

My brother ruined a perfectly good run by saying, “Justine is pregnant.”

That kicked me completely out of my mental zone, and suddenly I became aware of the burning in my legs, my heavy breathing. I dropped out of gear and gradually slowed down until I was walking. In the blue light of July predawn, Montrose Beach was deserted. It wasn’t hot yet. That’s why I was up at oh-God-thirty.

Thomas slowed down, too, until we were walking side by side. His dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Like me, he wore an old T-shirt, sweatpants, and sneakers. He was one of those men who were so good-looking that it made people check around to see if they were being pranked.

He was also a vampire.

“Let me get this right. You pick me up this morning,” I said. “We came all the way down here. We did six miles in the sand and neither of us said a word. The whole city is still and quiet. We’ve barely seen a moving car.”

“Yeah?” Thomas asked.

I scowled. “So why’d you have to go and ruin it?”

His mouth twitched at the corner. “Sorry to spoil your man time, there, Hemingway.”

“Nnngh,” I said. We had reached the end of our last lap and were almost back to the cars anyway. I stopped and turned toward the lake

and breathed. The weighted vest I was wearing pinched at something on my shoulder, restricting its movement, and I rolled it irritably.

Far out over the lake, the blue had begun to lighten. Sunrise would be soon.

“You sure?” I asked.

“Very,” he said.

I glanced aside at him. The ideal symmetry of his face was stretched tight with tension. His eyes, which were sometimes blue, usually grey, were tinting toward reflective silver. I knew the look. He was Hungry.

“How did that happen?” I asked him.

He looked aside at me without turning his head and lifted his eyebrows. “Did no one ever have this talk with you?”

I scowled. “I mean, weren’t you careful?”

“Yes,” Thomas said. “And my kind are all but infertile to boot. Happened anyway.”

“What happens now?”

“The usual, mostly. Except that the baby’s Hunger will draw life energy from Justine. She’s going to be fed upon continuously for the next seven and a half months.”

I studied him. “Is that dangerous?”

He swallowed. “According to the family records, just over fifty percent either don’t survive the delivery or die shortly after.”

“Hell’s bells,” I said. I kept staring out at the water. Blue had given way to lighter blue and then to the first wash of gold. Chicago was starting to wake up around us. The burble of noise from the freeways had begun to escalate by slow degrees. Birds in the sanctuary at the end of the beach were beginning to sing.

“I don’t know what to do,” Thomas said. “If I lose her . . .”

He didn’t continue. He didn’t have to. There was a universe of pain residing in that ellipsis.

“You’ll be fine,” I said. “I’ll help.”

“You?” Thomas asked. A faint smile lightened his profile for a second.

“I’ll have you know I’ve been a full-time dad for well over a month, and Maggie isn’t dead yet. I clearly have mad parenting skills.”

The smile faded. “Right. But . . . Harry . . .”

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Don't borrow trouble," I said. "There's plenty of that going around without looking for more of it. She needs taking care of. So whatever needs to happen, we'll do it."

He stared at me for a silent moment and nodded once.

"Meanwhile," I said, "you should probably focus on taking care of yourself so you can be there for her."

"I'm fine," he said, waving one hand.

"You don't look fine."

That made him jerk his head toward me and glare. The expression changed him. Suddenly he looked less like a human being and more like something carved from marble. Angry, angry marble. I felt my shoulders tense up in the presence of a creature I knew was genuinely dangerous.

He glared at me, but he had to look up to do it. My older brother is right around six feet tall, but I'm six nine. Usually, I have a commanding advantage when looking down at him. Today, I had less than usual, since I was standing in a depression in the sand.

His voice was cool. "Leave it, Harry."

"If I don't," I asked, "are you gonna punch me?"

He scowled at me.

"Because you know. I'm all Captain Winter now. It might not go the way you assume it would."

He sneered. "Please. I'd hog-tie you with your entrails."

I squinted at him. Then I spoke carefully and slowly. "If you don't take care of yourself and act like a sane person," I said, "maybe we'll find out."

