We’d seen some convincing Adams at the Stephanie Hotel’s LARP weekend.

“No, I don’t think so. A real, actual Adam Vex.”

“What the fucking fuck?”

“That’s what I thought... Or you know, sorta.”

“The loup-garou,” Victor said, then looked at me in the rearview mirror. “She’s not dead.”

“Yeah... I figured it was her too.”

“How can she not be dead?” Zee exclaimed. “She fell all the fuckin’ way down that cliff.”

“Shapeshifter.” Victor’s face gathered all the shadows, making his dark eyes shine.

Zee huffed a laugh. “So she just sprouted wings and fuckin’ flew away?”

“Exactly.”

“Wait... She could do that? Shouldn’t you have planned for that, Your Highness?”

“I was aware it was possible, but it did not occur to me that in her final moments she’d have the wherewithal to shift. I assumed she had plummeted to her death.”

“You assumed ? You do know assumed makes an ass outtah you and me, right?”

“We all thought that,” I said, and scowled over my shoulder at Zee. Zee rolled his eyes and flopped back in the seat. Facing Victor again, I could see the frustration on his face. “It’s alright, it’s not your—alligator!”

The truck’s lights highlighted the track ahead, and the biggest alligator I’d ever seen. Which wasn’t saying much as I’d only ever seen one, but this one was real big, and in the middle of the road.

Victor yanked the wheel, veering the truck wildly left. Headlights lit up a swathe of trees we were definitely about to crash into. The truck’s nose dropped, we plowed down a bank, and dove into the swathe of black swamp. The windshield exploded. Water and glass surged in, and swirled around us, quickly rising. My legs were soon underwater, then my waist.

Zee poofed . Gone for a second.

The water surged higher, slurping up my chest.

Victor turned in the driver's seat, reaching for me.

Zee tugged open the door and yanked me out.

“Wait!” I spluttered. Victor... What about Victor? It all happened at once—so much, so fast. Water bubbled and snarled, as though boiling around the truck, sucking it under.

I swam away from the splashing, groaning, glugging noises, and clambered up a bank. “Victor?—”

The truck vanished below the water with a final glug, and so did Zee.

A few seconds later, Zee reappeared next to Victor, who looked like one of those fancy dogs with long hair you see prancing around posh dog shows... that had been thrown into a swamp. He spluttered, and waded over, face peppered with weeds.

Oh dear... Vacations were definitely not our thing.

“I quit,” Zee said, flopping onto the bank. “I hate this place. I’m done. If there’s a fuckin’ bloodsucking leech anywhere on my glorious body, imma cry. And nobody wants to fuckin’ see that.”

A rattle of metal had all three of us peering up the bank toward the road, where the high beams from the fancy trucks highlighted a line of trolls pointing guns down at us.



Chatty troll smirked. “Mr. Skrinde would like a conversation.”

### CHAPTER 10

Zee and Victor looked to me for what to say or do next. I could technically eat the mafia trolls, then we could borrow one of their trucks and ride off into the sunset. But I had argued for trying to talk our way out of this problem, so it was time to give Plan A a fighting chance.

We were marched at gunpoint up the bank and onto the track we'd abruptly left just a few minutes ago. The stubborn alligator that had caused our detour had slunk back into the murky waters somewhere.

"Get in," one of the trolls grunted.

The truck we climbed into had its interior lit up like the inside of a spaceship. All glowing ambient lighting and plush, creaky leather.

"I am loving these kinky red-room vibes," Zee said, scooting all the way over so Victor and I could fit too. "You guys hire it out by the hour?"

Nobody replied.

The other trolls returned to their trucks, doors slamming, and after performing some tight U-turns that almost saw us plunging down the bank again, we headed back out of the swamp.

Maybe talking was all they'd wanted all along?

“May I ask where you are taking us?” Victor enquired.

The troll in the front passenger seat grinned over his shoulder. “You’re gonna love it.”

That non-answer sounded ominous. Especially as he kept his shotgun resting over his knees.

They hadn’t tied us up, though. Perhaps they thought the guns were enough of a deterrent. I didn’t much like the idea of a shotgun blast to the face, but if the situation soured, we’d be able to escape.

Victor and Zee’s quick glances confirmed they’d had the same thoughts. We’d play along... for now.

The trucks trundled through the night, leaving the Everglades behind for a sprawl of houses that soon turned into blocks of modern apartment buildings. The sky turned red, sun rising behind towering palm trees. Victor eyed the approaching dawn with concern, but just as it seemed we’d be driving into full daylight, the convoy of black trucks pulled up outside a shiny, newly constructed apartment building, and we were escorted under the entrance canopy and into a sparse, marble-floored foyer.

The smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

Chatty, the troll who seemed to be the one in charge, waved a card over an elevator panel. The elevator pinged, its door opening.

“Step inside.” He gestured for us to go first.

We each peered into the elevator car.

“Is it safe?” Zee asked.

“It’s an elevator.”

“So uhm... it’s not going to randomly drop ten floors? It’s just, sometimes that happens... to us,” I said, remembering the elevator at Reynard Technologies that had tried to kill me. Also, our own hotel elevator had tried to kill me. The one at the Stephanie Hotel hadn’t been all bad, though, just frosty. So we hadn’t had much luck with elevators.

“The building is new, one of Mr. Skrinde’s newest developments. All signed off on, and safe. You can take the stairs if you like, but it’s twenty floors up, and some of us have shorter legs.”

Zee stepped inside, Victor followed, and I entered last.

“Why would we go to all the trouble of bringing you here just to kill you in an elevator?” Chatty stepped inside too and hit the penthouse button. The doors rumbled closed and the car swooshed into stomach-flipping motion.

Victor side-eyed me. I side-eyed Zee. Zee scowled down at the back of the troll’s head, like maybe he wanted to shove him face first into a wall. At twice his size, there were countless ways Zee could overpower him.

“You guys are ripe,” Chatty said. “Some advice. Use the shower before meeting Mr. Skrinde. He likes everything to be... clean. There’s clothes waiting for you.”

Were the clothes poisoned? Was poisoned clothes a thing? What was their angle? I was about to ask, when the elevator doors opened, revealing a gleaming lobby. A big leafy green potted plant softened all the shiny white tiles. Victor avoided the windows as we were escorted to the closed door ahead. The troll waved his card over the lock

again, and shoved open the apartment door.

It was as though Toby's house had been transported off the beach and planted on top of this building. There was even an infinity pool, with a scary drop toward miles of sandy beach, bustling roads, and people going about their early morning routine.

"Get cleaned up, and meet us in the foyer at eight tonight." Chatty left the apartment keycard on the side.

"Uh... Have we been kidnapped?" I asked. It felt like it, but also didn't.

The troll smirked, then sauntered across the room to peer up at me.

"I mean, can we leave?" I asked, not sure if he was about to pull a knife or?—

He extended his hand. "Why would you want to? The name's Tucker."

I took his hand and gave it a polite shake. "Uh hi."

"You get one shot at meeting the boss. Don't fuck it up." And with that bit of advice delivered, he left.

"I like his vibe," Zee said as the door closed. "For a troll, he's badass."

"Zee, he tried to shoot us."

"Meh. Who hasn't?"

"Unless either of you would like to shower immediately, I really must insist I go first." Victor scratched at his head. "There's something wriggling in my hair and I'd prefer not to learn what it is."

“Ick.” Zee recoiled. “Go. If it’s a leech, don’t fuckin’ tell me.”

Victor hurried to the bathroom while Zee and I headed toward the three beds, each one with an outfit laid out on it. Zee’s had a brilliant dark-purple suit that almost matched his hair color, mine was a silky dark-gray suit that felt like the most expensive thing I’d ever stroked, and Victor’s suit had black silk accents. He hadn’t worn a suit like that since losing his billions.

I glanced at Zee and saw his raised eyebrow. “If they think I can be bought by fine clothes and silk sheets, they are absolutely fucking right.” He eyed the balcony, and after opening the sliding door, he stepped outside. “This is some weird-ass kidnapping.”

The sound of traffic and the ocean sailed in. I joined him on the balcony, shielded my eyes against the glare off the endless ocean, and peered down at the long strip of beach and impressive high-rises flanking it.

Zee leaned on the rail, taking in the view, and grinned. Sunlight highlighted all the shades of purple in his ruffled hair... and the bits of swamp gunk. “Miami, baby.” He sighed hard. “Maybe I won’t quit just yet.”

The view was stunning, just like the apartment. But why hadn’t we been left for dead in the swamp? Why give us nice clothes and have us stay in a place like this? It didn’t add up.

“You think maybe it’s a bit suspicious?” I asked.

Zee leaned a hip against the glass balustrade, folded his arms, and smiled, sharp teeth and purple eyes shining in the sunlight. I chose to ignore the crusted bit of algae hanging off his left horn. “Kitten, trust me, we are one hundred percent being lubed up to be fucked over. Doesn’t mean we can’t enjoy the warm-up. We just gotta watch

our backs.”

His gaze roamed over me, warming up . He beckoned me over, and I looped my arms around his waist... pressed close. He peered down. “Your hair is a mess and you smell like something a gremlin threw up.”

“Thank you,” I snorted.

He sniffed my hair and grimaced. “Ew.”

I snapped the crusted bit of green stuff off his horn, then showed it to him. He screwed up his nose, and laughed when I tossed the green stuff over the rail.

“So our plan,” Zee said. “Is to go along with all this. Meet Mr. Drug Lord, tell him to fuck off, and if he doesn’t, then you eat his ass—in the unfun way.”

“Unfun for him. But yeah, that’s about it. I don’t think they realize what we can do.”

“Half the time, neither do I.” He bowed his head and bumped our noses.

I lost myself for a little while in his eyes, enjoying the moment and the feel of his arms around me. Zee and Victor were my everything, and the people who tried to hurt us had no idea the extremes I’d go to to keep them safe. Except my brother, he knew, which was why we were as far away from him as possible.

“We need to find a phone.” I started to peel myself out of Zee’s embrace, but he caught my hand and reeled me back in. I didn’t put up much of a fight, as there was no place I’d rather be than wrapped in Zee’s arms.

“Yeah, but we have some time. Got a whole day to kill. In Miami.” He glanced at the outfits. Zee in purple, me in gray, and Victor in black. His eyebrows jumped. “This is

a vacation, right? And we're long overdue for some fun."

Stretching onto my toes, I smacked a kiss on his lips. His arms tightened, hugging me closer, and his tongue swept in, needing more, needing me. We might have indulged some more if some kind of wriggling bug thing hadn't fallen out of his hair. Knowing he wasn't the biggest fan of bugs, I discreetly flicked it off his shoulder. "Maybe a shower first?"

"Fuck, yes. I got crust in places crust is not welcome." He sauntered back inside to examine his suit. "Hey, Kitten. My friend in Miami. He has a place on the Strip, big with celebs. You're gonna love it."

"Is it like Razorsedge?"

"Pfft, that dump? Kitten, this is Miami ."

It was definitely like Razorsedge. But if we could walk out of this place without getting stopped by Skrinde's people, then I was game for some sightseeing. If being on the road had taught me anything, it was to enjoy the good stuff while you could, because you never knew what pitfall was around the next bend.



### CHAPTER 11

Usually, if the three of us were in the vicinity of a shower together, we'd end up in the shower together. But picking off bits of swamp gunk was not sexy. I showered after Victor, then Zee hopped in, and while Zee's singing voice echoed from the bathroom, Victor and I dressed in our new clothes.

This suit was in a whole different class to the cheap one I'd worn on the SOS Hotel opening day. Its quality even caught Victor's eye, and drew him over to admire the stitching... and me in it.

"You look delightful, my dear." He grabbed the front of my jacket and with a jolt, aligned it just so.

I beamed. "You look pretty good yourself, mister." Daddy may have been the better word. When he'd first arrived at the SOS Hotel, and stepped out of the black car under an umbrella to keep the sun off, he'd looked like this. The pinnacle of refinement. Not a thread out of place and no speck of fluff dared touch him. He was a man of control, right down to the way his shoe laces were perfectly tied and each crease had its place. But now I knew that control was a thin veneer, and the person he was inside was a lot more complicated, and vulnerable, but also mine to love.

"Hm. I see your thoughts in your eyes, my dear." His thumb skimmed my cheek, skirting close to my mouth.

"I was just thinking about how we've changed—well, not changed, exactly..."

“How far we’ve come?” he corrected with a quirk of his lips.

“Yeah...”

The bathroom door opened, and through a waft of steam, Zee strode out, tiny towel clinging to his hips, water droplets gleaming on his chest, and his purple hair almost black from being wet. He flopped onto his massive bed, bouncing a little as he landed. Somehow, the small towel covered up that generous part of him the tattoo arrow pointed to... but only just.

“You look fine as fuck in that suit, Fancy Fangs.” Zee flashed a hungry, lingering smile. “Both of you do.”

I caught my reflection in the wall-length mirror. We did look good. The expensive fabric clung to me in all the right places, and a thrill ran through me at the sight of Victor watching me closely. His cool gaze reminded me of his Reynard Technologies days, when he’d been powerful, feared, and utterly untouchable.

Except by me and Zee.

We’d touched him. A lot.

I kinda wanted to touch him now too.

I caught Victor’s reflection looking me over, then Zee’s.

We had a little time to kill.

“I believe,” Victor said, unwinding his tie with deliberate slowness. “We have several hours to fill at our leisure.”

His voice held that special kind of rumble, the rumble that made my dragon heart skip. The silvery swirl in his eyes intensified, and I knew that look. Hunger.

Zee propped himself up on his elbows. “I do not need to be an incubus to pick up the fuck-me vibes you’ve got going on.” The tip of his tail stroked the bedsheet.

Victor’s lips curled into a smile, confirming Zee’s senses.

“I ain’t lettin’ either of you out of those suits without getting my hands all over them first.”

I loosened my own tie, feeling heat crawl up my neck and also sink lower. “Wait... Don’t you want us out of the suits?”

“Oh, I do, Kitten.” Zee’s eyes flashed glittery purple as he shifted onto his knees on the bed. “But so very slowly.”

Victor stepped behind me, his cool breath ghosting over the back of my neck. His hands settled on my hips, tugging me against him. “Zodiac has excellent ideas, on occasion.”

“On occasion?” Zee snorted, but his eyes were fixed on Victor’s hands as they slid around to undo my fly. “Wait, was that a fuckin’ compliment from Vampire Daddy? It’s official. Fancy Fangs has it bad for a demon.”

“I make no secret of it. And not just any demon, the best demon.”

Zee gasped and placed a hand on his chest. “He said it.”

Chuckling at their banter, I let my head fall back against Victor’s shoulder as his fingers worked, achingly slow. “You’re both overdressed,” I managed to say, my

voice turning rough with need.

“Patience, my dear.” Victor’s lips brushed my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

Zee crawled to the edge of the bed, reaching for me, tugging me by my loosened tie until I was standing between his spread knees with Victor behind me. Our gazes locked, revealing a need in his eyes. He had something on his mind, a question he hadn’t yet asked.

“What is it?”

“I want you first,” he said, looking up at me with those hypnotic eyes. “Then I want to watch Vic take you apart.”

“And then?” I asked, my imagination already running wild. When Zee had worked at Razorsedge, he’d rarely gotten what he wanted. But those days were gone. Here, he could have it all.

“Then me an’ Vic are gonna team up and take turns until we break the fucking bed under you.” Zee’s grin was wicked as he began unbuttoning my shirt, exposing my skin inch by tantalizing inch. He leaned forward to press his hot mouth against my nipple, wrenching a gasp from me.

The two of them working me in tandem? I gulped, and nodded. “Yeah, yes... I want that.” I glanced at Victor, checking he’d be game too.

In response, Victor’s hands slid under my untucked shirt, cool against my burning skin. The contrast of temperatures—Victor’s cool touch and Zee’s hot mouth—had me trembling between them.

“Look at you, my dear,” Victor murmured, his voice a deep rumble against my back.

“So responsive. So perfect.”

I wasn't the only one fired up. Zee's wings fizzed into sight, a sure sign he was getting into the rhythm, and their pretty expanses shimmered purple, bathing us in an otherworldly glow. Two sharp pinpricks scraped my neck as Victor pressed open-mouthed kisses over my shoulder—not biting, just teasing.

“Bed,” I managed to gasp as Zee's talented mouth skimmed lower. “Now.”

Zee pulled back, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “You heard him, Vic. Our dragon's got needs.”

Victor stepped away, long enough to shed his jacket in an elegant motion. My gaze tracked the mesmerizing sight of him unbuttoning his shirt cuffs, then his shirt buttons, one at a time. He shrugged it off, revealing his pale chest. “Then let us not keep him waiting.”

I'd never been able to resist Victor, but when the pair of them had me in their sights, I was helpless. I fumbled with my own buttons and zipper, clumsy in my haste, and stumbled out of my trousers.

Victor, of course, was a picture of grace. He undressed with the same deliberate poise he approached everything with, folding each garment before setting it aside.

“For fuck's sake, Vic,” Zee groaned. “Could you move any slower?”

“Some pleasures...” Victor replied, stepping out of his trousers with maddening slowness. “Are worth savoring.”

Turning back from watching Victor undress, I laid eyes on the glorious sight of Zee, towel gone, naked from his head to the tip of his tail, kneeling on the bed, expectant

and glorious.

I couldn't wait any longer. I tackled Zee to the bed, capturing his surprised laugh with my mouth. He tasted uniquely Zee —wild and intoxicating.

“Greedy kitten,” he murmured against my lips, but his hands were everywhere, pulling me closer.

The bed dipped as Victor joined us, his cool hand sliding up my spine. “Such impatience,” he scolded lightly, but there was fondness in his voice too.

“You like it,” I shot back, breaking away from Zee to look over my shoulder.

The smile Victor gave me verged on predatory, especially now his fangs had come out to play. “Like is too small a word. I adore everything about you, my dear.”

Zee's hot mouth tracked down my chest, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. I faced him again, dizzy from their attention. When he wrapped his hand around my cock, I sucked in a tight, hissing breath.

“Sensitive,” he purred, stroking me with agonizing slowness. “I can make you come just like this. One delicious stroke at a time until you're begging me to finish you. Would you like that, Kitten?”

“Like is too small a word,” I mumbled, repeating Victor's earlier line, trying to keep up with them.

“Your next move, demon?” Victor enquired, while he caressed my shoulders, my back, sliding lower with each pass.

Zee flipped me suddenly, pinning me to the mattress. His eyes glowed with unholy

light, wings casting purple shadows across the room. His hard dick pressed against my thigh, hot and insistent. “Gonna make you feel so fuckin’ good, Kitten.”

I panted hard, staring back, demanding more.

Victor stretched out beside us, one elegant hand trailing lazily down my chest, stopping just shy of where I ached for him. “Exquisite.”

I wasn’t exquisite, but in their eyes I felt like I could be. As though I were the most precious thing on this earth.

Zee rocked against my thigh, doing more of that teasing, driving me toward desperation.

The click of a cap opening was obscenely loud in the heated quiet, joined only by our panting breaths and the rustling of sheets. Victor must have found the lube, because Zee’s attention was all on me.

Zee bent to kiss me again, slower this time, deep and thorough, his tongue sliding against mine in a rhythm that matched the roll of his hips. When he pulled back, his smile was softer than before. “Mine,” he murmured, and the tenderness in that one word nearly broke me.

Victor leaned in from the other side, his lips finding the sensitive spot just below my ear while his slick fingers worked between my legs, diving lower, preparing me with maddening precision. “Ours,” he corrected, and the possessiveness in that single word sent a shudder through me.

“Yours,” I agreed, arching into Victor’s touch as he slipped a finger inside me. “Mercy, always yours.”

“Let me,” Zee said, positioning himself lower, between my thighs, his cock nudging where Victor’s fingers had been. “Need to be in you, Kitten.” There was no teasing now, just needs, demands.

The slow push of him entering me had me clutching at the sheets. I was dimly aware of Victor watching us, his silver eyes burning, one hand wrapped around his own impressive length.

“Fuck, you feel good,” Zee groaned, building a slow rhythm. “So tight for me.”

Victor shifted up the bed until he was kneeling by my head, his erection inches from my face. “May I?” he asked, always so polite.

In answer, I took him into my mouth, reveling in his sharp intake of breath.

“That’s it, Kitten.” Zee’s eyes sparkled, alive with lust. “Take him deep.”

Time seemed to stretch and compress as we found our rhythm. The drag of Zee inside me, the weight of Victor on my tongue, the electric current of pleasure building at the base of my spine—the both of them overwhelmed me in the best possible way.

During the blur of pleasure, Victor withdrew from my mouth, replacing his cock with his fingers. I sucked them eagerly, my gaze locked on his, knowing—hoping for what came next. Sure enough, he shifted down the bed, effortlessly replacing Zee between my knees.

Zee shifted up to my side, the mirror image of where Victor had been moments before. How had they gotten so good at this dance, or was it just instinct?

“Allow me, my dear,” Victor said, voice tight with restraint as he pushed inside me. Where Zee had been a smoldering fire, Victor was controlled, cool precision, each



deep thrust calculated to drive me wild.

Zee moved to kneel by my head, his dick glistening. “Do you want me, Kitten?”

I nodded, beyond trivial words. Zee fed himself into my mouth.

I was caught between them, filled from both ends, pleasure spiraling tighter and tighter as Zee began to match Victor’s rhythm.

Victor’s fangs sank into my thigh, the sharp pain giving way to a rush of pleasure so intense I cried out around Zee’s cock. Zee’s tail captured my wrist, guiding it to my own throbbing erection.

Power spiraled between us, like lightning in my veins, raw and wild and untamed. With the guidance of Zee’s tail, I stroked myself faster as Victor thrust deep inside me, his rhythm growing erratic. Zee’s cock slipped from my mouth as he threw his head back, wings flaring brighter.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come,” Zee groaned, fisting his dick just inches from my face. “Wanna see you come first, though.”

“Finish for us,” Victor commanded, his voice rough with need as he gripped my hips hard enough to bruise. “Now, Adam.”

And I did.

The pleasure crested like a tidal wave, and I cried out Victor’s name, then Zee’s. Almost immediately, Zee followed, as he cursed in words that had to be demon. Victor lasted only moments longer, driving deep one final time with a strangled groan that might have been my real name—Mydros.

The few lights on in the room flickered and died, although it didn't matter since it was daylight outside. A few seconds later, they blinked back on. At least there weren't any wards here we might have accidentally boosted.

I shuddered as we came down together. That had been intense. Wonderful. Amazing. Zee burrowed his face into the crook of my neck, folding himself close, and Victor lay on my right, breathing hard. The three of us became a tangle of limbs and cooling sweat.

Zee lazily traced patterns on my chest, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "That was... fuck," he mumbled.

"Eloquent as always," Victor said dryly, but his hand was gentle as it stroked my thigh.

I laughed, feeling lighter than I had in days. Maybe weeks. "I think we broke the electrics."

"Worth it," Zee declared, pressing a kiss to my collarbone.

"Most definitely," Victor said in agreement, his arm tightening around my waist.

Outside, the Miami traffic still hummed, horns honked, people went about their day. Inside, it was just us, wrapped in each other, safe in our bubble.

\* \* \*

My mission was to find a phone. As Victor was allergic to bright sunlight, Zee and I left him back at the apartment and headed out of the building to the South Beach Strip. We'd walked a block when Zee swiped us two pairs of sunglasses from a rack outside a tourist store, as though the shades might hide him, but no single pair of

sunglasses could hide his fabulousness or natural magnetism.

Other demons and Lost Ones were out too, enjoying the sun, dining at outdoor restaurants. Zee quickly relaxed into his typical demon swagger. No wings, though. The sidewalk was too busy and his wings were too distinctive to flash in public, since we were trying to stay hidden.

My gray suit looked fine, but I may as well have been invisible next to the seven-foot-tall, sparkling purple demon who glittered in the sunlight as though he were on fire. He soaked up every lingering gaze like I soaked up the sun.

No one would have guessed we didn't have a dime to our names, or that we were on the run and were wanted for murder. We blended right in with the shiny, smartly dressed, fancy people, and it wasn't long before everything that had happened just hours ago in the Everglades felt like last night's weird dream. Or maybe walking the Miami Strip was the dream.

I could also have just been exhausted and hallucinating.

Zee had a destination in mind, so I let him lead, and ambled along beside him, trying on some smiles whenever Zee acknowledged an appreciative shout or whistle. I'd forgotten what it was like to be next to him in public whenever he got his swagger on.

We'd walked for half an hour, enjoying the scenery, when I spotted someone I'd seen before, back by the coffee and ice-cream stand. He was definitely tailing us. Probably one of Skrinde's guys. They'd be fools not to keep an eye on us after going to so much trouble to kidnap us.

Zee took a left off the main street, then a right, heading into the less bustling streets several rows back from the beachfront. I figured we were heading for the bar, with its bustling tropical outdoor space filled with scantily clad people.

The banners proclaimed it The Peach Pit , with an emoji peach as their logo. It probably had some kind of double meaning that was lost on me.

Zee stopped at the front, whipped off his shades, gave the doorman a thousand-dollar smile, and the rope was lifted.

“Hey, that guy lurking on the corner... Make sure he doesn’t get in.” Zee had spotted our tail too. “They’ll have others on us,” he said to me. “But that guy’s outfit sucks balls.”

“Zodiac!” A high-pitched squeal rang across the outside dining area. I didn’t have time to see who had yelled his name before a demon poofed in front of us in a hail of pink glitter. Shorter than Zee, the demon was all white, with baby-pink wings and a tufty, hot-pink tail.

“Kat!” Zee threw his arms around him.

“Oh my purple stars, look at you. It’s been too long, baby. You lookin’ fine. Love your horn ring. Did you get out from under that sewer rat, Sebastien? How’s things on the West Coast? And who is this little dime?”

Pink eyes fixed on me, and it took me a second to realize Kat’s breathless gushing had stopped and he was waiting for my name.

“Hi. I’m Adam.”

“Adam is my ke-ach ,” Zee said, using a word I was unfamiliar with. I’d ask him later. “Fuckin’ touch him and die,” he added with a careless laugh. “Adam, this is Kat. We hunted suckers in our previous lives. He looks as soft as a marshmallow but will cut a bitch.”

Kat giggled. “I fuckin’ will! Come in, drinks are on me.” Kat’s pale arm looped around my shoulders and I was hauled deeper into the dining area. “We need to catch up. Adam, tell me everything . Like how you met, how you managed to convince Lycian to go domestic?—”

“Oh, I don’t—I didn’t?—”

“You’re his ke-ach , aren’t you. Look at you. I could eat you right up.” Kat smiled, revealing rows of sharp demon teeth. Kat’s tail flicked, and while the studded tail bling mixed in with the fluff looked decorative, I suspected one whip from that tail could take a man’s head off.

I glanced behind, trying to convey help with my eyes. Zee leaned in and whispered, “Ke-ach is life mate. You got this.”

I was Zee’s... life mate?

My heart melted and a weird little lump of emotion clogged my throat. Kat’s slap on the back while he thrust a pink drink into my hand cleared it. “So tell me, why are you two in Miami?”

“Got on the wrong side of a gang turf war, made a drug lord angry, probably gonna do some killing later.” Zee swiped a drink from a nearby table. “You know, the fuckin’ usual.”

He said it so casually, even I wondered if he was joking.

Kat laughed. “Still the party animal. Did you end Sebastien?”

Zee’s grin turned predatory. “Seb got his card punched.”

“Then we shall celebrate!” Kat twirled and led us through the dining area, toward a cozy corner surrounded by lush plants that gave us some screening from the public.

It was likely Kat had served with Seb in the demon armies. Zee and Kat clearly had history, maybe even a bond forged in battle. If Zee trusted him, so did I.

We chatted some more, mostly about how Seb had messed up in San Francisco and about how the Razorsedge family were doing. Kat had started The Peach Pit with a human partner right after the veil had sealed five years ago, but instead of taking advantage of Kat like most humans, they’d worked together. A true partnership. Kat’s business partner—maybe life partner too—had died two years ago. Killed. Wrong place, wrong time. Even if Kat hadn’t been intimately involved with his human partner, it was clear talking about the man’s death remained painful.

The story of how Kat had come to be here wasn’t all that different to how Zee and I had hooked up.

“So, you know anything about this guy, Skrinde?” Zee asked, after a few more rounds of drinks and free table snacks, which he had unashamedly devoured.

Kat’s demeanor chilled. “Skrinde, fuck. You weren’t joking about the drug lord, huh?” His flighty smile fluttered and died. “Yeah, the Lost Ones here know Skrinde. Asshole troll, thinks he’s king of the Strip.” Kat sobered and leaned forward in his chair. “If you’re going up against Skrinde, you’re going to need an army.”

“I got one,” Zee said, smiling at me. “Where’s his base of operations?” he asked Kat, slipping into soldiering speak.

“Multimillion-dollar mansion on Pointe Drive. Makes Mar-a-Lago look like a fuckin’ summer house. Security up the tits. Rumor is he’s got a fuckin’ Minigun at the entrance gate. You can’t get in there, babe.”

Zee smirked, and in his purple suit, shades tucked into his jacket pocket, he looked every inch the badass I knew him to be. “You’d be surprised what we can do. Hey, you got a phone we can borrow?”

“Sure, use mine.” He took a fake-diamond-encrusted phone from his pocket and handed it to Zee, then looked up as someone called his name. “I’ll be right back. Eat, drink, enjoy yourselves.”

Zee handed the phone to me. The diamonds looked real up close.

“You’d better fill Agent Fae in before shit gets more real, Kitten.”

“Right.” Where did I even start to explain everything that had happened since my brother showed up.

I dialed Leomaris’s number and listened to it ring. Oh hey, so there’s this thing , I could say. I have a brother. Surprise! And he wants to eat everyone. In fact, you’ve probably already met him.

An automated voice picked up and asked me to leave a message after the tone. All thoughts vacated the building. “Erm, hey... so, we’re in Miami and uhm...” Zee frowned, suggesting I get to the point. “We’re uh... I guess we’re not really on vacation, exactly.”

Zee rolled his eyes. “Tell them your name.”

“Oh yeah, it’s Adam. And Zee is here, you probably just heard him. Victor is back at the apartment a mafia boss put us up in, I guess.” Zee blinked. I felt like maybe I was doing this wrong? Or I’d started at the wrong part of the conversation. “You know what, let me start again. So, there was a troll, who we thought we saved but?—”

“Oh, sweet baby Gareth, you are so bad at this. Gimme the phone.”

“Uhm, so Zee wants?—”

Zee stole the phone out my hand. “Hey, Agent Fae, in case you didn’t know, we’re kinda fucked. Adam has a big bad brother and—” He lowered the phone, staring at it. “It cut me off.” Huffing, he shook his head. “You waffled on for too long.”

“Redial. But you explain it all this time.”

“Okay, fine.” He flicked his hair, redialed, and crossed his legs, jangling a foot as he waited for the answering service to pick up again. “Yeah, so, hey again,” he sang, and examined his nails. “It’s Zee. Obviously. So, Adam has a psycho brother who wants to eat the world.” He sang that in a jovial tone too. “You should run far, far away. If you’re screaming, you’re probably not dying. But if you’re dead, I guess you won’t get this message?—”

“Zee!” I stole the phone back and muffled the microphone with a hand. “You can’t say that.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“It sounds bad.”

“It is fuckin’ bad.”

“No, I mean it sounds like we’re threatening Leomaris.”

“But it’s true.”

I raised the phone to try and better explain, but the line had died again. This was



terrible. We couldn't keep leaving messed-up messages. Leomaris would think we were crazy... well, more crazy than usual. I set the phone down on the table and stared at it. "Victor would know what to say."

"Call Madame Matase at the hotel."

"Right, yeah." Scooping up the phone, I dialed the SOS Hotel's front desk number. Even if we couldn't explain everything to Leomaris right now, we could at least warn Tom Collins and the others that the Adam with them was a fake. The line rang once, and Tom Collins's straightforward recorded voice told me that he was the head of customer relations and to call back later. The recorded voice also said if I didn't call back then I obviously didn't want to stay at the SOS Hotel anyway, so good riddance. Then the line died. "Did you know Tom's in charge of customer relations?"

"What?" Zee snorted. "If anyone should be in charge of relationships with customers, it's me." Zee frowned again. "Why didn't you leave a message?"

"There wasn't that option. Maybe they're all busy?"

"When has the hotel ever been that busy?"

That was true. Madame Matase never left the front desk unattended. My heart sank, and kept right on sinking through the floor, through the bedrock, deeper and deeper. "What if something terrible has happened? What if it's burned down? What if my brother has already eaten everyone? Zee! What do we do?!" The SOS Hotel was our home, our sanctuary. My heart hammered, breaths coming fast.

Zee scooted over to squish into my chair with me. His arm crushed me close. "That's not what's happened. They're fine. Everyone is fine."

"How do you know that?" I wheezed.

“I do... I just do.” He patted my head, which turned out to be oddly comforting. “I feel it, like I know you’re right here and you’re okay.” He tipped my chin up. “Trust the Fucking God.”

I snorted. “That’s the name you decided on?”

A commotion, then the sounds of a glass shattering drew our gazes. Across the dining area, three beefy trolls were muscling their way over, with Kat looking distraught, trying to block them. He poofed next to us, raining pink sparks. “I tried to hold them up.”

“It’s alright,” I told him, rising to my feet.

Zee stood, tail swishing. “We can take ’em.”

“Not here.” I really did not want to bring any trouble down on Kat. He’d worked too hard to make this place safe and I knew what that felt like. “It’s time we went back to Victor anyway.”

“You guys be careful, huh?” Kat said, his eyes sheepish and sad. He wanted to help, to do more.

Zee bristled when one of the trolls tried to grab for his arm. “Hey, hands off the merchandise! I’m fuckin’ expensive.”

Kat caught my wrist and pulled me aside. “Look out for Lycian, he’s one of the last good ones.”

“I know. I will.” I squeezed Kat’s hand, then followed the surprisingly big trolls’ directions to leave the club. A black pickup waited outside, and in we climbed.

One look at Zee's serious expression, and it was clear fun time was over.

### CHAPTER 12

“I take it things did not go well,” Victor said, seeing our faces as he was ushered into the back of the pickup truck with us.

“It was goin’ just fine until these dicks picked us up again.” Zee tutted at our escorts, the driver and his literal shotgun partner. “Although I gotta say, Sexy McSpicy Fangs, seeing your ass in those fine threads again almost makes up for it.”

“Thank you. I think.” Victor settled into the seat to my right while Zee admired him from my left. As usual, I was in the middle. Victor tugged at his cuffs. “It does feel nice being back in quality clothing once more. Especially as an alligator ate much of my previous suit.”

We’d been gone most of the day, so by the time we’d made it back to the apartment building to collect Victor, the sun was well on its way to setting behind the high-rises. Miami was even more glamorous and sparkly at night.

“Gorgeous,” Zee said, probably gazing out the window.

I tore my gaze from the sprawl of colored lights and found him watching me. A soft smile tugged at his lips, and my glance flicked to Victor who I also found to be looking at me. And smiling. Oh, okay. Zee meant me?

You’d think by now I’d be used to praise, but the dual weight of their admiring gazes had me squirming. When you come from a world in which your family will stop at nothing to kill you, it’s tough learning to bask in positive energy. Maybe one day I’d

just accept that I deserved good things too... like their love.

It wasn't long before we passed through a set of tall metal gates and stopped outside a guard booth. Kat hadn't been wrong about the enormous gun. There it was, slung from the ceiling inside the booth. I'd never seen a gun that big. The big hunk of metal was probably as long as Zee was tall.

What the heck was it designed to stop?

"Someone is compensating for summin', just sayin'..." Zee remarked, with a side-eye that meant we all knew what that thing was the drug lord might be compensating for.

"Compensating for what?" Victor asked, leaning back in the truck's seat.

"Huh?" Zee asked.

The guard peered inside the truck, saw the two trolls up front, and waved us through a second gate. Cameras recorded our passing from high up on the fence posts.

"What is the mini-cannon compensating for?" Victor asked again.

Zee frowned. "Are you joking right now?"

"No. I do not believe so."

"How do you not know this?" Zee gestured toward his own crotch. "Compensating for a lack of firepower elsewhere, yah know?"

"Oh." Victor lifted his chin. "I see."

Shotgun Troll twisted in the passenger seat and glared at Zee. "You sayin' the boss

has a small dick?”

Zee raised his hands. “Woah, does he know you talk about him like that?”

“You said it, demon.”

“I was just admiring the big gun. Looks like you got dicks on the brain. Some might say, therefore, you are a dickhead.”

Oh dear, was this some clever ploy to antagonize Shotgun Troll, or was Zee oblivious to how he’d offended his masculine energy?

“You guys are small, so you probably need to compensate, is all I was sayin’.”

“You sayin’ we all got small dicks?”

Zee spluttered a laugh. “What? Moi? Would I say something like that? I’m sure you’re perfectly proportioned.”

I caught Victor’s less than subtle eyeroll.

It seemed Zee was just antagonizing Shotgun Troll because he could, or because he was bored.

“And I suppose your dick is huge?” the troll snarled.

Zee preened. “Now that you mention it...”

“Is a penis-measuring contest truly necessary?” Of course that came from Victor.

Shotgun Troll grumbled and faced ahead again. Zee had to pinch his lips together,

because... you know... penis.

During their conversation, the driver had threaded the big truck down a smooth, winding driveway that had taken us through gardens, tennis courts, and golf courses. Lots of open space and palm trees. And privacy. Where some folks might possibly get disappeared and buried under the ninth hole.

Clearly, selling drugs paid well. What were the chances that Tom Collins might know this guy?

The truck pulled around a splashing fountain, and a well-dressed doorman jogged down the steps and opened our door.

“Do you think he gets the back door too?” Zee smirked, eyeing the heavysset doorman as though picturing him naked.

“I suspect he’s more likely to be the ‘slam your balls in a door’ kind of person,” Victor said, deadpan.

We both stared at Victor as we climbed the steps behind our escorts.

Victor side-eyed us, noticing our stares. “Apologies, was that too much?”

“No, I fuckin’ like it when you get salty... weirdly.” Zee shivered all over. “Jealous, Fancy Fangs?”

“That is a possibility.”

“Babe, you know you’re all mine, an’ I ain’t the kind to step out, right?” Zee slung an arm around Victor’s shoulders and tugged him close.

“We’re Zee’s ke-ach ,” I said.

Victor clearly knew the word and stopped dead in his tracks, holding up our retinue of guards in the grand, glass-domed entrance foyer.

Zee eye-rolled, and stepping away from Victor said, “Don’t make it weird.”

“Is that true?” Victor asked.

“Yes. Fuck. Obviously. Or I wouldn’t have said it.”

Did this ke-ach status have a more significant meaning than just mate, and I was missing it? “It’s good, right?”

Victor’s wide eyes skipped to me. “We three are married—in demon terms.”

Married. “Oh!” I beamed.

“Ugh.” Zee rolled his eyes. “I said don’t make it weird, and you go an’ make it weird.”

“Get a move on. Mr. Skrinde does not like to be kept waiting,” Shotgun Troll said, urging us on with the end of the gun.

Zee stuck up a hand. “Hold up.” He stopped our group, made sure all eyes were on him, and said, “I love you.” He pointed at me. Then at Victor. “And I love you.” Pointing at the troll, he said, “Do not love you.” With a flick of his wrist, he planted both hands on his hips. “There-fucking-fore—lemme be clear, for the emotionally stunted vampires—I am yours and you are mine, and that’s what ke-ach means.”

My heart swelled and my grin turned goofy. “You’re the best, Zee.”