He scowled and started to speak, his expression darkening.

"No," I said simply. "No, you don't get to do that. You don't get to go into an emo vampire angst spiral over this. Because that's selfish, and you can't afford to think that way. Not anymore."

He stared at me for a while, his expression furious, then thoughtful, then disturbed.

Waves rolled in on the beach.

"I have to think of them," he said.

"Good man would," I said.

His grey eyes stared out at the lake. "Everything is going to change," he said.

“Yeah.”

“I’m scared,” he said.

“Yeah.”

Something in his body language relaxed, and suddenly he was just my brother again. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That I got edgy. I . . . don’t like to talk vampire stuff with you.”

“You’d rather pretend we were just normal brothers, with normal problems,” I said.

“Wouldn’t you?” he asked.

I squinted down at my feet for a while. “Maybe. But you can’t ignore things that are real just because they’re uncomfortable. I’ll sit on you and make you take care of yourself if I have to. But it’s probably better for them if you do it.”

He nodded. “Probably. I have a solution in mind,” he said. “I’ll work on it. Good enough?”

I raised both of my hands, palms out. “I’m not your dad,” I said. Then it was my turn to frown. “Your dad’s side of the family going to be an issue?”

“When aren’t they an issue?”

“Heh,” I said. Silence stretched. Over the lake, the sky began to swell with the first faint band of deep orange. It had already gotten to the skyscrapers behind us. The light moved steadily down the buildings’ sides.

“Sometimes,” Thomas said, “I hate what I am. I hate being me.”

“Maybe it’s time to work on that,” I said to him. “Isn’t really the kind of thing you want to teach to a little kid.”

He glowered at me. Then he said, “When the hell did you get deep?”

“Through experience, wisdom I have earned,” I said in Yoda’s voice. But it tickled my throat weirdly and made me start coughing. I dealt with that for longer than I should have needed to and was straightening up again when Thomas said, his tone suddenly tighter, “Harry.”

I looked up to see a young man approaching us.

Carlos Ramirez was of average height, maybe of a little more than average muscle. He was filling out, getting that solid adult look to him, though for some reason I still expected to see a gangly kid in his early twenties whenever I saw him. He’d grown his dark hair out longer. His

skin was bronzed from inclination and the sun. He walked with difficulty, limping and leaning on a thick cane carved with symbols—his wizard's staff. He wore jeans and a tank top and a light jacket. Ramirez was solid, a proven fighter, a good man to have at your back, and was one of a very few people on the White Council of Wizardry whom I considered a friend.

“Harry,” he said. He nodded warily at Thomas. “Raith.”

My brother nodded back. “Been a while.”

“Since the Deeps,” Ramirez agreed.

“Carlos,” I said. “How's your back?”

“I know when it's going to rain now,” he said, flashing me a quick grin. “Won't be dancing much for a while. But I won't miss that damned chair.”

He held up a hand. I bumped fists with him. “What brings you out from the coast?”

“Council business,” he said.

Thomas nodded and said, “I'll go.”

“No need,” Ramirez said. “This is going public this morning. McCoy thought it would be good for someone you knew to tell you, Harry.”

I grunted and unfastened the damned weighted vest. White Council business, typically, gave me a headache. “What is it this time?”

“Peace talks,” Ramirez said.

I arched an eyebrow. “What, seriously? With the Fomor?”

The supernatural world had been kind of topsy-turvy lately. Some lunatic had managed to wipe out the Red Court of Vampires completely, and the resulting vacuum had destabilized balances of power that were centuries old. The biggest result of the chaos was that the Fomor, an undersea power hardly anyone had spoken about during my lifetime, had risen up with a vengeance, taking territory from various powers and wreaking havoc on ordinary humans—mostly the poor, migrants, people without many champions to stand for them.

“A convocation of the Unseelie Accord signatories,” Ramirez confirmed. “Every major power is coming to the meeting. Apparently, the Fomor requested it. They want to resolve our differences. Everyone's sending representatives.”