Victor swallowed hard, and maybe he had a little something in his eye, making him dab at his lashes. “I uh... Words are failing me.”

“That’s why there is a demon word for it... ke-ach .”

Shotgun Troll sighed. “Are you guys done with the Hallmark moment?”

Zee fluttered his fingers. “You may proceed.” Then tilted his head and with a grin, whispered to Victor. “You don’t need to say anything, Vic.” Zee touched his own chest, over his heart. “I feel it.”

Victor nodded, maybe a little afraid his voice would fail him. It had to be tough for a vampire with a heart to go through life unloved, then to find it with two misfits like us. But he was beginning to believe it, and believe he was worthy.

We walked through the fancy house—although house was the wrong word. Palace was more appropriate. Sprawling walkways led to different sections, with much of the house being wide open to the elements. Maybe it didn’t rain all that much here?

Finally we headed to a lit-up pool area, where a skinny troll floated in an inflated unicorn ring.

“Mr. Skrinde, the San Francisco so-called heroes have arrived.”

I wasn’t sure what I was expecting a drug-lord troll to look like, but this guy wasn’t it.

“Right, hold up...” He shoved his hands into the water on either side of the unicorn inflatable and began to paddle his way back toward the edge. Only, he wasn’t all that heavy, and a breeze must have caught the unicorn, twisting him around to face the wrong way. He paddled furiously to correct his course, and ended up paddling in a

circle.

I wasn't sure where to look. He was clearly struggling.

Secondhand embarrassment crawled over me.

“Is anyone goin’ to help him out?” Zee asked.

Shotgun Troll shot Zee a dead-eyed warning glare, and his finger twitched on the shotgun's trigger.

Okay then. We were all just supposed to wait while the drug-lord troll paddled in circles in his blow-up unicorn in his giant pool in his oversized Miami mansion?

“It's okay! I got this.” He paddled around, lined himself back up with us, and splashed over, using unsettling hip-jerking motions to gain momentum in the water.

Was this the right Mr. Skrinde? The same Mr. Skrinde who had businesses like Kat's running scared? The same Mr. Skrinde who had the frog shifters fighting for their land and their lives?

Victor scratched at his cheek, but remained stoic-faced. He'd had a lot of practice.

Zee's eyes were wide, and blinking. “This is fuckin’ painful... I can just hop in there and drag him—” Shotgun Troll pointed his shotgun at Zee, and Zee raised his hands. “Yup, okay, not gonna do that.”

“Here we are! Hoo-wee!” Mr. Skrinde tipped himself out of the unicorn and padded up the steps, out of the pool. His tight black swim shorts left little to the imagination. Turns out Zee was wrong about trolls being proportionate... Or Mr. Skrinde had a cucumber stashed down there.

“That’s some banana hammock,” Zee said, lips pinching back a laugh.

Victor snorted, and covered the sound with a well-timed polite cough.

I couldn’t look away. Why couldn’t I look away?

Mr. Skrinde tucked his thumbs down those tight trunks, and flicked them from his waist, adjusting what did not need to be adjusted.

“I mean, I’ve seen some nut-huggers, but those are eye-watering,” Zee commented.

“Perhaps a size too small?” Victor suggested, straight-faced.

“You think he sings soprano?”

“I dare say, the Minigun at the gate is perhaps rather accurate.”

What was happening? Were Zee and Victor riffing?

Cocking a hip, Zee folded his arms. “I’d pay good money to see you in a peen pouch like that, Spicy Fangs.”

“No payment required, demon. Just so long as you admire the package from your knees.”

Zee choked out a dirty, startled chuckle. “Fuck me.”

“Gladly,” Victor purred under his breath.

Mercy. This was... peculiar, even for me. I’d been doing just fine until I imagined Victor rising from that pool wearing just a tiny pair of shorts. Oh my stars... I tugged

at my shirt collar, then flicked a few buttons open. Miami nights were hot, huh?

Finally, one of the house staff hurried out and offered a fluffy black gown to Skrinde. He shrugged it on and belted it tight. “Now then, let’s take a seat over here and talk business, shall we? Sit, sit... You want some blow?”

Zee’s eyes lit up, pupils blowing like a cat high on catnip.

“No, we’re good...” I took a seat opposite Skrinde at the fancy glass-top table. Victor and Zee sat either side of me, taking their usual positions.

“It’s good to finally meet you three— Heroes of the City .” He swept a hand through the air. “Real life celebrities. And a dragon, too.” Skrinde grinned, and wiggled in his seat like an excitable puppy.

“Uhm... yes.” Did he not know we’d killed his son? Maybe the news hadn’t reached him yet. It was probably best not to mention it.

“Do you like the apartment? One of my favorites, right on the oceanfront. Stunning sunrises, although I figure the vampire doesn’t much like all that glass, eh?”

“You are correct,” Victor admitted. “But your hospitality is otherwise appreciated, if somewhat unexpected.”

“What, you think all trolls are tiny assholes?” Skrinde asked, then laughed at our trio of blank faces. Even Zee didn’t seem to know how to handle the oddness of all this. “For real, though. I’m a nice guy. Would a bad guy own an inflatable unicorn?”

Zee opened his mouth to add some of his varied and extensive experience with bad guys, then stalled and closed it again.

“I suspect what Zodiac was about to ask, is why have you brought us here?” Victor said, steering us toward a topic more useful than blow-up unicorns.

“Ah yes, a man who likes to get straight to the point. I appreciate conciseness. It doesn’t hurt in business to go straight for the jugular... and you’d know all about that!” Skrinde laughed.

“Indeed.”

I was sure Victor had heard that line more than once, but he took it with grace.

“Let’s see. Why are you here? Alright, well. I believe we can help each other. You’re on the run and I need some untraceable assistance with a problem of the amphibian nature. You help me clear out some undesirables, and I won’t tell your brother where you are.”

It was disconcerting listening to a skinny, wet, barely dressed troll attempt to blackmail us. His home, the estate, the people he had around him... it all suggested he was a powerful person. But that world meant nothing to us. His wealth, his muscle, the theatrics, all designed to impress, were insignificant.

Skrinde had made a big mistake when he’d looked at us and assumed weakness. Although I did wonder how he knew I had a brother when only a few folks knew that, and nearly all of those few folks were sitting next to me.

“Is that it?” Zee asked. “That’s the play?”

“Well, yes. See, not so bad.” Skrinde spread his hands. “We can work together, and I’ll let you go when I’ve gotten those frogs off my land.”

“Oh, sure. We all agree frogs are bad.” Zee leaned back in the chair, getting

comfortable. “And we’re supposed to trust you’ll just keep our location a secret because you’re nice like that?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Why would you?” Victor asked.

A tiny fracture passed through Skrinde’s smile. I’d had enough experience with fake smiles and fake nice people to know when we were being played.

“You do know there was an accident at Toby Skrinde’s villa?” I asked.

Skrinde senior shrugged. “I have five other brats leeching off my bank account. Toby was expendable.”

If his own son was expendable, then so were we. He needed some firepower to get the frogs out. If we did as he asked, he’d probably try and kill us afterward, or hand us over to my brother.

In my experience, nice people rarely had to tell others they were nice people. And that was coming from a nice person who sometimes wasn’t nice at all.

I smiled back at Skrinde. “I think we’ll pass, but thank you for everything you’ve done. The apartment was lovely, and the clothes are great.” I got to my feet. Zee and Victor followed my cue. “Now, which way is out?”

“Oh dear,” Skrinde sighed.

That was my line.

“You seem to think this is a negotiation.” Skrinde beckoned his people closer—the

guys with the guns. “It’s too late for that.”

I’d lived with bullies my whole life. So had Zee. Victor had been at the bottom of the vampire hierarchy, and treated like trash by his own family. We knew what it felt like, being helpless, trapped in circumstances not of your making.

Mr. Skrinde really had underestimated us, and overestimated his own power.

Victor moved . The gun vanished from Shotgun Troll’s hands.

Zee poofed behind the trolls with guns and loomed, suddenly huge, with his wings open and tail lashing. “Boo!”

They whirled, guns up. But he poofed away, gone in a blink.

During Zee’s distraction, Victor dashed to Skrinde—stolen shotgun in hand—and wedged the gun’s barrel against the back of the troll’s head. Victor didn’t have to be dramatic, he could have broken Skrinde’s neck before anyone had seen him move, but this was a warning, made all the more clear when Zee poofed into the pool, grabbed the blow-up unicorn, and poised his tail to stab it.

The unicorn made painful, wet, rubber-on-rubber noises as Zee squelched up the pool steps, dripping wet but looking badass for it. “Nobody fuckin’ move or I blow the unicorn.”

I snicked my claws free and smiled at Skrinde, frozen in his chair. “Let’s negotiate.”

### CHAPTER 13

“Let’s all be clear.” I got to my feet, giving myself some space from Skrinde. “That land you’re desperate to bully your way onto doesn’t belong to you. Hooper said no to your deal. Move on, leave them alone, or you won’t like where this ends.”

Skrinde flushed scarlet with rage. “You can’t touch me! I own this city and that swamp!” Now his true colors were coming out.

I spread my arms, gesturing at my two very capable partners. “Does it look as though we care what you think you own?”

Skrinde huffed, clearly furious. But he didn’t have much choice if he wanted to keep his head in one piece and on his shoulders.

“We’ve been nice up until now. You sent your son after us, then sent him again with guns. His death was an accident, by the way, that could have been avoided if you’d talked first. We’re actually nice people.” Admittedly, it didn’t look like it right now, with Victor holding a shotgun to the back of Skrinde’s head and Zee about to murder the unicorn. But Skrinde had driven us to this point.

“Nice? You’re all wanted for murder in multiple states!”

“Alleged,” I corrected. “Leave Hooper and his land alone or this will get much worse for you.”

“You think you’re going to just walk out of here?” A grin stretched across Skrinde’s



face. “My house is a fortress. You’re surrounded.”

We were outnumbered, that was true. On the face of it, three against a whole bunch of people with guns looked like an easy win for Skrinde. But we’d faced much worse. “Again, I gotta warn you. Right now we’re being nice, but we can also be not nice, and everything you’ve got here, all this fancy land, the pool, that big ol’ shiny house. Poof ... all gone. Just saying. We wouldn’t want any more misunderstandings.” My claws helped emphasise my point. That and the growl beneath my words.

“Then you really are just like he said...” Skrinde’s voice trembled. “A vicious, rampaging monster.”

My heart felt the words, even as I guarded my expression against them. I wasn’t like my brother. I wasn’t... But maybe in this instance, it wouldn’t hurt to be the bad guy? “You talked to him... My brother?”

“Not yet. But not everyone thinks you’re heroes. Plenty of folks don’t much like the idea of a dragon, a vampire, an’ a demon working together. He put the word out you’re on the run, that you’re dangerous.” Skrinde’s gaze settled on Zee. “You killed that innocent detective. That was cold, man.”

Zee’s tail flicked. He tried to keep the hurt off his face, like I did, but it was there. Zee blamed himself for the accident a few weeks ago, when Somers, a human detective he’d accidentally allured into being obsessed with him, had taken his own life right in front of Zee, even though it hadn’t been Zee’s fault. Somehow Skrinde knew to dig at that wound. My brother must have twisted the truth and leaked it online to make us look bad, probably with Jenny the loup-garou’s help.

A high-pitched whistle sounded, then gradually the pitch deepened—the unmistakable sound of air escaping from a tiny hole.

The unicorn deflated in Zee's grip.

"Oops," Zee snarled.

"An' you, vampire." Skrinde turned his attention to Victor, although he couldn't see him standing behind him. "We all saw the news footage. You led the raid on an innocent religious ceremony, desecrated a vampire shrine, and lots of folks think you killed the vampire queen to bring down the monarchy and pitch yourself as the leader of the vampire council."

Victor's lashes fluttered, the only sign Skrinde's words got to him, picking at that wound too. Victor hadn't planned any of that, but it could easily be twisted to look that way. My brother again.

"And you..." Skrinde glared at me and spluttered a rich laugh, thick with derision. "Everyone knows dragons are the worst. This sweet innocent human act is bullshit. You're a killing machine. Heroes of the City? Fuck no, you got everyone fooled. You're the villains of this story."

"Yeah, I've about heard enough from this dickface." Zee flung the floppy unicorn down and stomped to my side. "Fuck you and fuck your fake news. We're out of here. Kitten?"

These weren't Skrinde's words. They belonged to my brother, distributed by social media to damage us. Syros knew exactly how to turn the world against us.

"Kitten?"

"Yeah, uhm... Yeah, let's go."

"Walk," Victor said, using his voice to add extra oomph to the command. Skrinde

jolted into motion, his movements wooden.

Skrinde's people followed our every step, back through the palatial house, then out the front to the fountain. Zee hopped into one of the pickups and started the engine. "Climb in," he told me.

I slashed the tires on the other trucks, then hopped in beside Zee, catching his comforting smile and matching it with my own. We were going to be okay.

Victor whispered something into Skrinde's ear, and whatever he said, it froze the drug lord in place. He slipped Skrinde's phone from his pocket, then handed the shotgun to me through the truck's open window. "I'll deal with the guard at the gate."

Victor vanished, racing to clear our exit route.

Skrinde glared. His armed guards glanced at each other, unsure what to do without orders. Did they shoot us and risk a war?

"This ends here," I told them all. "If you come after us, you'll die. Don't make the same mistake countless dead have made before you."

Zee spun the truck away from the house, kicking up arcs of gravel from the tires, and by the time we'd made it to the guardhouse by the open gateway, the guard was gone.

Victor hopped into the seat behind mine.

Had we just bluffed our way into scaring a drug lord, saved Hooper and his friends, and gotten a phone to call Leomaris on? "We are so badass," I laughed, surprised any of that had worked.

"Fuckin' right we are!" Zee laughed too. "He was quivering in those tiny budgie

smugglers.”

“Adam.” Victor handed me the phone. “You must connect with Agent Leomaris. Mr. Skrinde’s words made it crystal clear your brother’s tactics are taking root against us. We are out of time and must come out of hiding to defend ourselves.”

“Oh right, yeah.” I took the phone—no locking passcode because Skrinde was an overconfident fool—and dialed Leomaris again, then gazed out the window as the ringtone chirped in my ear.

Zee side-eyed me, then Victor. “You don’t think anyone else believes all that stuff about us being the bad guys, do you?”

“No...” I said. “Probably not...” I shifted in the seat. “Maybe?”

“Humans especially, but Lost Ones also, like nothing more than to tear heroes down,” Victor grumbled from the back.

“Yeah. Internet mobs and witchhunts are not fun. I should probably check my socials—oh wait, I can’t, because someone threw my phone in a pool.”

“An impulsive mistake, I admit.”

Skrinde’s phone still chirped in my ear, calling for Leomaris to pick up. Maybe they didn’t answer numbers they didn’t recognize? Or maybe my brother had already gotten to them?

“Leomaris wouldn’t believe it though, right?” Zee asked. “They know we’re the good guys.”

“They did put their career on the line for us.” What if Leomaris’s bosses had

withdrawn our hero status? What if Leomaris had been reprimanded because we'd left San Francisco and a trail of bodies behind?

"Agent Leomaris speaking. Who is this?"

I'd never been so relieved to hear Leomaris's slow, melodic drawl. But also, I was apprehensive. They were on our side, right? "Uh, hey, it's uhm... it's Adam... Adam Vex?"

"Adam? Where are you?"

"Oh uh..." The scenery outside the truck had gone from built-up city to a few scattered houses with massive yards. "Somewhere outside Miami."

"Miami? You really could not have run farther away without leaving the country."

"Run? What?" I half laughed. "We're not on the run, we just... needed some space."

"If you're calling to tell me there's an imposter in your hotel, I am well aware. With no means of contacting you, I've been monitoring the situation in the hope you would, at some point, call in."

"Yeah, so, about that uhm... how did you know he's not me?"

"From the simple fact Victor and Zodiac are not here. The imposter claimed they were still touring the US, but knowing you as I do, I found that version of events highly unlikely."

At least I didn't have to convince them the fake Adam was fake. "I guess I need to start at the beginning. So... I uh, have a brother."

“We’ve met.” Leomaris did not sound pleased. “Some warning would have been appropriate, don’t you think? Regardless, you must return to San Francisco immediately. Your absence is making your situation indefensible.”

We did have to go back. The moment was coming. But I just needed a day or two. Just a little more time... “Is everyone okay? Is the hotel okay?”

“Tom Collins appears to have everything running smoothly. Where are you? I’ll send a team to escort you home.”

I swallowed, and checked Zee’s concerned face, then Victor’s. I trusted Leomaris, I did. But also... someone—probably the loup-garou Gen Z Jenny—was at the hotel, impersonating me. What if this wasn’t Leomaris at all? What if I was speaking with Jenny? She could have overpowered Leomaris and taken their phone, especially if she’d looked like me at the time.

“Uhm, so this is going to sound weird, but how do I know this is you?” I asked.

“Who else would it be?”

“It’s just, that imposter? She’s real good at lying. And she probably really, really doesn’t like me much.”

“And why is that?”

This wasn’t a conversation to be had over the phone. And right now, it wasn’t the most important thing that was happening. Only Leomaris could send an SSD team to collect us, right? Although Jenny could pretend to be them and order a team... Oh dear, I had to trust them. I didn’t have a choice if I wanted to clear this whole mess up. We needed Leomaris.

“Alright, I guess. We’ll be at The Peach Pit in Miami South Beach in uhm...”

“Tomorrow at six a.m., Miami time,” Victor said, giving us the rest of the night to plan ahead.

“I will send a team in. Adam... be careful.”

“We will. And uh... you too.” I hung up and frowned at the phone. None of this felt right, but it had to happen. I’d been running for a very, very long time. From before buying the hotel with Zee, before I’d changed my name and my life to become Adam Vex.

It was time for Mydros to stop running, time for me to finally face the consequences of my actions... and my brother.

### CHAPTER 14

We pulled the drug lord's shiny pickup truck to a stop in the small lot at the back of Hooper's shack and hopped out. It was hard to believe that a day ago, we'd crawled out of the swamp with only the clothes on our back—and leeches. Now we had a new truck, and looked as though we'd just stepped off a red carpet.

Inside the shack, it was the same island of calm we'd visited prior to Skrinde's people arriving to bully Hooper off his land. Another baseball game played on the static-obscured TV screen, and Hooper's friends and family sat around make-do tables, chatting and playing board games. Now we knew they were all frog shifters, it changed the dynamic some, with Zee standing very, very still, his tail wrapped around his right ankle to keep it from causing chaos.

"We brought you a truck to replace the one we wrecked—sorry about that." I handed Hooper the truck key. "I don't think Skrinde will bother you anymore."

"Then I guess he's going to want his merchandise back, eh?" Hooper said.

"Merchandise?" I asked.

"Yeah, come out back... I'll show you."

We headed outside again, and ambled down a winding trail toward another shack, this one larger and unlit, standing on stilts above the water. Hooper opened the double barn doors and flicked on a light, illuminating rows of wooden crates, six deep by four wide and three high. There was a whole lot of whatever was in those crates.



“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing good,” Victor said, probably already knowing the answer.

Zee’s eyes lit up in... awe? “It’s Tom Collins’s dream warehouse.”

“Alcohol?” I asked.

Hooper lifted the lid on the nearest crate, revealing small wrapped packages of white powder.

“Drugs,” Hooper said.

Zee whistled. “That’s a fuckton of fairy dust.”

“Maybe Skrinde will forget it’s here,” I suggested. Victor and Zee both blinked at me. “No?”

“That haul is worth more than his Miami palace, Kitten,” Zee said.

“Oh. That’s why he wants this land. To store his drugs away from the city...” Which meant Skrinde wasn’t about to walk away, not when he was about to lose a huge chunk of his business. “We could take it back to him? Call it quits.”

“You wanna deliver a truckload of Class A drugs to a drug lord in the center of Miami?” Zee asked.

“Adding drug trafficking to our multiple counts of murder seems rather excessive.”

“Alleged murder,” I corrected. So what did we do with all the drugs? “We could dump it?”

“In the swamp?” Zee squeaked. “Do you wanna get high-as-fuck alligators? Because that’s how you get high-as-fuck alligators.”

“Is that a bad thing?”

“Clearly, you have not seen Cocaine Bear .”

“There are bears here too?” Why was the Everglades not gated off like Jurassic Park?

“Cocaine bears or alligators are the least of our concerns,” Victor said. “This much cocaine is a public health threat. We cannot let Skrinde retrieve it. In fact, if it were removed , its absence would ruin Skrinde’s business, freeing South Beach from his grasp.”

Okay, so all this cocaine could be a good thing? It gave us leverage to bring down Skrinde’s entire empire. We could use this against Skrinde.

“Zodiac, please refrain from sampling the drugs,” Victor grumbled.

I looked behind us and found Zee had his finger in his mouth, an open crate beside him with one bag removed. Victor hadn’t even needed to turn around to know what Zee was up to.

“Pfft... I’m obviously just checkin’ it’s not flour.”

“Why would flour be hidden in unmarked crates in an isolated building in the Everglades?”

Zee shrugged. “Epic pancakes?” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, I can report, it is indeed cocaine. And very fine it is too. Tom Collins would be impressed. I can’t vouch for all the crates, but I could sample a few others at random?—”

“Unnecessary.”

“Ugh. You are no fun.” Zee huffed and folded his arms. “It’s not as though cocaine is illegal. Or bad for you.”

“It is, in fact, both,” Victor corrected.

“To humans, maybe. You see any humans here?”

He had a point. There were definitely no humans here.

“How are we going to make sure this doesn’t harm humans?” Hooper asked.

I had an idea... one that could take the drugs off the market, ruin Skrinde, and see to it that Hooper was finally left alone to enjoy his swampy amphibian paradise.

“Adam?” Victor asked, catching whatever expression my face had just performed.

I smiled. “Hooper, have you ever been to The Peach Pit?”

\* \* \*

After parking the trucks a block from the oceanfront, our troupe of unlikely misfits headed to The Peach Pit. The doorman waved us through, then tried to stop Hooper and his crew as they didn’t really shimmer and shine or jiggle seductively in their casual clothes, but at least they had tried to smarten up for a last-minute night on the town by donning some clean overalls.

Hopefully, we wouldn’t need their additional tongue-muscle, but it couldn’t hurt to have some giant frogs along should my plan get a bit heated.

“Back so soon!” Kat air-kissed Zee’s cheeks. “And you brought so many friends! Fabulous!”

“Yeah, so...” Zee checked me for the final okay, and at my nod, scooped an arm around Kat’s shoulders and led him toward the outdoor bar.

“Check out the inside, see what we’re dealing with,” I told Victor. He dutifully glided off through the crowd, heading out of sight into the club.

I caught up with Zee at the bar, and heard him say, “We’ve got a way to bring down Skrinde for good. You in?”

“You’re going to free the Strip?” Kat glanced at me as I took the stool next to him, then back to Zee. “You guys don’t mess around, huh? You’re in town for a day and you got plans to liberate us all?”

“We saw an opportunity,” I said.

“But we need your help,” Zee added.

“Oh, do tell. I am always up for a good fight. It’s been far too dull around here.” Kat waved over a barman. I ordered a whiskey, and Zee a cocktail, which the barman crafted with flair.

With our drinks served, Kat looked around. “Where did the vampire go? We serve a great Bloody Bitch here.”

“He’s taking a look around,” I explained.

Kat’s demeanor cooled. He thought a moment, pink nails tapping his glass. “You can trust me, you know,” he said. “This place is safe. After... well... I worked hard to

make it that way.”

“I know... I didn’t mean to offend you. Safe places for Lost Ones are rare. I know exactly what it takes to keep this place open for everyone.”

“Yes, of course, your hotel...” Kat tapped his glass again. “Then you know it’s a labor of love.”

“You have my word. We won’t put this place in harm’s way.”

Kat didn’t know me from... well... Adam. But when he looked over at Zee, and Zee nodded, Kat relaxed again. He didn’t trust me, but he did trust Zee. “You never did steer us wrong, Lycian.”

“You don’t even need to do anything,” Zee explained. “Just sit back and let our plan play out. You can even say you didn’t know anything about it if anyone asks. Just look the other way.”

Kat nodded. “Alright, you have my attention. What’s the plan?”

### CHAPTER 15

Using Skrinde's phone, Victor dialed the drug lord's emergency contact, connecting with his gardener who apparently had no idea why she was her boss's emergency contact but said she could get a message to him. Victor's message was simple. "If you prefer your multimillion-dollar haul of drugs not to be dumped into the Everglades, we require your presence at The Peach Pit at six a.m."

Victor hung up and placed the phone on the bar. "The hook is baited."

"You think he'll suspect it's a trap?" I asked.

Zee draped himself against the bar to Victor's left. "Nah, not in the middle of South Beach. Besides, we're wanted criminals who definitely do not have a direct line to an SSD agent. Who we're gonna call for backup." He waved over the barman and ordered another cocktail. Drinks were on the house, thanks to Kat. "We're gettin' good at this hero schtick."

We really were. We'd saved a pack of biker werewolves, a hotel full of LARPers, and hopefully now a whole city of Lost Ones under a drug lord's thumb. "It's almost as though we know what we're doing."

"I wouldn't go that far." Victor smiled.

"Well, we got a few hours to kill. I wanna get wasted, then get a hand job so I can power-up. You know... just in case we need some extra ooh la la ?"

“I’m not convinced we’ll require multiple orgasms for this plan to succeed.”

Zee snorted. “Who doesn’t need multiple orgasms?”

“The Stephanie Hotel’s dead chef?” I quipped.

“Heart attack, Kitten. Not my fault.”

It had definitely been his fault. We chatted some more while the drinks kept flowing, feeling good in the warm Miami night, surrounded by Lost Ones and humans who were out to have a good time. This might be our last chance to relax for a while. Tomorrow, the SSD would arrive to take us back to San Francisco, back to where my brother waited. Zee and Victor didn’t let on that they were nervous about tomorrow, and what would come next, but I saw it whenever a silence stretched a little too long or concern chipped at their smiles.

As Zee headed to the bar to refill our drinks, Victor leaned over, catching my eye. “Zodiac’s earlier suggestion may have some merit. The plan could use a little extra... ooh la la , as he mentioned.”

“What do you have in mind?”

Victor’s side-eye coasted toward the restrooms, then back to me, making my heart skip. I was not going to say no to any kind of offer that saw me and Victor getting up close and personal.

“Just a quick one?” I grinned, and took his hand.

It was quick and frantic and greedy fun that saw us back at the table in under fifteen minutes, just as Zee got back from the bar. He instantly knew we’d been up to some sexual shenanigans, and grinned. No comment required. We chatted some more, the

music and drinks—but mostly the company—providing the perfect atmosphere.

A little after one a.m., Kat poofed to our table in a cloud of pink glitter. “Are you all set for the showdown?”

“As set as we’re ever going to be,” Zee said from his lounged position in the oversized seat, with me tucked next to him.

Even Victor appeared relaxed, with his sleeves rolled up and his hair bundled into a messy bun.

“Fabulous, then can you entertain us, Lycian? It’s been so long since I’ve heard your gorgeous voice.”

Zee merely smiled, almost shyly. Why didn’t he jump at the chance to strut his stuff in front of a more-than-willing crowd?

“Zodiac?” Victor enquired, as surprised as me.

He caught Victor’s gaze, and his lashes fluttered when he looked down at the table and our half-finished drinks. His arm, draped over my shoulder, tightened some.

I knew what this was. He wanted to be with me and Victor, wanted to drag out the seconds into hours. He really was worried about tomorrow.

I sat forward, and looked him in the eyes when he raised his gaze. “It’s alright. You should go have some fun. We’ll be right here.”

Victor gave a slight nod, agreeing with me, and offered up a soft smile too. “I must insist. One of your breathtaking performances will be the icing on the cake of this fine evening.”



“They even have a stage.” It wasn’t a big stage, and it had gotten a bit lost behind the jungle-like foliage. But once Zee was on it, and the lights were on him, it would shine.

Zee glanced over, as though he hadn’t clocked the stage the second he’d walked in. “It would be a waste not to perform something,” he said, as though he hadn’t already decided to get up there and drive this unsuspecting crowd wild.

“Exactly,” I agreed.

“Oh fine, because you guys asked.”

“Excellent!” Kat squealed.

Zee was on his feet and leaving the table with Kat when he glanced over his shoulder, looking back at us. I gave him a wave, and he smiled back, that soft, quiet, gentle smile. My heart cinched and an unexpected lump tried to climb my throat. A cough cleared it, but not before Victor noticed.

“Are you well, my dear?”

I didn’t know any words powerful enough to explain how I never wanted this night to end, how I’d drag time to a standstill if I could. I was a dragon—one of the last, one of the strongest, most powerful beings to exist this side of the veil—but I couldn’t slow time.

“I just uh... I’m just goin’ to get some air.”

“Adam?”

“I’m okay...” I got to my feet and left the table. If he came with me, I’d turn into a

sobbing wreck. He'd hold me, tell me everything was going to be alright, but it wouldn't change anything. Victor could stop an angry mob with a single word, but he couldn't stop tomorrow either.

After fighting my way blindly through the crowd, I found a back door, and stumbled out of the main club just as the opening bars of "Feeling Good" began to play. One of Zee's favorites, and he always performed it to perfection.

The short corridor led to an outside fire escape someone had wedged open. I stumbled outside and leaned against the wall. The music played. I could hear Zee inside, giving it his all.

If my brother snuffed out his light, so help me, I'd tear the stars from the night sky and use them to shred his scales.

"Hey buddy, you okay?"

"Huh?" I smiled at the server taking a break to vape. "Yeah, you know..." I shrugged.

"Yeah," he said, somehow knowing .

A black pickup truck rumbled by the end of the back alley. It was only there a few moments, illuminated under a streetlight, then gone again.

There had to be plenty of black pickups in Miami.

It didn't mean anything.

"Hey, you got the time?"

"Sure." He checked his phone. "One thirty."

Six a.m. was our meet time. The time Agent Leomaris had agreed to send in the SSD agents. I headed back inside, where Zee had switched it up to sing “Roxanne” by The Police. He had the perfect voice, adding some throaty growl to go with the song’s gritty theme.

I got turned around in the maze of back corridors, taking a left somewhere instead of a right, and ended up heading into a quieter part of the club. About to give up and turn around again, I caught sight of Kat’s name painted on a door in neon pink. Definitely not the men’s room, but an easy mistake to make if I was asked.

I tried the door, found it unlocked, eased it open, and ducked inside.

A burbling fish tank full of lively, brightly colored fish lit the office behind a desk. I almost regretted trespassing until I noticed the framed photo on the shelf by the tank. Kat and Skrinde shaking hands in front of some development land, both full of big smiles.

I picked up the picture.

The scene could have been innocent. It didn’t have to mean Kat was friends with Skrinde. They were both Lost Ones in business in Miami. It was probably just a small world, right?

But if they weren’t friends, why display it?

My insides fluttered.

Placing the photo back, I turned to the desk and opened a few drawers, not sure what I was looking for. Something, anything that would stop my instincts from setting off warning flares.

Zee trusted Kat. They were friends, war buddies, brothers in arms.

But being trapped on this side of the veil changed people—changed everything. Not always for the better, like it had me, Victor, and Zee.

Kat said he'd had a human partner, someone he'd cared about. If I could find something on him, then maybe it wouldn't all have been lies... I rummaged some more, shifting papers aside, the seconds ticking down. A folded photo had been shoved to the back of the top drawer. I opened it.

The image showed The Peach Pit's owners, according to the handwritten scrawl. Skrinde, Kat, and their third business partner, a human guy with a kind smile. You wouldn't shove this crumpled picture in the drawer and display the other if you hated Skrinde as Kat had claimed.

My gut sank. Kat was not what he seemed.

A hail of pink sparks spritzed over me.

“You shouldn't be back here.”

A blow to the back of my head tipped me forward, moments before the world went black.

## Page 16

*Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 5:39 am*

### CHAPTER 16

I came around on the office floor, minutes or hours later. Music thumped through the club walls, but Zee wasn't singing.

I had to get back to them.

Climbing to my feet sparked a throbbing headache, and a quick probe with my fingers found a bruise that would heal soon. Kat had wanted me out of the way...

I stuffed The Peach Pit owners photo in my pocket and dashed out the door, down the corridor, found the right path, and dove back into the bustling parts of the club. Loud music pounded my headache even harder. Nothing had changed, but the neon-pink surroundings had a different, more sinister vibe now.

The stage was empty again.

I stopped a passing server—the same guy I'd seen outside. "Hey, where did the singing demon go?"

"Oh, hey there. No idea. You wanna drink?"

"Uh, no, I'm good. When did he finish up?"

"Huh?"

"The demon, Zee, when did he leave the stage?"

“I don’t know, like... ten minutes go? Are you okay, man? Do you need to sit down?”

“I’m fine...” I left him, shoved through the crowd, and found our table, now empty. Our half-empty glasses were still there... but no Victor or Zee. They wouldn’t leave. They’d be looking for me.

I had to find them. Fast.

If Kat was working with Skrinde, then Kat could have tipped him off. Skrinde probably already knew we’d planned to spring a trap.

I scanned the crowd and spotted some of Hooper’s people enjoying their drinks and waiting for six a.m. to roll around. But there were trolls here too. And while not all trolls were Skrinde’s people, they could be.

“Adam?”

I whirled.

Zee was back on stage, but this time not to sing. He was looking for me.

I waved, caught his attention, and in an instant, he poofed to my side, startling others nearby. “Where did you go? Where’s Vic? If this is a game of hide-and-seek, you gotta warn me. I’m into games, but I need a bit of warnin’ first?—”

I shoved the picture into Zee’s hand. He unfolded it and frowned. “What’s this?”

“They were partners, all three of them, Zee. Kat doesn’t hate Skrinde. I think they’re in business together, and maybe...” Zee looked up, already knowing where I was going with this. “Maybe they got rid of the human?”

His tail whipped. “For real?”

“I might be wrong, but also... he kinda hit me over the head, so yeah... for real.”

“He hit you?!” Purple sparks sizzled down Zee’s horns. “Now I’m fuckin’ mad.”

“We have to find Victor. I think Skrinde might already be?—”

The music cut off and the club’s lights dimmed. Skrinde stood on the stage, bathed in spotlights. His white suit glowed, but it wasn’t just any white suit. It was covered in little cartoon unicorns. Skrinde really liked unicorns.

“Alright, settle down...” Skrinde said into the mic, making it screech. “No need to panic. This is just a public service announcement.” The mic screeched again, and Skrinde adjusted it, looking my way. “Adam Vex, did you really think I was so dumb I’d fall for your stupid trap?”

A spotlight flooded over me, highlighting me in the crowd. “Uhm... yeah?”

“Ha!” Skrinde beamed. “Alright boys, let’s show them who’s the boss of this town!” Skrinde’s not-so-subtle gang members pulled guns, grabbing Hooper’s people. “Surprise! Look around. You really are surrounded this time, and oh no, where’s your vampire? The one who can voice-fuck people? Huh, not here.”

“Fuck this tiny asshole.” Zee poofed onto the stage, but a cloud of pink got there before him. The two ex-warrior demons faced off, wings flared, tails whipping. Kat was smaller, but he had the element of surprise and shock over Zee. They hadn’t traded blows... not yet.

“Kat told you about the plan?” I called over to Skrinde.

“Yeah, and?” he replied into the mic, his voice filling every corner of the room.

“So you would have fallen for it, if Kat hadn’t betrayed us?”

“What?” Skrinde snorted. “No. It’s obviously a trap. You think I got to be top troll in this town by trusting people?”

“Traitor,” Zee snarled, ignoring Skrinde and instead focusing on Kat.

Kat’s wings drooped. “I’m looking out for me . Like we all had to.”

“Did you kill him? Your human partner?” Zee asked, waving the wrinkled photo in front of Kat’s face.

Kat lifted his chin, defiant. “He was just some stupid human.”

Zee lunged, grabbed Kat by the neck too fast for him to react, and slammed him into the club’s back wall. “I thought I’d taken out the trash with Sebastien. Seems like I missed some.”

“Lycian... wait,” Kat squeaked. His tail whipped up behind Zee, but Zee’s tail smacked it back. “We’re soldiers, brothers, bonds formed in battle!”

“The name’s Zee, an’ no traitor is a brother of mine.”

He was going to kill him. Zee had been pushed to breaking point. He was done messing around with people trying to hurt us, or take advantage of others. But if he killed Kat in front of all these people, there was no coming back from that. He was angry, I got that, but right now he wasn’t thinking clearly.

“Zee...” I pushed through the crowd toward the stage. “Easy.”



He leaned in, teeth bared. “You’re right, Kitten, it would be easy. After the battles we’ve been through, this is how you repay me? I should pull your wings off, Kat.”

“Go ahead,” Skrinde laughed. “What’s another murder to you guys? When the SSD show up, who do you think they’re going to arrest? Me? What did I do? You guys have murdered your way across the States to get here.”

“That’s not... We haven’t...” Okay, so we had been in the wrong places at the wrong times, and some things did look bad. But this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. The SSD were going to arrest Skrinde . I’d made sure of it. Leomaris had assured me—during a second phone call when I’d set up this plan—that the SSD agents would bring Skrinde in for drug offenses, locking him up for good.

Unless I hadn’t been speaking to Leomaris during that second phone call.

Unless Jenny had been on the end of that line

Or maybe Leomaris just had orders to bring us in...

Oh dear.

What if I’d given my brother and the loup-garou everything they’d needed to bring the SSD to us... not to save us, but to arrest us?

Had I set our own trap?

The crowd waited, most of them intrigued, not scared. This was probably a typical Miami night.

Zee waited for my word to snap Kat’s neck, and Skrinde waited with a grin on his face, thinking he’d won.

But I had something he didn't.

The lights went out, plunging the club into near darkness. The only light came from the two faintly glowing demons at the back of the stage.

I had a shadow daddy.

Shame it was too dark for Skrinde to see my smile.

Indecipherable whispers filtered through the dark in a voice that chilled the air and touched my spine. The crowd stirred, tension rising, panic brewing. I could feel it too—the anticipation, a hint of fear. Ancient instincts warning us all there was a predator among us, and this time, it wasn't me.

There are vampires, and then there's Victor Reynard. And when he's angry, he's a whole other level of murder husband.

Skrinde grunted into the mic, but when I looked back to the stage, he'd vanished. Zee was still there, unconcerned by the sudden darkness. He could feel Victor at work.

There had always been a chance Skrinde wouldn't fall for our six a.m. trap.

So Victor was our backup plan.

He appeared on stage, bathed in the spotlight, missing his tie, looking wild and ragged, eyes a shining silver, hair kinda messy. Unhinged Victor had arrived.

"We're all gonna play Victor Says. You ready?" Zee asked Kat.

Kat's wide-eyed gaze darted from Zee to Victor, then to me. He'd begun to realize he wasn't getting out of this.

“All the people here working for Skrinde, raise your hands,” Victor said into the mic, using his voice . He could also see in the dark, so he had a great view of those who were here to harm us or others. “Drop your weapons.”

The clatter of weapons hitting the ground filled the club.

“Everyone working for Skrinde, kneel.”

The rustle of clothes sounded, and a pleasant little shiver ran through me.

“Ooh, I like this part.” Zee grinned, stepping back and letting Kat drop to his knees too.

“Remain in that position until I give you permission to move.”

“How long is that gonna be?” a meek voice called out.