I whistled. That would be something. A gathering of influential members of the greatest powers in the supernatural world, in a time where tensions were high and tempers hot. I pitied the poor town where that little dinner party was going to take place. In fact . . .

I felt my mouth open. "Wait. They're doing it here? *Here?* In Chicago?" Ramirez shrugged. "Yeah, that's why McCoy sent me to tell you."

"Whose stupid idea was that?" I asked.

"That's the other reason McCoy sent me," Ramirez said, grinning. "The local baron offered his hospitality."

"*Marcone?*" I demanded. Gentleman Johnnie Marcone, former robber baron of Chicago's outfit, was now *Baron* Marcone, the only vanilla human being to sign the Unseelie Accords. He'd managed that a few years ago, and he'd been building his power base ever since.

"That stunt he pulled with Mab this spring," I said, scowling.

Ramirez shrugged and spread his hands. "Marcone maneuvered Nicodemus Archleone into a corner and took everything he had, without breaking a single one of the bylaws of the Accords. Say what you will about the man, but he's competent. It impressed a lot of people."

"Yeah," I said darkly. "That was all him. Tell me that the Council doesn't want me to be our emissary."

Ramirez blinked. "Wait, what? Oh . . . oh God, no, Harry. I mean . . . no. Just no."

My brother covered up his mouth with one hand and coughed. I chose to ignore the wrinkles at the corners of his eyes.

Ramirez cleared his throat before continuing. "But they will expect you to be the Council's liaison with Winter, if needed, and to provide security for the Senior Council members in attendance. Everyone will be conducting themselves under guest-right, but they'll all bring their own muscle, too."

"Trust but verify," I said. I took off the weighted vest with disgust and tossed it onto the beach. It made an extremely weighty *thump* when it hit.

Ramirez arched an eyebrow. "Christ, Harry. How much does that thing weigh?"

"Two-twenty," I replied.

He shook his head. His expression, for a moment, was probing and pensive. I'd learned to recognize the look—that “I wonder if Harry Dresden is still Harry Dresden or if the Queen of Air and Darkness has turned him into her personal monster” look.

I get that one a lot these days. Sometimes in the mirror.

I looked down at my feet again and studied the ground. I could see it better as the sun drew nearer the horizon.

“You sure the Senior Council wants me to be on the security team?” I asked.

Ramirez nodded firmly. “I’m heading it up. They told me I could pick my own team. I’m picking you. I want you there.”

“Where you can more easily keep an eye on him,” Thomas murmured.

Ramirez grinned and inclined his head. “Maybe. Or maybe I just want to see some more buildings burn down.” He nodded to me and said, “Harry. I’ll be in touch.”

I nodded back. “Good to see you, ’Los.”

“Raith,” Ramirez said.

“Warden Ramirez,” my brother answered.

Ramirez shambled off, leaning on his cane, moving without much grace but with considerable energy.

“Well,” Thomas said. He watched Ramirez depart, and his eyes narrowed in thought. “It looks like I’d better get moving. Things are going to get complicated.”

“You don’t know that,” I said. “Maybe it’ll be a nice dinner, and everyone will sing ‘Kumbaya’ together.”

He eyed me.

I looked down at my feet again and said, “Yeah. Maybe not.”

He snorted, clapped my arm, and started walking back to the car without saying anything further. I knew he’d wait for me.

Once he was gone, I stepped out of the depression in the sand and picked up my weighted vest. Then I turned and studied it as the sun began to come up in earnest and I could finally see clearly.

I’d been standing in a humanoid footprint.

It was well over three feet long.

Once I looked, I saw that there was a line of them, with several yards stretching between each one and the next. The line led toward the water. The rising lakeshore breeze was already beginning to blur the footprints' outlines.

Maybe their appearance was a complete coincidence.

Yeah. Maybe not.

I slung the weighted vest over my shoulder and started trudging back to the car. I had that sinking feeling that things were about to get hectic again.