Victor narrowed his glare on the speaker, and said, “Silence.” He stepped back from the mic and vanished. In his typically anticlimactic fashion, it was over. A few moments later, the club’s lights came back on, revealing at least fifteen people on their knees, with Skrinde hogtied and gagged in the middle of the club. So that was where Victor’s tie had gone.

After the nervousness eased, the music kicked in again and the crowd melted away, deciding now was probably a good time to head to a different bar, or home.

I returned to our table, and was soon joined by Victor and Zee.

“Sorry about Kat,” Zee grumbled, slotting himself in next to me while Victor sat opposite. “I’d say war changes people but he’s always been a flouncy fuck.”

“Well, it’s a good thing we were prepared.”

Zee and I both admired Victor for a moment, watching him lift his drink and take a sip. Power was intoxicating, and he had it in spades.

“I do believe the combined heat in your gazes has a slim chance of making me blush.”

“I’m just glad you’re on our side, Fancy McMurder Daddy.” Zee chuckled, reaching for his drink.

“It would not have been possible without Adam’s... intimate attention earlier.”

With a smirk, Zee reclined in the seat, dragging me with him. “Fancy words for Adam deep-throating your dick in the restroom, you kinky pair you.”

The club doors flew open from all sides—back and front—and a stream of armor-clad agents poured in and around Skrinde’s kneeling people, ignoring them and instead coming straight for me.

“By international order of the SSD, Adam Vex, you are hereby under arrest and must submit immediately or wards will be used to restrain you.”

Oh dear.

### CHAPTER 17

“Yeah, we found them in the middle of some kind of weird ritual,” the arresting SSD Agent was saying into a phone. “Had some innocent trolls on their knees.”

“That’s not what was going on,” I tried to explain. But nobody appeared to care. The SSD raid was early, and this wasn’t how it was supposed to go. We weren’t the bad guys. But while Victor, Zee, and I were being escorted outside, toward the waiting warded vans, Skrinde and Kat stood nearby chatting with an agent, explaining how innocent they were.

We hadn’t yet been cuffed, but as we approached the vans, nearby agents readied pairs of cuffs for each of us.

“Call Agent Leomaris in San Francisco. They know what’s going on,” I urged.

The arresting agent took the phone away from his ear and looked me in the eyes. “Who do you think authorized this?”

My veins chilled, heart turning to ice.

Oh no.

My brother had gotten to Leomaris.

That was the only explanation for why Leomaris would arrest us now.

“At least arrest them too,” Victor said. “You must know Skrinde is a drug baron. If you let him walk free, you’ll be making a terrible mistake.”

The agent eyed Skrinde, who had gotten to the arm-waving part of his fantasy tale. The agent considered Victor’s words.

“Also, Kat is a murdering fuck, so... what have you got to lose?” Zee asked. “Cuff ’em and work it out later.”

“Watch them,” the agent ordered, gesturing at us. “Any funny business and you get the cuffs. Cooperate and this will be almost painless for you.” He waved for a few agents to join him and headed toward Skrinde and Kat.

Zee leaned in and whispered, “So, we gonna run now?”

We could. We hadn’t been restrained, and the chance to escape was fast closing. Once we were locked in the warded van, we’d be trapped in SSD care until we could plead our case. But if we ran, we’d be admitting we were guilty.

“No,” Victor replied, not sounding happy about it. “It is time we face the inevitable.”

A shout went up. I looked over and spotted Kat in cuffs, but Skrinde was sprinting across the street, two agents in pursuit.

“That was startlingly obvious,” Victor sighed.

“They’ll catch him, right?” Uncertainty rattled my nerves. I didn’t like this. Did not like it at all. Not just Skrinde running, but the whole setup. It felt as though we were walking into my brother’s trap without putting up a fight. Surrendering.

I had to get hold of Leomaris. I had to make them see we were

innocent—mostly—and that this was all some game my brother was playing.

“We lost him!” an agent barked. “Call the wolf unit in.”

I knew where Skrinde was going.

I could stop him.

I glanced at Victor, met his gaze, and quickly looked away to Zee. Zee looked down, his typically animated expression hardening into a grim frown.

“Everything is going to be okay,” I told them. “Stay here...” I bolted, ignoring Zee’s shout to wait up. He could poof after me unless I ducked out of sight, but he didn’t. I danced around a reaching agent, ignored more shouts, and ran full pelt down the sidewalk. It was late, not much traffic, nobody around. Skrinde was long gone.

The time was now.

Between one step and the next, I shifted, tearing open my glamor and letting dragon pour out. In a heartbeat, I went from running through the street to wings out, flying above it. It would look bad, but Skrinde was not getting away. If the SSD weren’t going to fix this, then I would.

I flapped higher, coasting on the warm updrafts rising off the beach.

Miami from above was even more spectacular, but there wasn’t time to admire it.

Ahead, a black pickup truck wove its way toward the chunk of land sticking out from the city. Skrinde’s enormous estate stood out for its lack of lights, except for the ones glowing from the house in the center that was sparkling like crown.

I soared higher, riding the wind, and circled around to get a good look at the manicured gardens below. Plenty of room for a dragon to land.

Alright then... There wasn't going to be anything nice or subtle about what came next.

I dove through the air, straight like an arrow, and at the last moment I flung open my wings and landed in the house's grounds. My clawed feet dug into the soft lawn, and a swipe from my tail took out a few palm trees.

Wings open, I stretched and let out a thunderous roar.

Okay, not going to lie, it felt good to be me.

Heat peppered my side, scattering down my scales. I whipped my head around, and there stood Skrinde, Minigun pointing up from the guardhouse. The gun spat out another line of bullets, smattering my wing, punching a string of holes through the membrane.

That was not nice.

I swung my head around, turning and churning up the ground, and thrust my head toward him.

The little troll squealed and bolted seconds before I opened my jaws and bit the guardhouse off its foundations—gun, walls, an' all.

Spitting the rubble to the side, I turned again, and saw the little troll fleeing up the front steps.

His only advantage was his size. Like a mouse in the grass, he could hide from me.



My only option, then, was to flush him out.

I could have unleashed a wave of flame, but it would probably kill him. There wouldn't be much meat on a roasted troll, and besides, Skrinde was going to pay for his actions and rot in a Lost Ones prison somewhere. But first, I was going to reduce his empire to rubble.

A single tail swipe took out the tennis courts.

Every step tore up the pretty driveway.

I stomped to the front of the house and bit through the walls and glass, taking out the shiny entrance foyer. Skrinde wasn't inside. He'd probably run to the back of the house, as far away from me as possible. I chomped some more house away, gradually reducing the sprawling palace to rubble until all that was left was the pool, and Skrinde standing next to it pointing a tiny gun at me.

"Stay back, dragon!"

He fired. The round bounced off my nose.

"Gah!" He looked at the gun, disgusted by it, then tossed it into the pool and raised his hands. "Okay, you got me! I give up."

I brought my head low and my snout in close. Skrinde trembled. I showed him my teeth in a snarl. Teeth bigger than him.

"Wait! Don't eat me!" He dropped into a ball, hugging his knees to his chest. "I'll tell them everything! Tell them it was me, not you. The drugs, guns, pixie strippers, unicorn eggs, all of it!"

Unicorns laid eggs? I huffed, blasting him with hot nostril air.

He squealed. "Please..." he sobbed. "Please don't eat me."

Yeah... no. I opened my jaws, tilted my head, and snapped my teeth around him, locking him inside my mouth. With the palace in ruins, Skrinde had learned his lesson. Wings out, I flapped, and took to the air again, ignoring the throbbing ache from the string of bullet holes. I'd heal soon enough. Skrinde wriggled on my tongue. He'd better sit still. One gulp, and he'd be gone. I sailed over Miami's South Beach and spiraled down again, zeroing in on where the SSD vehicles waited like a string of ants. Landing on the Strip, I tucked my wings in, making myself as small as possible, and plodded toward the angsty onlooking agents.

Zee and Victor were still here. I tried not to focus on how worried they were.

The rows of agents glanced at each other. Nobody seemed to know what to do with a dragon the size of a building in front of them. They scooted back as I brought my head in low and spat out a wet, spluttering Skrinde. He sobbed on the asphalt.

I snorted, and Skrinde yelped. "I did it... I did it all. Arrest me! I'm the one you want."

I grinned, and sat back on my haunches, the tip of my tail wagging.

See... I didn't eat every problem. Skrinde would have been all bone and no meat anyway.

Nobody seemed all that pleased. Except Zee, showing me two thumbs up.

Right. Dragons looked fierce and terrifying.

I packed my dragon self away inside my human glamor, shrinking down until I was just Adam again. Everyone continued to gawk, open-mouthed.

Tough crowd. I ambled toward the arresting agent and stopped just in front of him. “Are we free to go now?”

He cleared his throat. “That’s not my call to make. You gotta get in the van, but... you know... if you don’t want to, that’s fine too, I guess... I just work here.” He gulped hard. “Please don’t eat me. I got kids.”

I sucked in a deep breath, and sighed. “Okay, sure. But no cuffs. We’re giving up voluntarily. We need to speak with Agent Leomaris.”

I climbed into the back of the van with Victor and Zee, and the doors slammed shut. A lock clanged.

I could only hope we weren’t making a terrible mistake.

### CHAPTER 18

We'd made a terrible mistake.

Maybe it was when we were ushered into a warded cargo plane that I began to feel uneasy about our destination. Or maybe as we came in to land, and the big rear door opened onto a cool desert scene at night, stars shining and several armored personnel carriers with their mounted guns pointed in our direction. Maybe then it seemed, you know... bad. Or maybe it was when they snapped cuffs on us anyway—just routine.

But by the time they'd escorted us through giant metal gates, split us up, took my clothes, hosed me down, and threatened to shave my head... At that point, I was certain we were screwed.

I sat in my prison cell, on a chair bolted to the floor, and chewed on my nails. Zee would be hating this. Victor too, though he'd probably been through worse. I'd seen other demons when I was being escorted to my cell, and they all had their wings clamped closed and locked tight. Zee hadn't done anything wrong. Okay, so he did kill that chef, but he'd been protecting me. He shouldn't have been shipped to this place. He wasn't bad.

But this prison was.

As bad as things could get.

The walls were all warded. I couldn't shift, couldn't break the door down. Outside, a huge perimeter cage surrounded the building, as though we were hamsters trapped

inside. This was the SSD Nevada prison, where they put all the Big Bads they didn't know what to do with.

If I hadn't eaten Gideon Cain, he'd have been locked up here.

There was no escaping.

Was this... the end of us?

The door lock clanged and an automated voice told me to stand back. The door swung open, and a guard marched a guy around my age in, wearing the same orange suit. It took a hot minute to recognize him under the scruffy beard and messy hair. "Zander?"

"Oh wow, what are the chances? Hey there, Adam!" He threw his arms around me in a quick hard hug, then parted to get a look at our cell.

The door clanged shut, and the lock snicked.

"Wow, look at this place. Cozy. Bunks, huh? That's not so bad. There's even a little window." He looked up at the tiny barred window, way too high for either of us to reach. Even if we could, it would be warded.

I'd last seen Zander in Whiteacre Falls. He'd been attacked by the loup-garou, and the werewolf pack had ostracized him, preferring to blame him for a murder instead of finding the real killer. We'd helped him out. But seeing him here now didn't make any sense. "What happened? Why are you here?"

He laughed a bit and sat on the bottom bunk. "That is the weirdest thing. I get a call out of the blue from a bartender—at your hotel, I think. The Sus Hotel, right?"

“Erm, the SOS Hotel, but go on.”

Zander tested the thin mattress’s bounce. “He said you guys were in trouble, and that I had to hightail it to San Francisco.”

“Tom Collins said that?”

“Yeah, I mean, he also spent most of the call uh... explaining how it was up to him to save you all, and that you maybe couldn’t save yourselves if you were trapped in a paper bag with a knife. He swore a lot, and offered me drugs. I was pretty skeptical that he was your friend, honestly.”

“Yeah, no. That sounds like Tom.”

“Well, anyway, I didn’t have much else to do since, you know... everything. And you guys said I should come visit, so I did.”

Okay, that sort of explained how he’d gotten to San Francisco, but not why he was in this prison with me. “But how’d you get here?”

“I dunno, honestly.” He scratched at his messy hair. “So, I showed up at your hotel reception, and there was this guy there. He kinda looked like you, but before I could talk to him, the SSD showed up, arrested me for trespassing, and here I am. And here you are! Wow. What are the chances of that?!”

Pretty slim. “Trespassing?” That didn’t make any sense. “That’s it? You didn’t... attack anyone?”

“What? Me? Pfft. I’d just done my nails and I don’t attack people. That’s not my thing.”

“You didn’t threaten the guy who looks like me?”

“Nah, I didn’t even see him, really. It’s as though the agents were waiting for me, I guess.” He shrugged. “So here I am. Summer camp. I mean, the welcome party was a bit brutal, but I wasn’t not into it, if you know what I mean.” He grinned. “Is there gonna be marshmallows? I love marshmallows.”

“Erm, Zander, this isn’t summer camp.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s a maximum security prison for Lost Ones.”

“Oh.” His face fell, then brightened. “That’s why we’re all wearing orange. Orange is fab.”

“You shouldn’t be here.” Why would Tom Collins tell Zander go to the hotel, only to have the SSD jump him as soon as he arrived?

He flapped a hand. “I’m sure it will all get sorted out. At least it’s warm here, and dry. I needed a change of scenery. Do you mind if I take a nap? That bus ride over was super aggressive.”

“Sure...”

Zander made himself comfortable, and was out like a light and snoring within a few minutes.

Arrested for trespassing in a hotel wasn’t a thing, was it? Unless my brother had spotted him, and knowing we’d met had wanted him gone. And it sounded as though Tom Collins was up to something. But what?

### CHAPTER 19

At dinner, we were all filed out of our cells and watched by guards with stun guns while they herded us into the mess hall. Zander was excited for potatoes and stew, and once we'd found an empty table, he tucked into his with gusto. I wasn't hungry, and instead searched the crowd for Victor or Zee... then I spotted Zee chatting with another demon. His gaze wandered toward me. I shot to my feet and waved.

Zee's grin lit up. He strode over, weaving around tables—not running, but close to it—and with only a few steps to go, he opened his arms to scoop me into a hug. “Kitten?—”

“No physical contact!”

Zee pulled up short, and shot a look of imma murder you later to the guard.

We sat instead, and Zee spotted Zander wolfing down his dinner.

“Zander?” Zee blinked, as though disbelieving what his own eyes were telling him.

“This stew is so good!”

“What are you doing here, buddy?” Zee asked.

“No idea, but free food is a win, right?” He grinned around a mouthful.

“For real,” Zee agreed, then frowned at me. I briefly told him about Tom Collins



calling Zander. He wasn't buying it either. Zander was a harmless labrador compared to the other con artist and killer Lost Ones surrounding us. "Have you seen Vic? He'd know?—"

"I am here, my dears," Victor slid into the seat next to mine. He reached out and grasped my hand, giving it a secret squeeze, then let go before the guards could notice.

"Sweet baby Gareth, orange is not your fucking color," Zee said, grinning. "But it sure feels good to know you're okay, vampire."

"Likewise, demon." They shared a soft, lingering look, filled with longing. The table between the three of us felt like a bottomless chasm.

"Adam, were you aware Hooper is also here?" Victor asked.

"The frog shifter?" I knew who he was, it just didn't make sense that he'd be here too.

Victor nodded. "He was apprehended the same time we were."

"But he didn't do anything wrong."

"Didn't need to." Zee shuddered. "Frogs are the fucking worst. Hiroshima? Frogs did it."

"Zee, Hooper's nice. He fixed your leeches, remember?"

"One nice frog... One. Like there's one nice vampire... Ours. The rest are psychopaths. Did you guys know frogs use their eyes to swallow. Nobody should use their own eyeballs for anything other than lookin'. It's fuckin' messed up and weird."

“Indeed...” Victor sighed. “May I continue?”

“Yes,” Zee said with a wrist-flick. “Fancy Fangs, you may.”

“Hooper gave me a message to pass to you, Adam.”

“A message?”

“From Agent Leomaris.”

We all leaned in closer to Victor.

After a suitably dramatic pause, Victor whispered, “Leomaris said ‘trust us , ’ and ‘your brother is coming.’”

Hope lifted all the horrible weight of worry off my shoulders. “Then Leomaris knows what’s going on, right?” I hoped. “If they’re warning us, they know we’re innocent—mostly innocent.”

“There is more news,” Victor said. “Wesley is here.”

“Your fangboy from the Stephanie Hotel? Oh, may I rub your back, Lord Victorveus? That Wesley?” Zee said, adding a haughty Wesley impression.

“Indeed.”

“Did he offer to kiss your ring... or kiss something else, milord?”

Victor blinked. “He did not.”

“Good, then he knows you’re ours. That sucker might seem nice, but that’s how they

get you. They start out friendly, then oops , fangs in your neck. Happens every time.”

First Zander arrived in my cell, then Hooper was here, and now Wesley too? “Okay, this can’t be a coincidence.”

“It is not,” Victor agreed. “I was able to speak briefly with Wesley. It seems Tom Collins called him, explained we were in dire need of assistance and that he must visit the SOS Hotel immediately. Wesley did so, where he was promptly arrested.”

“For trespassing?” I asked.

“Exactly.”

“The same as Zander here...”

Zander looked up from licking his plastic tray. “Are there marshmallows?”

We each shared furtive, knowing glances. This was a setup. Tom Collins and Leomaris had been wrangling the people we’d helped during our vacation . They’d made it so our allies would be in prison with us.

“Are you all glancing at each other because you’re communicating telepathically?” Zander asked, after several moments of silence.

“Uh, no, it’s just... we’re all thinking the same thing.”

Zee laughed. “I doubt it.”

“I’m afraid to ask what you’re thinking, Zodiac.”

“You should be afraid. Frogs got y’all fooled. They clearly planned all this so we’d

be trapped behind bars while they make their move against the humans.”

Victor glanced at me. I shrugged. I’d been very wrong about alligators, so maybe I was wrong about frogs too. “I suspect that is unlikely,” Victor said.

“Have you met us? Unlikely follows us around.”

“However, what does appear likely is that Tom Collins and Agent Leomaris have engineered the circumstances in which we find ourselves,” Victor clarified, steering the conversation back on track.

“We’re supposed to be here,” I told Zander, after seeing his eyes had glazed over from confusion.

“There’s a plan underway, and we’re part of it,” Victor said.

“Oh, good! So what happens next in this plan?” Zander asked.

“My brother will want to see us to gloat. He’ll think he’s won. So I guess we wait for him to show up and hope Leomaris has a plan for that too.”

“Huh... Is he nice like you, your brother?” Zander asked.

“No,” Zee replied. “Spyros is worse than frogs. He’s like... if Gideon Cain were a frog.”

“Syros,” I corrected. “And he’s the most powerful Lost One this side of the veil, besides me.” Although I didn’t feel very powerful locked behind warded bars.

The bell rang, signaling the end of dinner. It hadn’t been long enough. “Stay strong, my dear.” Victor squeezed my hand again, then got up to leave. “I suspect an end to

our troubles is near.”

Zee blew me a kiss and winked. “Tom Collins is an asshole, but when has he ever let us down? I mean, he threatens it, a lot, but he comes through. We’ve got this.”

“Yeah. We do.” I wanted to seem strong, to be confident, and so I smiled in a way I hoped showed that. But inside, my heart ached, especially when I watched them split up and head back to their blocks.

Tom Collins and Agent Leomaris had been working together to lure my brother and our allies here, to me, into a highly warded prison with countless super-powerful Lost Ones. All of whom were reduced to shadows of themselves... as my brother would be when he stepped through those prison gates.

Inside these walls we were powerless, vulnerable.

But Syros would be too.

And he’d be alone.

I had Zee and Victor, Wesley, Hooper, and Zander. I was not alone. Hopefully, I also had Leomaris and Tom Collins on the outside.

Could this be my one and only chance to finally end Syros?

All I had to do was not mess it up.

\* \* \*

A few uneventful days passed, made brighter by Zander’s boundless enthusiasm. Tiny cell? Super cozy. Can’t sleep? Zander had a dildo story to pass the time. Who

knew the history of dildos was so interesting? Zander knew.

“Stand back from the door,” the automated voice said. It usually signaled exercise time, or time to eat, but we’d already had dinner, and it was getting late.

“What’s going on?” I asked the guard as he snicked on the cuffs and ushered me outside and through the main population, then took a right, using a keycard to unlock a string of doors.

“Special arrangement,” the guard finally said.

We headed outside via a covered walkway, and toward some kind of trailer unit.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Conjugal cabin,” he replied without turning. “Someone pulled strings.”

Conjugal what now?

“Orders from above.” He stopped at a small set of steps that led up to the trailer’s door. “One hour.” He unlocked the cuffs and smirked. “Have fun.”

What the heck did conjugal mean? Was this a trap? Was my brother behind this door? I climbed the steps, grasped the handle, and eased open the door to get a quick look inside. There wasn’t much. A modest room with a bed, a small bathroom, and little else. But I barely cared, because Victor and Zee were inside waiting.

“Kitten!” Zee’s face lit up. His wings too, unlocked and loose behind him.

Victor stood with perfect posture, but relief softened his eyes. “My dear.”

The door closed behind me, the lock clicking into place. “One hour!” the guard repeated, then stomped off.

“What—” I began, but Zee crossed the room in two strides and pulled me into a crushing hug.

“I missed you.” He patted my head, then stroked my hair.

It felt good, being held, and for a moment I relished him, hugging him back, breathing him in.

Victor approached more deliberately, placing a hand on my shoulder. “It’s good to see you are well.” I hooked an arm around his waist and dragged him into the hug. Zee shifted, embracing Victor too, and for a few blissful seconds it was just the three of us, warm, safe, together.

“How are they letting this happen?” I asked.

Victor leaned back and pulled a crumpled up note from his jumpsuit pocket. “I found this after being brought here.”

Get on with it - TC

Tom Collins. “Oh,” I said, understanding dawning. “This must be part of the plan.”

“This,” Victor said, taking the note and setting it aside. “Is our one opportunity to rearm so we are adequately prepared for what comes next.”

Zee’s wings shimmered, painting the plain walls in a shifting purple glow. “I know what’s coming next. Adam—multiple times.”

“Are we uh... Are we allowed?”

Victor swept a hand at the neat bed behind me. “This is a conjugal cabin, my dear. It would be rude not to.”

“Oh, that’s what conjugal means.” Wait... Okay. So Tom Collins had maneuvered us here to have fantastic, power-boosting sex? I guess we hadn’t been all that quiet the previous times we’d boosted our hotel wards.

“It’s likely that our enhanced abilities will become useful very soon,” Victor said.

“Do you guys want to?” I asked them. “It doesn’t feel too forced?”

Victor’s hands on my shoulders turned me around, then those expert fingers worked my zip down my back, sparking a little shiver. “My dear, we always want to.”

If my brother was coming, if this was all leading to a final confrontation, we needed every advantage. And we had two huge advantages, providing they could get around the wards. Victor and Zee’s boosted abilities.

“One hour,” I said, turning to look at them both behind me. My glorious demon and my stalwart vampire. My loves. “Let’s make it count.”

Victor’s fingers brushed my cheek before he leaned in to kiss me with almost perfect restraint, leaving me wanting more.

The prison jumpsuits weren’t exactly romantic, and the moment felt forced, but the weird surroundings didn’t matter the moment Zee moved to admire me and Victor. The needful look in his eyes already had parts of me awake and eager.

“Who first?” Zee murmured, lashes slow-blinking while he cocked a hip and arched



an eyebrow.

“Both,” I answered—I always wanted both. But Victor shook his head.

“Separate encounters produce more focused results,” he reminded me. “As enjoyable as this will be, we do have an objective and a time limit. Efficiency is key.”

“Trust Fancy Fangs to make a threesome sound boring,” Zee chuckled, but nodded in agreement. “You go first, vampire. I’ll take my ass over here to soak up the vibe an’ watch.”

Victor’s silver eyes gleamed in the purple light of Zee’s wings. “Very well.”

My jumpsuit slipped from my shoulders and pooled around my ankles. Almost too quickly, I stood naked in front of him. The room was still warm from the day’s leftover heat, but his gaze scorched, further heating me through. He took his time, eyes roaming over my body as if memorizing every detail or seeing me for the first time. “Exquisite.” His own jumpsuit joined mine on the floor in one impossibly smooth motion.

Victor naked—all that raw, unashamed masculinity on display—always stole my breath.

“Come here,” he said. The command in his voice sent a shiver through me.

I stepped willingly into his arms, the firm press of his skin against mine a welcome shock after days of isolation. His kisses grew more insistent, deeper, hungrier, his desperation and relief thinly veiled. I matched that need with my own, kissing him as though each kiss were a promise for more.

“I’ve missed you,” he whispered against my lips.

I thrust a hand into his loose hair, and gripped him there, holding him still. These last few days had been our hardest test yet. But we would get through this. “I will always be with you,” I told him—vowed it.

He kissed me hard, hands everywhere, tracing patterns down my back, across my hips, between my legs. I gasped, relishing every touch of skin on skin. He guided me backward until my legs hit the edge of the bed.

From the corner, a rare, quiet Zee watched, his eyes and wings glowing with anticipation, his tail flicking in that telltale way that meant he was enjoying the show.

Victor laid me down with deliberate care, his body covering mine, his mouth trailing down my neck, my chest, my stomach. I arched into his touch, my fingers tangling in his hair, guiding him downward.

When he took me between his lips, I had to fight not to come. It had been too long, and the skillful pressure of his tongue, the cool suction of his lips, emptied all the thoughts from my head, turning me into a beast of need.

“Victor,” I gasped. “I won’t last if you keep?—”

“Then don’t,” he pulled back just enough to say, before returning to his task with renewed vigor.

“Mercy.” My hands fisted in his hair as pleasure coiled tighter. Victor slid a finger inside me, then another, teasing more pleasure out of me until I came, helpless under his mouth and hands and body. I cried out and let the waves tear through me, wave after wave of intense pleasure.

But Victor wasn’t done. As I lay there, panting and sensitive, he worked his way back up my body, pressing kisses to my heated skin. His dick pressed hard and insistent

against my thigh.

“May I?” he asked, his voice rough with need.

“Yes,” I breathed. “Please.”

Zee tossed Victor an unmarked bottle, probably supplied for all the conjugal visits, and Victor prepared me with careful attention, his fingers slick and cool, opening me up with practiced patience. When he finally pushed into me, I felt a familiar jolt of intense connection as the power that sparked between us flared to life.

Victor moved with deliberate precision, each thrust measured and controlled. But I knew how to undo that control. I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, and was rewarded with a growl for more.

“Let go,” I whispered. “I can take it.”

Something in his eyes shifted, the silver swirling like a storm. He gripped my hips hard enough to bruise and drove into me, no longer holding back. The bed creaked beneath us, and somewhere in the back of my mind I wondered if it would hold. I wondered, too, if the prison wards might prevent his powers from boosting. We’d know soon enough.

Crackling, storm-like energy built between us with every thrust—electric, primal, overwhelming. I could feel it gathering in my chest, rising like a tide, ready to spill over and into him. Victor’s fangs extended, his control slipping as pleasure stole all that was left of his refined self.

When he leaned down to sink those fangs into my neck, the spark exploded between us. My power surged, flowing into him like liquid fire. The lights in the room flickered wildly—it was definitely working. I clutched him tight, as his body rocked

against mine, building to a peak.

Victor's cry was muffled against my neck. He pulsed inside me as he came, his normally cool skin surging hot.

As he withdrew his fangs and collapsed beside me, his eyes glowed brighter than I'd ever seen them. "Adam, my dear, I... am rather lost for words..."

"Intense, huh?" I finished for him.

He brushed a strand of hair from my face with trembling fingers. "Thank you, my dear."

Zee cleared his throat from the corner. "If you two are done, I have a serious case of blue balls over here." His voice was tight with need, his wings spread wider than before. "My turn."

Zee was at the bed in a flash, shedding his jumpsuit with none of Victor's grace but twice the enthusiasm. Where Victor was all cool control, Zee was heat and chaos and boundless energy.

He crawled over me, his tail caressing places that made me shiver, reigniting my need despite my recent climax. His hungry mouth found mine in a messy kiss.

"Been thinking about this for days, Kitten," he growled against my lips. His hands weren't gentle like normal—more demanding, more desperate, just like Victor had been. "Need you, need to be in you, with you, can't be without you."

"Yes." I agreed to all of it, my own need climbing again. A new surge of desire turned my veins molten.

He flipped me onto my stomach with impressive strength, pulling my hips up as his mouth traced a path down my spine. When his tongue dipped lower, I buried my face in the pillow to muffle my cry.

“That’s right,” he purred, his breath hot against my most tender of places. “Let me hear those dragon noises.”

Victor, recovering beside us, stroked my hair as Zee worked me open with his tongue and fingers. The dual sensations—Victor’s cool touch at my temple, Zee’s heat between my legs—had me writhing between them.

“Ready for me, Kitten?” Zee asked, his voice rough.

“More than ready,” I gasped. “Do it, Zee.”

When he pushed inside, it was nothing like Victor’s careful entry. Zee thrust home in one smooth motion that filled me up. He set a punishing pace immediately, his hands gripping my hips with bruising force.

“Fuck, you feel amazing,” he groaned, his wings casting dancing shadows on the walls as we rocked together.

The poor bed protested beneath us, the metal frame creaking alarmingly. I didn’t care. All I could focus on was the delicious drag of Zee inside me, the way his tail wrapped around my thigh, the smooth heat of his skin against mine.

The energy built differently with him—faster, hotter, more volatile. His demon essence pulled at my dragon power like a magnetic force, drawing it out in waves that made his wings glow brighter and hotter.

Victor watched us with lidded eyes, his hand idly stroking himself back to hardness.

The sight of him—satisfied yet aroused again—pushed me closer to the edge.

Zee reached around to grasp my dick, stroking in time with his thrusts. “Come for me,” he demanded. “Want to feel you come apart while I’m inside you.”

The power surged between us, building once more. Maybe it was because of where we were, or all the things that had happened, but this was so much more than before. When the pleasure crested, reaching the edge, it became so intense that the remaining lights in the room burst, plunging us into darkness lit only by Zee’s sparkling wings.

I came with an inhuman growl, my body clenching around Zee as pleasure ripped through me. He followed a moment later, his wings flaring brighter as he buried himself deep.

The surge of power was different than with Victor—wilder, more primal. Where Victor had drawn my power with precision, Zee pulled it from me in a rush, his entire body illuminated from within as my energy merged with his.

Spent, we collapsed in a tangle of slick limbs. Zee’s skin practically hummed with new power.

“Holy shit,” Zee breathed, his voice deeper than before, resonating with new power. “I am broken in the best way.”

“Did it work?” I panted. “Do you feel stronger?”

“Like I could make this whole fucking prison come with a snap of my fingers,” Zee said, pulling me into position as the little spoon to his big spoon. “I doubt even the wards could stop me.”

Victor sprawled in front of us, smirking around his fangs. “My consciousness feels...

expanded. I believe I should be able to extend my influence considerably farther than before.”

I looked between them, these two beings I loved more than anything. Maybe we really could do this. “I love you guys.”

A sharp knock at the door broke the post-sex spell. The guard signaled we had ten minutes to get dressed.

Zee squeezed my hand. “Whatever happens, Kitten. We do this together.”

“Indeed. Together,” Victor vowed. “To the end.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “Together. Always.”

Reluctantly and quietly we parted, cleaned up, and got dressed. Nobody had much to say, and instead we basked in the afterglow.

“I find myself in the peculiar position of trusting Tom Collins,” Victor said, straightening his jumpsuit. “But I do believe our rogue bartender will not let us down.”

The knock came again. “If you don’t come out in one minute, I’m coming in.”

I kissed them both, quick and fast. “I know he won’t.” We locked gazes, all three of us, then after a synchronized nod, we left the cabin.

\* \* \*

Not even an hour had passed since I’d returned from the conjugal visit when the guard was back again. “You got a visitor.”

“Now?” It was long past visiting hours.

“Guess your guest has a special pass.”

Zander watched me leave with concerned puppy-dog eyes. “It’s fine,” I told him, then frowned when the guard slammed the door shut between us.

He really did not deserve to be here. If we got out— when we got out—I’d make it up to him.

A few of the Lost Ones in our neighboring cells watched me pass by. There was Percy, the recovering alcoholic unicorn shifter. He’d gotten violent in New York traffic and shifted, raging at people on the Brooklyn Bridge. A raging unicorn is not a pretty sight. A few people had jumped. They hadn’t survived. He’d gotten the blame.

We passed by the aviary, where they kept the pixies that made Little Jimmy with his sass and murder vibes look like a cute Disney fairy.

I had no doubt some Lost Ones imprisoned here were dangerous and deserved to be here, but I also knew a lot weren’t bad and didn’t belong behind these bars. Human authorities didn’t know what to do with them, so it was easier to just shove them in here and forget they existed.

I wasn’t out of this place yet, but I was lucky that I had people trying to make it happen. Some folks I passed by didn’t have anyone to rescue them. I knew what that felt like.

The guard dumped me in a visitor’s chair in a room full of empty tables and chairs, all bolted to the floor. He cuffed my wrists to the table and left.

Hm... This did not feel good. My brother wouldn’t be cuffed. Nobody else was in the



room. There were cameras, but Syros wouldn't care who was watching when he tore my head off.

The wards did prevent both of us from using our abilities, but he was still strong without them.

What was I supposed to do now?

Trust us , Leomaris had said.

But how were they going to get around the wards?

I had to trust the plan. Trust that everything had been leading toward this moment. Tom Collins had maneuvered everyone here who needed to be. Agent Leomaris was smart, and they probably had some control over what happened in this room. We'd had our conjugal visit to power-up.

Whatever was going to happen, would probably happen any second now.

I drummed my fingers on the table.

A long mirror on one wall reflected the empty room back at me. Dark, barred windows lined the opposite wall.

Doors clanged deeper inside the prison, but the visiting room was quiet. Just me, my drumming fingers, and pounding heart.

The door at the far end of the room opened, and in stepped my brother. My heart skipped, then sank like a rock through my stomach.

Syros's smile was all predatory glee. "You finally stopped running."

### CHAPTER 20

I stood, rattling the cuffs against the table. “Brother.”

Play it cool, play it calm. There was no other way with him. If I showed any sign of weakness, he’d tear into me.

“Look at you.” He ambled into the room, and behind him another familiar face appeared. Jenny— Gen Z as Zee had called her—the shapeshifting loup-garou. She smirked too.

The door clanged closed, sealing me alone with two formidable enemies. Cameras stared from the corners, but they’d be no help if Syros decided to end me here.

“Didn’t expect to see me, huh?” Jenny said, following Syros to my table. “When you throw someone off a cliff, least you can do is check they’re dead. Villain one-oh-one.”

“I was busy trying to save werewolf lives at the time.”

“And end mine.”

“I’m also not the villain here,” I argued.

“Not a villain?” Syros laughed and slid into the bolted-down chair opposite mine. “Tell that to Gideon Cain’s surviving kin, or the staff of the Stephanie Hotel who are now out of a job.”

“They shouldn’t have poisoned the sandwiches. That’s no way to run a hotel.”

“What about the cat lady who owned the SOS Hotel before you?” Syros asked.

“What happened to her, huh? Did you get a little peckish?”

Yeah, okay, I had eaten her. “What do you want?”

“I always knew you were weak and pathetic—the runt. I knew once I got you cornered you’d roll over and show me your belly. But you’re even weaker than I remember. Those fools you keep around at that trashy SOS Hotel? They didn’t even care you’d gone, and when Jenny stepped in, you know what she learned?” Syros laughed again. “Nobody there gives a crap about Adam Vex. The woman at the front desk... Madame something, gypsy ward weaver? I was worried about her, but she didn’t even notice you were gone... or that you were back when Jenny wore your glamor. And that broken AI barman? Wow... The way he talks, the disdain? I’m surprised he hasn’t tried to kill you.”

“Yeah, honestly? Me too.”

“There’s gremlins everywhere, the pixie has no respect for authority or anyone, and I took a look at your accounts, brother. You’re one broken pipe away from going bust.”

That all sounded... accurate. And I missed that crazy place like a hole in my heart. “I see you had the full SOS Hotel experience.”

“That place is a dump, populated by mewling prey.”

“Maybe.” But even broken things could be remade stronger when they came together. My brother had just told me he’d underestimated our SOS Hotel family. They’d played him, strung him along, made him think he was winning, but all the while, behind the scenes, they’d plotted against him to bring him here, to me, right now...

I glanced at the cameras, and the dark outside the windows.

I trusted Tom, Leomaris, Madame Matase, Little Jimmy, all of them. They'd come through, any second now...

"Waiting for a save?" Syros chuckled, prompting Jenny to snigger too. He leaned forward. "Nobody is coming for you. You'll rot here, while outside, I take it all. When this world is on its knees, maybe then I'll come get you out, brother. Or maybe I'll just leave you here to die like the humans have left all the other troublesome Lost Ones." He rose to his feet. "Stupid humans got that right. Cut out the rot. It's the only way. You killed the rest of our kin because I let you. Easier that way. But not me, brother... You didn't get me."

I swallowed. My heart fluttered. They would come through.

But there wasn't much time left. Syros turned his back on me. I had to stop him, buy more time, do something instead of just sitting and taking it.

"Wait."

He stopped, turned again and waited, eyebrows raised. Jenny stopped beside him, waiting for my big speech too.

"I uh..." I got to my feet, buying a few more seconds to find my words. "I mean... You know... I never really understood what it meant to have a family."

"What are you talking about?"

"Our kin? They weren't a real family. They were killers. I'm talking about people you care for, people who care for you. Not because of blood, or some kinda bond they didn't have a choice in, or destiny. People who choose to be around you, who

choose to love you.”

Syros snorted. “And you think you know what that is now? Those losers at that hotel barely know you exist. I could kill you here now and nobody would notice.”

It was my turn to smirk. He had no idea what it meant to be loved, and never would. It was so alien to him, he couldn’t even see it when it had been right in front of his face the moment he stepped into the SOS Hotel.

“Why are you smiling?” Syros stomped toward me. “Huh? What have you got to smile about? You’re stuck in here and I’m out there! I’m free! And I’m going to make this world my sandbox. There’s nothing to smile about.”

“I dunno...” I shrugged. “I think there is.”

“What?!?” he snapped. “Huh?”

Jenny glanced at him, watching him lose his cool. Maybe she was beginning to realize the unhinged monster she’d buddied up with would turn on her too.

“I’m smiling because I know, without a single doubt, that I’ll never be alone.”

He barked a dismissive laugh. “You’re alone right now, idiot.”

Jenny’s gaze caught mine, and held it. My heartbeat quickened.

I wasn’t alone.

But Syros was.

He narrowed his eyes on me, then looked at Jenny and opened his mouth to ask why

we were bonding over a glance, but a screeching siren beat him to it.

The lights went out, plunging us into a blink of darkness before the emergency lighting kicked in. Green Fire Exit signs lit the way.

A phone rang somewhere nearby, behind a door or that long mirror.

Here we go...

“What’s going on?” Syros strode for the door.

Jenny hung back, dug into her pocket and tossed me a key. She winked, proving my unlikely hunch right. She wasn’t here with Syros, although she’d told him she was. She was here for me. I had no idea how or why she’d switched sides, but now wasn’t the time to get into it.

I slotted the little key into the cuffs and flicked them open, tossing them onto the metal table.

Syros turned again, saw I was free, and glanced at Jenny. “You dare betray me?”

“Bro, you’re low-key an asshole.”

He lunged toward her, but I lunged for Syros, tackling him around the waist. My momentum knocked him off his feet, and I got a few strides under me before my brother slammed his fist between my shoulders. Pain flashed up my spine. I lost my footing. We both tumbled, hit the wall beneath the mirror, and sprawled to the floor.

The phone still rang, right behind the glass. I staggered to my feet, leaning back against the window.

Syros bounced to his feet, and turned on me with a roar. He clenched his right hand into a fist and swung. I ducked. Glass shattered, exploding into millions of tiny tempered pieces—designed to shatter.

He'd opened up a hole into another room, like a viewing gallery. I vaulted the sill, spotted the phone on the far wall, and dashed for it.

Syros slammed into my back, and smacked me face first against the wall right next to the phone. I reached for it. Syros grabbed my arm by the wrist, and yanked me around.

“You remember when we fought like this?” He sneered in my face. “You always lost.”

“I remember... I let you win.” I smacked my head forward, smashing my skull into his nose, crunching it. He howled, and staggered away.

Twisting, I grabbed the phone's receiver and held it to my ear. “Tom?!”

“Welcome to the best bar in San Francisco...” Tom's static voice came back, and a shock of power jolted down the handset, making it leap from my hand. It clattered against the wall, then swung back and forth, spewing static-filled smoke.

Syros watched, hands cupped over his bloody nose, realization dawning.

The distinct outline of our bartender began to take shape in the smoke.

Syros bolted for the door, tore it open, and dashed out.

Guards should have been out there, but whatever commotion had triggered the alarms had distracted them too.

I poked my head outside the door.

No guards, just sirens.

I had to go after Syros. If he got away, we'd be back to square one again. It had to end now.

"Finally found some balls?" Tom Collins asked, standing next to me. His outline spat static, but he looked solid and real in a silk burgundy waistcoat and pressed black pants. With his hair slicked back, there was that slightly unsettling murderous gleam in his eyes. Even more murderous than normal.

"Thanks for coming." I beamed.

"Someone had to save your ineffective, pathetic asses."

"Did Leomaris threaten to arrest you for the drugs if you didn't help?"

Tom snorted a non-answer. "Go get your brother. I've got work to do here."

That sounded concerning. But I definitely needed the distraction.

"Hey, thanks for this, Tom. I mean it."

He smiled. "Now go break shit. I'm about to." His outline turned ghostly, then fizzled into a thread that funneled back into the phone. Somewhere nearby, another phone rang. He'd keep some of the guards busy.

I figured my brother had bolted toward the glowing green exit arrow, so I dashed in the same direction, hoping to catch up. Dim emergency lighting lit the sterile, white-walled corridors lined with locked metal doors and no windows. This place was a



maze. If I didn't catch up with Syros soon, I might never find him.

Turning a corner, I ran right toward a guard armed with a sparking cattle prod.

“Stop!”

I skidded and tried to look innocent in my bright orange jumpsuit. “Oh uh... hi.”

“You Lost Ones are all the fucking same! Get back in your cell!”

He jabbed the prod toward me. I sprang back. I could maybe get around him, but I'd have to be fast?—

The guard jerked upright, a look of shock on his face. His back arched, his eyes bulged, he grunted and bucked as though possessed, then dropped to his knees, shuddering. I kicked the prod away, and looked up to see a swathe of purple light filling the corridor, and then the demon it belonged to rounded the corner in full sparkly sex-god glory.

Oh... The guard wasn't dying then, just real... excited.

“Kitten, the Fucking God has arrived! Also, this is the most fun I've had since a lock-in orgy at Razorsedge. Free orgasms for everyone.”

“Zee!” I flung my arms around him, ignoring the pleasant tingles the touch sparked all over me.

“Hello, Kitten... I am on fucking fire! Watch me burn.”

“But how... the wards?”

“I’m guessin’ the fire alarm disabled some of ’em. Nobody wants inmates burning to death. Bad fucking PR. No idea who triggered the fire alarm—fuck, what if there is a fire?”

There wasn’t a fire. “Tom Collins is here,” I told him.

“Oh, fuck.” His eyes lit up. “This party’s gonna get wild.”

“Syros is too, but he got away. I thought he came this way, but if you’re here, I guess not. Let’s double back.” Zee jogged along beside me. “How’d you get out of your cell?”

He grinned brilliantly. “Orgasmed my way out. Humans will do anything once they’re puddles on the floor.”

“And Victor?”

“No idea, but I bet he’s working on something.”

We might have a chance, might actually pull this off... We just needed to find and stop Syros. If he stayed within the wards, he’d be as restrained as the rest of us.

After racing down the corridors, we eventually came to a grated door wedged open by the unconscious guard sprawled through it.

“Not my handiwork,” Zee said, stepping over him.

“Syros.”

A few more switchback corridors delivered us to some kind of internal foyer. A guard bolted, running from the room where the door was swinging shut. I sprinted over,

shoved it open, and stumbled inside.

Syros stood at a bank of screens. He whirled when I entered, and brandished a cattle prod he'd taken off the unconscious guard. "Good, you're here. You know, I'm starting to think you're somehow behind this chaos—" His eyes widened as Zee entered the room behind me. "Stay there! Or I free every single criminal in this prison, and I know even you don't want that, brother."

I shrugged. "Actually, I'm okay with it. Zee?"

Zee shrugged too, making his wings bounce. "Meh. Have at it. Half of 'em shouldn't be in here anyway."

"Aren't you supposed to be the good guys?" Syros scoffed. "SOS Hotel heroes?"

Yeah, being official heroes had sounded good, but the shine had worn off. "Honestly, we just kinda want to be left alone to run our hotel."

"Yeah, this hero schtick is crazy bad for my mental health. My therapist says it's all about balance. He was making a drink and sprinkling coke over it at the time... but the point is, being bad is sometimes good. So you go right ahead and press that big ol' red button, let all the Bad People out. We'll watch."

"You know there are Lost Ones behind these bars who wanna chew up this world and spit it out?"

"Then you'll have company," I said.

He hesitated, hand hovering over the actual big red button. "Why would you want me to do this?"

“Maybe you were right and we’re tired of being heroes?” I inched closer. “Or maybe we were the villains all along. Isn’t that right, Zee?”

“I am livin’ my villain era right now. So press that fuckin’ button, dragon. I dare yah.”

Syros wanted this world, but he wanted to be the one to ruin it. He wouldn’t press that button. He might be crazy, but he wasn’t that crazy. He pulled his hand back. “You’re more unhinged than I?—”

Zee clicked his fingers.

As a wave of pleasure rolled up Syros’s back. He gasped, fell back, and reaching out to stop himself from falling, his hand slammed down on the big red button.

Bigger, louder, more alarming alarms sounded.

The green exit lights turned red—the universal color of very bad stuff.

“Zee?!” I dashed to the consoles where, on screen, all the cell doors had flung open.

He joined me and cringed. “Oh my fuck!”

The prisoners emerged.

Zee flung his hands up to cover his face, then peeked through his fingers. “Is it bad?”

“I mean...” Lost Ones surged out of their cells, pouring like a river down the corridors. “Yeah. It’s pretty bad.” Imagine twenty, maybe fifty Gideon Cains on the loose. This party really was about to get wild.

Zee jabbed the button again, but it made a comical sad trombone sound. “The fuck?! Why does this big button not also lock the doors? Who designed these fuckin’ controls?”

“What have you done?!” Syros bellowed, staring at the screens.

“Made you come. Was it as good for you as it was for me?” Zee grinned at my recovering brother.

Syros snarled, and thrust the cattle prod into Zee’s middle, jolting him, then he ran. Zee dropped in a twitching, sparkling heap. I grabbed him, pulling him close so he didn’t convulse too hard and break something.

“Gah... go, Kitten!” he growled through gritted teeth.

But I didn’t want to leave him.

But I had to stop Syros before he got outside the wards.

But, but, but...

Zee bucked, gasping. “Fuck, ow...”

“My dears...” Victor’s firm, comforting arms wrapped around us both. “I’m here.” He sounded pissed off, afraid, furious, wary. “I feared the worst...”

“It’s alright,” Zee grumbled. “We’re alright.” He twitched again. “Sparky stick. Very ouch.”

“Why am I not surprised to find you three here?” Tom snapped, appearing behind Victor. “Did you not stop Syros from unleashing the entire prison?!”

“Hi, Tom.” I waved. “Uh... actually, we did that.”

“You unlocked all the doors?” Tom strode toward the consoles, his outline fizzing with static. “Well fucking done. We’re all fucked. And that’s my cue to leave, quit the hotel, and hop on a phone line to Hawaii. Have a great end of the world!”

“You can’t leave.” I shot to my feet.

“Why?”

“You uh... you just got here?”

Zee reached up. I grabbed his hand and helped haul him back onto his legs.

Victor was already at the screens, face pale in their glow. “This is indeed alarming.”

“So... how are we going to fix this?” Zee asked.

“Uhm...” Zee and I joined Tom and Victor at the consoles to admire the carnage.

“Ask them nicely?”

Tom rolled his eyes and folded his arms. “Ask the cutesy fluffy mass murderers nicely?”

We didn’t have time for this. “I have to stop my brother, or none of this will matter anyway.”

“Adam, you may be right about asking them nicely...” Victor said. “If I can find a way to project my voice throughout the facility, I may be able to command them to return to their cells. Or at least slow their escape.”

Tom grabbed what looked like a golf ball on a stick. “Like this PA system?”

“Yes... That is perfect.”

“Perfect is what keeps my customers coming back for more.”

“Sounds like something I’d say.” Zee ruffled his wings, shaking off a few purple sparks.

I knew what had to be done. They had to stay here and contain this riot, while I went after Syros. If I stayed too, he’d get away. And I wasn’t needed here. I had to go. Now.

Turning away, I headed for the door. I had to leave them. This was the right thing. It was always going to happen this way anyway. Me and Syros. A rematch.

“Kitten?”

“It’s alright, I’ll...” I grasped the door frame and smiled over my shoulder. Victor frowned, and Zee just looked... hopeful, as though maybe these wouldn’t be our last ever moments together. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hey...” Zee ran to my side and grabbed my shoulders, giving me a soft shake. “If you say something stupid like “It was always going to end this way” or “I have to keep you guys safe,” then imma get mad... and sad... and nobody wants that. So I’m coming with you, and if you think you’re gonna brush me off by being an actual hero, you should know that one not-so-human dragon cannot give me the slip.”

“Zee, but?—”

He pressed a finger to my lips. “Nope. It’s both of us or Syros goes free.”

I blinked and peered up at him. If Syros shifted into his dragon form, Zee would be nothing to him, no more bothersome than a fly he'd swat out of the air.

Zee's eyes got all intense and sparkly, the humor all gone now, replaced by no-holds-barred warrior intent. "You wanna argue, Kitten? That's fine. But there's not much time, and I'd rather tie you up and throw you over my shoulder than let you go alone, and I reckon Victor will help. He's good with knots."

I mumbled around his finger.

"What's that? Zee is the best and also right?"

Another mumble.

He scowled and plucked his finger away. "Choose your next words carefully, Adam Vex."

"I love you." I grabbed his face, pulled him down, and smacked a kiss on his lips, then held him there, peering into his glowing eyes. "Let's go."

"If you perish, just know my grief will turn day into night," Victor vowed. "And I will not rest until my vengeance has burned through what remains of my empty soul."

"Fucking hell... Is this goodbye going to go on much longer?" Tom rolled his eyes again. "Adam. You had better not die, my paycheck needs to clear."

I was sure, in his own way, Tom loved us too. Probably.

"Wait, Tom. You're plugged into the cameras, right? That's a thing you can do?" I asked.



“Bartender one-oh-one, always watch your customers.”

Yeah... I wasn't sure that was the bartender's number one rule. “Where's Syros right now?”

Tom reached out and flicked his fingers, but those fingers turned into static streams of sparkly energy and vanished into the screen nearest him. “In the exercise yard, trying to get through the fence.

“We can't let that happen.” I caught Victor's stricken gaze. He wanted to come too, wanted to protect us, but he also had several thousand Lost Ones to contain.

“Join us, Vic, when you're done saving the prison,” Zee said.

“Keep him safe.”

“I will,” both Zee and I said together.

“This romantic moment is nice an' all, but stop making eyes at each other and go already!”

“Right, yeah, okay... uh, bye.” We ducked out the door and raced down the corridor.

We could do this, we had to do this. I had faith.

And the best demon there ever was at my side.

### CHAPTER 21

The sirens weren't as loud in the exercise yard, and the panic happening inside the prison seemed like a whole other world away. The night air was still, stars twinkling beyond the chain-link cage we were all trapped in. Across the dusty yard, Syros tried to pull apart the warded metal links, and was gradually making a hole that would soon be large enough for him to squeeze through.

He couldn't shift, not yet, but he was strong.

We weren't the only ones closing in on my brother, though.

Jenny emerged from another side door.

"Oh, hell no," Zee breathed.

"It's okay, she's on our side... I think."

"You know, Syros." Jenny raised her voice, crossing the yard toward my brother, several strides in front of us. "This is literally your villain origin story backfiring."

Syros turned to see us all bearing down on him. "You guys do know I'm a dragon, right? Anything you do to me, I'll just heal and hit back harder."

Zee kept on heading forward too. "Yeah, we know. But it'll feel good while we beat the crap out of you."

“I had mad time to think after Adam tried to make me play nice at Whiteacre,” Jenny continued in her confusing Gen Z slang. “Just vibing with my thoughts, wondering if I was being toxic as fuck, and not gonna lie, I was givin’ major red-flag energy. The thing is, you can’t force someone to stan you, can’t make them simp for you, and I learned, it’s not their fault that you’re living in your flop era?—”

“I don’t want people to like me ,” Syros laughed. “They will worship me.”

Zee rolled his eyes. “Bro, you need a shit-ton of therapy. Do dragons have therapists?” he asked me.

“No, we mostly eat all our problems.”

The three of us stopped a few strides from Syros, and the buckled fence was at his back, close to being mangled enough for him to squeeze through. A few more tugs would probably snap the links. But he continued to glare at us. “There’s only one way this ends, and that’s with all of you dead at my feet.”

Zee snorted a laugh. “Does Mr Grumpy Dragon want belly rubs?”

“You said you’d gift me the hotel if I worked for you,” Jenny said. “But when I was there, as Adam, you missed all his main character energy. The people who work there? They’re all literally ride or dies. They went so hard, planning to bring everyone here who’s also in their squad. They chose to help Adam, and Zee, even the old vampire too—who nobody much likes btw—and I’m so living for that energy. I agreed when you came looking for their enemies, because I was low-key throwing shade at all of them, but the plot twist? Seeing through Adam's point of view, who they actually are? That kind of found family core memory can’t be gatekept, it’s just high-key authentic. And I stopped with the hate vibe, straight up. Syros, bro, you got it all wrong.”

“So you had a learning moment.” Syros sneered. “Do I look as though I care?”

“Hey,” Zee snapped. “This is Gen Z’s redemption arc. Have some respect for her character development.”

“That hotel is special,” Jenny said. “It’s people are low-key special, and I kinda wanna be like them, and not fight against them. Y’know, it’s better with your besties, than without.”

The smirk that crawled across Syros’s face was definitely not a good sign.

“I’m welling up.” Zee sniffed. “So fuckin’ proud of you, girl.”

“You ain’t my vibe.” Jenny lunged, fists up.

Syros sidestepped with surprising grace, pivoting to face her. “I only understood a fraction of what you just said, and I see now why my brother threw you off a cliff.”

“I choose them!” Jenny jabbed quickly, landing a blow to his sternum that made him grunt. “The found family worth fighting for!”

Syros’s eyes darkened. “Then you’ll die with them.”

He moved with a speed that belied his size, grabbing her wrist mid-punch and twisting sharply. Jenny cried out but twisted her body to follow the motion, breaking free with a practiced move.

“Whoa, Gen Z’s got moves,” Zee murmured beside me, his wings flaring brighter.

Jenny and Syros circled each other, the prison yard’s harsh lights casting their long shadows across the dusty ground. For a moment, I thought Jenny might actually stand

a chance. She'd survived our run-in. She was resilient, resourceful, a bit crazy, but who wasn't?

"Should we help her?" I whispered to Zee, but he shook his head.

"She wants this, Kitten. It's her redemption arc."

Syros feinted left, then drove forward with his right shoulder, slamming into Jenny's middle. She staggered back but recovered fast, and threw a quick one-two punch that caught him across the jaw. Syros barely flinched.

"You fight like injured prey," he spat, grin growing.

"Better than fighting like a basic villain," Jenny shot back, circling again.

I edged closer, ready to join the fight, but Jenny caught my movement. "Stay back, Adam! This is between me and this bag of dicks."

Syros laughed—a sound like rocks tumbling down a hillside—the sound of his true self trying to break through. "You really think you can take me? I've killed things ten times your size."

"Maybe," Jenny said. "But I bet you've never gone viral. That shit takes mad skills."

"I have no idea what you're say?—"

She drove forward in a blur of motion, landing three quick strikes to Syros's throat. He stumbled—actually stumbled—and I felt a surge of hope. If she could knock him back, then we definitely stood a chance.

It didn't last.

Syros recovered, eyes flashing with cold fury. He roared—not a dragon’s roar, but something close enough to make the hairs on my arms stand on end. His hand shot out, impossibly fast, snatching Jenny by the throat.

“No!” I shouted, lunging forward.

But it was too late.

With a single, efficient twist of his wrist, a crack echoed across the prison yard like a gunshot.

Time seemed to slow. Jenny’s body went limp, her eyes wide with surprise but already empty. Syros held her suspended for a moment, his face twisted in disgust, then softening to mild annoyance.

“Stupid girl,” he muttered, and hurled her lifeless body at the fence.

The buckled and bent section of chain-link snapped and her body tore through it, landing in a crumpled heap on the other side. The fence gaped open now, the hole easily large enough for Syros to climb through.

“Jenny!” I rushed forward.

Zee grabbed my arm. “She’s gone, Kitten.”

Syros turned to us, lips curled in a vicious sneer. “I’m enjoying this. Who else wants to dance?”

Jenny and I hadn’t been friends, but I understood her. She’d made a huge step in getting here, and sacrificed it all in the end. Rage boiled up inside me, hot and familiar. I tried to call on my dragon self, but the wards held firm.

“You son of a frog,” Zee snarled beside me, purple light pulsing from his wings. His eyes locked onto Syros with murderous intent. “Let’s see how you handle death by orgasm!”

He snapped his fingers, the sound cracking across the yard.

Nothing happened.

Zee’s confident expression faltered. He snapped again, then again, each motion growing more frantic.

“Performance issues?” Syros taunted.

Zee’s wings dimmed slightly. “The fuck? I should be juiced for days...”

“The wards... It’s worn off fast,” I realized aloud.

“Well, fuck,” Zee muttered, then rippled his clawed fingers and raised his fists. “Guess we do this the demon way.”

He launched at Syros, catching my brother off guard. Zee landed a solid punch to Syros’s jaw, followed by a knee to his stomach. Syros doubled over, more in surprise than pain.

“How’s that feel, lizard balls?” Zee taunted, dancing back. “You want some more demon coming at you?”

Syros straightened slowly, wiping a smear of blood from his lip. His eyes had changed, pupils narrowed to vertical, reptilian slits. “Tickles.” Syros attacked with predatory focus, each strike calculated and devastating. Zee fought back with everything he had, his movements a blur of purple light and fury, sparks flying, wings

flapping, but without his enhanced powers, and unarmed, I already knew how this ended.

I stepped in. “Syros?—”

A vicious uppercut caught Zee under the chin, snapping his head back. He staggered, wings flaring weakly. Before he could recover, Syros delivered a crushing blow to his stomach, followed by a kick that sent Zee tumbling across the dusty ground.

“No!” I rushed to his side as he struggled to rise, blood soaking the jagged slash marks through his orange suit.

“I’m good,” he gasped, but his legs gave out as he tried to stand. “Just... just give me a second.”

Syros laughed, backing toward the hole in the fence. “Is this really all you’ve got? The great Heroes of the City? I’ve scraped more heroic things off my shoes.”

I dropped onto the dirt next to Zee and helped him to sit up. He breathed hard, ragged, and his wings had dulled.

“Go,” Zee rasped, gripping my arm. “Don’t let him get away.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“I’m just winded. I’ll be right behind you, Kitten.” He coughed, then managed a pained smile.

I squeezed his hand. “Promise?”

“On my name... Lycian, Scourge of Demios, God of Fucking, Best Demon Ever.”



Standing, I turned to face my brother, but he was already slipping through the hole in the fence. Our eyes met for a brief moment—his triumphant, smug, satisfied. A growl simmered inside me.

“Come and get me, little brother,” he challenged, then stumbled from the fence and staggered a few feet into the starlit barren background of the Nevada desert.

I looked back at Zee one last time. He nodded weakly, his tail flicking in what might have been encouragement.

“Go be a badass,” he whispered.

I sprinted across the yard. The sirens still wailed inside the prison, but out here, with the stars overhead and the fence breached, a different kind of alarm sounded in my head.

Syros was free.

And I was alone. I’d wanted it this way, to face him one-on-one, to relive the past and make it right. But now it was happening, I missed Zee and Victor at my side. I was going to need them...

I dove through the hole in the fence, feeling the wards’ influence fade as I passed through and my dragon self stretched beneath my glamor.

The moment had come.

Only one dragon would survive what came next.

### CHAPTER 22

Outside the prison's huge perimeter fence, the vastness of the Nevada desert spread all around, bathed in monochrome moonlight—barren, beautiful, isolated, and perfect for the final showdown with my brother.

My glamor twitched as I readied to let it go.

Syros staggered several yards away, then straightened. I could see the change already beginning—his shoulders broadening, his silhouette elongating against the starlit sky.

“Just you and me now, brother,” he laughed, his voice deepening to a rumble. “No wards. No cages. No pathetic friends to hide behind.”

He still didn't get it. Probably never would. My friends were everything to me.

I stepped forward, feeling the last of the wards' influence fall away. “You should never have hunted me down. If you hadn't threatened them and the hotel I'd have left you alone.”

His skin began to ripple, scales pushing up beneath his glamor. “I had to hunt you. You and me, we're the last. It's in our nature to kill. I need you gone so I can take the ultimate crown.”

“You still don't understand, do you?” I shook my head and flexed my hands at my sides, gradually letting the glamor go. “It was never about power, not for me.”

Syros laughed, the sound cracking into a roar as his face elongated, teeth lengthening into fangs. “Power is all there is! That first night I came to you, I offered you a choice. The demon, the vampire, your little pets could have lived long, uneventful lives if you’d just submitted to me.”

I showed him my claws, moonlight gleaming off their razor edges . “ Uneventful is not really how the SOS Hotel works. It’s mostly chaos and mayhem.”

“After I kill you, I’m going to see to it that place is reduced to ash, starting with your wretched friends?—”

The desert night erupted in twin bursts of energy as we both shifted.

My bones stretched and cracked, glamor falling away as my spine elongated and wings burst from my back. My skin hardened into iridescent scales. I roared as the last pieces of humanity fell away, replaced by claws sharp enough to tear through steel and jaws that could crush cars like candy.

Syros roared too. Larger than me, his scales shimmered a deep tropical green, so dark they absorbed light rather than reflecting it. His eyes glowed with molten hatred, wings unfurling to block out the stars.

We circled each other, two primordial beasts, our massive bodies kicking up dust from the desert floor, tails lashing, wings flared. The prison’s tiny searchlights cut ineffectually through the darkness. Victor and Zee were down there, so were thousands of others. A few blasts of fire from Syros, and it would all be scorched rubble.

I had to end this now. End him .

He struck—a blur of scales and fury. His massive tail whipped toward my head. I

ducked. Displaced air rush over my wings and back. I lunged for his exposed flank. My teeth scraped against his armored hide, searching for a weak point between scales, but skittered right off. His heart... I had to get to his heart and rip it out for good. He couldn't heal without a heart.

Syros roared and twisted, one massive clawed talon swiping down. Pain lanced across my shoulder as his claws tore through scale and muscle. I disengaged, leaping back to create distance.

Blood—my blood—stained the desert sand. But the wound was already closing, dragon healing mending the gash even as Syros spun around for another attack.

This time I met him head on. Our bodies collided with thunderous impact, the sound echoing across the desert. We grappled, claws seeking purchase, tails lashing, wings whipping up dust storms. I was smaller, and quicker, but Syros had raw power on his side.

He caught me in a deadly embrace, his larger body driving me back, toward the prison. We crashed to the ground, me on my back, my wings pinned painfully beneath me. His jaws snapped inches from my throat—too close! I strained to lever him back and protect my belly at the same time.

He snapped at my face again.

Oh dear.

This was... not going well.

In fact, we'd been here before. I'd fled then, leaving him for dead, running and running, until coming to this world and finding one broken but bright demon whose shadow I could hide in.

I couldn't run now. There was too much at stake, too much to fight for. My wonderful, funny, brave Zee. And Victor—my strength, my rock. The SOS Hotel, worth so much more than the rotted timbers and dodgy electrics holding it together. Staffed by people who cared. A sanctuary for all. A beacon of hope.

That hope gave me strength. I twisted my neck and opened my jaws, blasting white-hot flame directly into his face. Syros reared back with a roar of pain, momentarily blinded. He scratched at his nose. I kicked out with my hind legs, catching him in the belly and sending him tumbling back.

We both took to the air, wings churning up small sandstorms below us. The desert night became a deadly dance of tooth and claw and flame. We spiraled higher, silhouettes against the moon, then dove at each other, claws tearing. Teeth snapping.

Each impact shook the earth below. Each roar split the night air. Blood—both mine and his—rained down upon the sand.

I feinted left, tucked my wings in and dropped, then dove sharply right and flapped hard, rising up beneath him. My jaws latched onto his wing membrane, teeth tearing through the tough tissue. Syros bellowed in pain and rage, trying to shake me off, but I held fast, ripping and tearing.

With a sickening sound, his wing buckled, a massive tear rendering it useless. But I clung on, and we both plummeted, Syros struggling to stay aloft with one damaged wing and my dead weight. Faster we fell, spiraling, almost out of control now. Syros roared his alarm. His black claws slashed at my face, trying to dislodge me.

At the last possible second, I let go and threw open my wings, like opening a parachute.

But Syros slammed into the unforgiving ground.

Sand and rock exploded around him. Bones cracked, sounding like thunder. I dropped onto him, talons locking in, pinning him under me.

He thrashed beneath me, his remaining good wing beating frantically, his tail whipping up sand. I drove my claws deeper into his shoulders, sinking them through scales and into flesh. My jaws opened wide, poised above the vulnerable spot where his neck met his chest—the fastest route to his heart.

One bite. That's all it would take. One savage tear through scale and bone to reach the pulsing organ beneath. I could taste his fear now, acrid and electric. His struggles weakened as he realized his position.

My gaze caught his.

His throat undulated, and my brother the bully lay still, staring up at me, waiting for death.

I'd done it...

I'd beaten him.

He was mine!

I hesitated, panting through open jaws, teeth still bared to deliver the killing blow.

Images flashed through my mind: Victor's quiet strength and wisdom; Zee's bubbling laughter; the SOS Hotel, a sanctuary for the broken and lost; Tom Collins's grudging loyalty; and even Jenny's final choice to stand with us rather than against us.

None of us were good, but we weren't bad either. When it came down to it, we chose the right way even if we sometimes got it wrong. And that was the important thing.

Choosing to be good.

My teeth clicked shut, inches from his throat.

I pulled back slightly, still keeping him pinned. My growl rumbled through the night—a warning—as my brother watched on. Still not moving. Still waiting.

He suddenly shifted back to human, wrapping himself in glamor again, forcing me back.

“What are you doing?” he snarled, panting. “Finish it! Prove you’re just like me!”

I shifted back, tucking all of my huge bulk into a neat Adam Vex package so I could face my brother eye to eye once more. “You will go back to that prison,” I breathed, my voice deeper, the shift too close to the surface. “Where you will be contained and handed over to the SSD. You will never threaten anyone I love again.”

His expression was unreadable, somewhere between contempt and something else—something almost like respect.

“Mercy from a dragon?” he said, the word sounding foreign on his tongue. “How... unexpected.”

“I’m not like you, or the rest of them,” I said. “I don’t kill to prove my strength.” Not anymore. I was Adam Vex now. Sometimes nice, with a side order of scary when necessary.

Syros scowled and looked over his shoulder at the prison, then back to me. “You want me to hand myself in?”

“I mean, it’s that or I eat your heart. So...”

He laughed... Actually laughed. “When you put it like that...” His expression turned contemplative, almost peaceful. And I began to wonder if we could be brothers, just the two of us. The last two dragons. Would he ever learn that he didn’t have to be bad?

Then his eyes hardened.

“Fool,” he spat, and lunged.

His right hook whipped my head around. Caught off guard, I stumbled back. He reached for my throat.

“Mercy is weakness! I’ll tear out your heart and?—”

A blinding flash of purple light cut through the night, followed by the unmistakable buzzing sound of a cattle prod—amplified a hundredfold.

Syros’s body jolted upright, and convulsed violently, his roar transforming into a pained screech. Standing behind him, illuminated in the glow of his own wings, stood Zee—prison jumpsuit torn to shreds, face streaked with blood. In his hands he wielded what looked like three cattle prods wired together, crackling with electricity far beyond their intended output. With some added incubus juice too, probably.

“Surprise jab, motherfucker!” Zee yelled, jamming the makeshift weapon against Syros’s spine again. “No one fucks with SOS Hotel management!”

Syros whirled toward this new threat, but his movements were jerky, uncoordinated from the electrical shock. Before he could strike, another figure stepped from the shadows—Victor, his eyes blazing silver.

“SLEEP,” he commanded, the word carrying the full force of his amplified power.



The sound hit Syros like a physical blow. He staggered, his body swaying as he fought the compulsion. But Victor wasn't done. He stepped closer, his voice dropping to a deadly whisper.

"You will sleep now, and when you wake, you will know only captivity for the rest of your days."

Syros fought it, his will battling against Victor's command, but the combined assault was too much. Between Zee's electrical attack, Victor's supernaturally charged voice, and his exhaustion from our fight, even he had his limits.

With a final, defiant growl, Syros collapsed face first in the dirt, then lay still, unconscious but alive.

The sudden silence seemed surreal. I stood there, staring at my brother's fallen body, then at my two most favorite people in the whole world.

"You came," I managed to say, my voice rough and strange.

Zee limped toward me, the jury-rigged cattle prod still sparking in his hand. "Always." His wings were tattered, but they still cast a soft purple glow over the desert.

Victor approached from the other side, his pristine prison jumpsuit somehow still mostly intact despite everything. "Together," he said simply. "Always."

Beaten and exhausted, I wobbled, and let them scoop me into their arms, feeling stronger than ever before. Because I wasn't alone.

"Did we just save the world again?" Zee mumbled into my hair. "Because if we did, imma need another certificate and a new fuckin' hat."

### CHAPTER 23

#### Four Days Later

Welcome Home! the tattered banners strung across the SOS Hotel porch entrance proclaimed. As Victor, Zee, and I climbed from the back of the SSD van, Madame Matase, Chef étrange, Little Jimmy, and even Tom Collins stood on the deck clapping.

So much had happened since we'd left on vacation, that it felt strange setting foot on the front step again. Good strange. It really did feel as though we were coming home.

We entered the lobby, where more banners had been hastily fixed over doorways. The sagging balloons had a few scratches. The gremlins had gotten to them, but even half deflated they looked great.

Zee headed straight for the foldaway table with plates of snacks and nibbles. "Mac and cheese! Gah, I've died and gone to SOS Hotel heaven!"

This was all very... extravagant and wonderful, and I had a tight little knot in my throat that wouldn't go away.

"I'm so glad we have you home again." Madame Matase's eyes looked a little glassy, like maybe she might cry. If she cried, so would I.

"Uh... yeah. So uhm... this is lovely, but how can we afford it?"

“Tom Collins assures me he had some money saved for when he... Now, how did he put this exactly? He called it a flight fund. For when this circus fails and we all drown in debt . Yes, that’s what he said.”

That sounded like something Tom would plan for, and say. “I guess he doesn’t think we’re a failure anymore.”

The front desk phone rang, so Madame Matase glided off to answer it. “No more running off, darling,” she scolded over her shoulder at me, then giggled. “It’s a good thing I like you, or I’d have to curse you, Adam Vex.”

I laughed, then stopped. She’d probably meant it.

“Adam Vex.” Agent Leomaris’s slow-moving, syrupy voice announced their presence behind me. I couldn’t tell from their tone if they had cuffs to slap on my wrist, but figured as I turned that if they’d wanted me arrested they’d have had their agents lock me up at the prison. Instead, we’d been bundled into a van, whisked to nearby motel, given a change of clothes, told to eat, then debriefed relentlessly for three full days. Only after the SSD was satisfied with our stories did they ship us back to our hotel door.

The SSD agent smiled as I turned, then thrust out a hand for me to shake. “It is good to see you well. You had me worried for far too long.”

I gripped their hand and shook with gusto. Their smile grew, and so did mine. I was ashamed I’d even doubted them. “We wouldn’t be here if not for you putting all the pieces in place.”

“You have Tom Collins to thank for that. As soon as you vanished and your brother made an unwanted appearance, Tom worked night and day to track your whereabouts and recruit those he was certain you would have helped. Of course, your brother was determined to paint you in a bad light, but your bartender made it clear he’s the only

one who is allowed to critique the Heroes of San Francisco. Your barman is very protective of you, and this hotel.”

Tom was currently standing by a bookshelf that had to be new, clearly discussing its construction with Victor. “He really did all that?” I asked.

“Indeed. He is a formidable manager. And friend.”

“Yeah.” My heart swelled with pride. Until Tom glared, as though sensing we were talking about him, and my heart withered under his unnerving judgmental scrutiny.

“It’s probably best not to reveal you’re aware of the lengths he went to. He seems to prefer it if everyone believes he despises you and this hotel.”

I grinned. “His secret is safe with me.”

Zee—plate in hand—sauntered over to Tom Collins and Victor, and as Agent Leomaris and I watched, Zee plucked a brown, plastic-wrapped package from under his baggy, off-the-shoulder sweater and gave it to Tom. It took me a second to place where that package had come from—Hooper’s warehouse. He must have pocketed a bag of cocaine, because of course he had. And now he was giving it to Tom, because of course wrapped drugs were a totally normal present to bring back from a vacation in the Everglades.

“Anyhoo.” I grabbed Leomaris’s arm and steered them around to face the reception desk. “How’s my brother doing?”

“Ah yes, well... as can be expected. The children adore him, of course.”

I gulped. “Kids?” They loved... my brother? Usually, he was the one who loved kids... when they went down in one bite, without wriggling.

“Yes, while we have his confession of world-domination ambitions from the cameras in the prison visitors’ room, he did not in fact commit any substantial crimes. So he’s one of the first Lost Ones to take part in the new community outreach initiative.”

Syros was in the community ...? I did not like where this was going. It had only been a few days since our showdown, and the SSD had let him out? “Huh... And what is that initiative exactly?”

“I see you’re concerned.” Leomaris’s smile was sympathetic but also comforting. “But there’s really no need to be. He’s restrained by wards and can’t hurt anyone. Community service is a proven rehabilitation program.”

“Oh... and it’s safe... for the uh... kids?”

“Oh yes, human younglings love being able to touch a dragon.”

“Touch... a dragon?”

“He’s in a petting zoo for under fives.”

Wait, my brother was in a zoo? They’d put him somewhere he was going to be prodded and poked by small children? Oh dear... but also... okay, then. Maybe having human younglings crawling all over him would teach him the error of his ways.

“You may also like to know the manager of The Peach Pit, Kat, has been charged with his business partner’s murder. It seems Skrinde had kept proof that the apparent accident was anything but, likely to pressure Kat into helping him run drugs through South Beach.”

It was a shame Kat had turned out not to be the good person Zee remembered, but not everyone could or should be saved.

“We’re shutting much of the Nevada prison down,” Leomaris continued. “All low-level Lost Ones will be assigned a community officer. The hope is that we can teach them to integrate better. Something that should have been done years ago.”

“That’s good.”

Leomaris nodded, and paused, likely thinking of all the Lost Ones who might have been saved, but at least now they had a second chance. “I hear Zander, the lupine shifter from Whiteacre, is now employed at Razorsedge?”

“Oh yeah.” I grinned. “I heard on the way over. He’s a... uhm... the club’s equipment engineer.” Which was a fancy way of saying Zander maintained the club’s vast array of toys . Zander was absolutely in his element, and I had no doubts that the Razorsedge demons would adore him.

“I see,” Leomaris said.

“Agent Fae!” Zee swaggered over, having left his drugs with Tom and his empty plate on the side. “You ever been to the neverglades? Like... hell on earth. If you don’t eat it, it eats you. There are frogs the size of people. And alligators lied! They are not cute and fluffy. Worse than that, fucking leeches. Worms that stick to your skin and suck out your brains. That place is next-level fucked. Should all be set on fire. All of it. All the bad things are there.”

“And drugs,” Leomaris said dryly.

“What?” Zee blinked, then laughed him off. “Oh yeah, drugs, all the drugs, but you got Skrinde for all that... right?”

“Mostly... We appeared to be missing a few packages, but I am certain they’ll resurface.”

Zee grimaced, and planted his hands on his hips. “Probably the frogs took it. You can’t trust ’em. Slippery critters. Big tongues. Very bad. Also, did I mention the alligators? One tried to eat Victor. Spat him out. Nobody likes vampires.”

Leomaris’s lips ticked with their effort to keep the smile at bay. “It is good to see you again, Zodiac.”

“I fuckin’ know, right? Shit got wild, but we are pros and handled it.” He slung an arm around my shoulders. “Like true Heroes of the fucking City.”

“Ah yes, about that... It seems placing such a responsibility on the three of you was?—”

“A brilliant fucking idea?” Zee supplied.

“Ambitious?” Victor suggested, stopping at my right.

“Perhaps optimistic is the word? We’re revoking your status, but only so that you can return to your old lives. Frankly, putting that much pressure on three individuals after an already traumatic event was too much to ask.”

“And you have some superiors asking difficult questions.” Victor smiled, seeing through Leomaris’s politeness to the crux of the issue. We really weren’t all that great at being heroes.

“Indeed. It’s best for everyone if you stay here, keep your guests happy, and your heads down. At least for a few months—or years. Live out the rest of your days as the heroes who twice saved the world.”

I grinned at Zee. He seemed sad, for a moment. He’d loved being a hero, but he also loved running a crazy hotel for Lost Ones, and after a few seconds, he smiled. “Yeah, I’m down with it. This place is more than enough, and these guys.”

Victor smiled too, in that soft, polite way that meant he was ecstatic but would never show it.

“I think we’d like that,” I said. We’d just be us again. Just three weirdos trying to figure out how to love while also crafting a normal life in a very abnormal hotel.

Tom rang a little bell, set it down on the side, and clapped his hands together. “Fun time’s over. Everyone get back to work, and if you’re not paying for a room or buying a drink, then kindly fuck off. This hotel is not a charity—but I did steal this food from one.”

The elevator pinged, the doors opened, and a fae ran screaming through the lobby and out the front doors.

“Was that a gremlin in her hair?” Zee asked. “Or a real weird hat?”

“Yes,” Victor replied.

Agent Leomaris bowed their head in a brief farewell gesture, probably sensing it was best to leave before the chaos erupted. “Welcome back to the SOS Hotel.”

It was good to be back, where we belonged.

“Does anyone have a fire extinguisher?” Madame Matase called.

Together.

Always.

The End

(For real, this time)



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