Chapter 24

There Ain't No Man, a Man That Can Change the Shape My Soul is in

It didn’t take me long to set up the new summoning circle, because I poured sand over the one Nick used last time. I was doing my part by recycling, I guess. If I kept this up, I should probably invest in making a permanent outside circle. It would be fun explaining it to visitors.

I had a small audience for this one. James and Ramon were there. Ava stayed to watch, Lock at her side. The rest of her crew had wandered into the house to find something to eat. Kell had gone with them, saying someone should keep an eye on them, but I think it was mostly because he didn’t want to be around me when I summoned Douglas. Kell avoided my kind of magic when he could.

The circle complete, I wasted no time creating a small incision on the side of my left wrist with my athame. Ramon had offered to donate, but with my connection to Douglas, I felt my blood would be a better choice.

“Try Ashley first,” James said, his voice carrying in the quiet yard.

“Do you think she’ll be able to answer?” Ramon asked.

James gave a sharp shake of his head, his shoulders tense. “No, but we should try anyway. Summoning Douglas…”

“Not the best idea,” I finished for him. “I know.” I closed my eyes, calling up my power. I flicked my hand, spattering blood on the grass. I felt each drop that fell, a frigid burst of power, like dropping rocks into an icy pond. The power splashed back up, igniting on my skin. As much as I hated what I was sometimes, it felt good to have my power back. To be *me* again.

I called for Ashley, picturing her in my mind.

Once.

Twice.

No response. I tipped my head to the side, my eyes opening on a silent question to James. He was chewing on his thumb. He flicked his fingers out in a go on gesture.

I shook my shoulders, loosening them up, sprinkling more blood into the grass. Impatience snapped at me, fueled by fear and worry. I skipped the pleasantries, punching his name into the ether with my power. “Douglas Montgomery!”

Nothing happened. I sucked in another breath. Before I could yell his name again, he popped into being a few feet in front of me.

Douglas had his hands out, like he’d been in the middle of doing something. He focused on me, unblinking. “Well, that was unexpected.”

“I need answers.” Adrenaline and power coursed through me, giving my words a snarl they wouldn’t normally have.

Douglas slowly lowered his hands, examining the situation “You only invoked one circle.”

“I know.” That had caused a short, brutal argument between me and James, but I’d held fast. “I don’t need one. You’re going to do what I say, and answer my questions, or so help me Douglas, I will spend the rest of my existence making your afterlife as miserable as possible.”

Douglas put his hands behind his back, a shark smile gliding across his face. “Our agreement—”

I cut him off. “Was for you to tell me everything to do with my situation. To share knowledge. This is the same problem, so I consider it part of our original agreement. I’m not in the mood to barter or fuck around.”

My approach was something James and I had agreed on. Normally, I would have played it cool, tried to give as little information to Douglas as I could. Pretended the situation was no big deal. That wouldn’t work here, and I wasn’t so good of a liar that I would have been able to pull off nonchalant.

Douglas tipped his head, his gaze assessing. “The ghoul came back.”

“The ghoul came back,” I repeated, dread in my voice. “It came back and it took people that were ours.”

“Who does it have?” Douglas asked, his attention on me sharpening.

“Does it matter?”

He didn’t answer, just waited.

I glared right back.

“It has two necromancers that we know of.” James had stepped up to the edge of the circle while I’d been staring at Douglas. “June Walker, from New Orleans. Lily—” He choked on her name, only for a second, but Douglas caught it, his expression shifting to an unreadable mask. “Lily Hatfield. It also took two of the Blackthorn pack—Bridin and Sayer.”

Douglas watched James—I was all but forgotten in this conversation. After a long silence, Douglas moved closer to the edge of the circle, inches from James. They were having some sort of silent conversation that I couldn’t follow.

Finally, so faint I could barely hear the words, James spoke. “They’re *mine*.”

Douglas nodded once, turning toward me. “I’ll help you.”

I couldn’t keep the shock off my face. “You will?” It was too easy. It felt like a trap.

Douglas made a sound then, part irritation, part amusement. “Do you know what the afterlife gives people like me, Sam? It gives us *time*.”

Time didn’t sound like a bad gift to me or a punishment, and I said as much.

Douglas sighed, crossing his arms almost like he was hugging himself. “For you, no. Time would be a great boon for someone such as Samhain LaCroix.” He dropped his arms. “But I am not someone such as you. I was a monster in life, Sam. I am a monster in death.” His gaze dropped to his hands, and I had the sense that he was seeing something I couldn’t see. “The things I have done.”

Normally, I would have been down to listen to Douglas—not because I wanted to hear what he had to say, really, but because I didn’t want to hear it at all. Douglas was a warning, a flashing neon sign in the darkness of what could be if I let myself slip down the wrong paths. But not right now. “For every second you speak, that’s another second the ghoul has them.”

Douglas nodded. “I know.” He looked at me then, and for the first time in I think ever, I saw Douglas the man. Not the power-hungry necromancer. Not the man who had waded through blood in his long life. No, I was seeing the person he could have been. “But you won’t trust my help if I don’t explain why I’m doing it.”

Which was true, damn it.

“I owe James,” Douglas admitted, his voice in that moment as close to an abasement as Douglas would ever get. “For everything he gave and everything I took, I owe James.” He turned from me, his attention back on James. “I’ll help you get back your hoard.”

James swallowed hard, his silver eyes shining. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Douglas said. “Not for this.” Then he stepped away from James, like being so close to him was physically painful. And maybe it was. James, as far as I knew, was the only person who had ever loved Douglas. Who was family in any way that counted. That was both amazing and extremely sad. My life contained so much wealth that Douglas’s didn’t.

“What do you need?” Douglas asked me.

“I need to go to the underworld,” I said. “I need to open a pathway and get them out. That’s the first priority. Then I need to figure out a way to contain the ghoul so it can’t do this again.”

Douglas went into what I’d started mentally referring to as his thinking stance—gaze soft, arms crossed, his mouth pinched. “I’m not sure what I can tell you about the ghoul,” he said finally. “I never found the original spell or any information on how they dealt with them before. But I can tell you how to get into the underworld.”

I tamped down on the excitement trying to flood my system. It wouldn’t do any good to get my hopes up yet. “How?”

“There are certain places where the boundaries between us and the land of the dead are thinner than others. They’re hard to find and normally it would take time to track one down, but you’re in luck.”

“I am?” If this was luck, I didn’t want any.

“You are. I already know where one is. I built a cabin by it.”

James’s head snapped up. “The cabin?”

Douglas smiled. “The cabin.” His smile faded. “In this case, that’s the easy part.”

“Funny, it doesn’t sound like the easy part,” I said. Ramon snorted.

“You’re going to need pillars to hold the breech open,” Douglas said. “As well as a few other things, but it’s the pillars that you need most. And you’ll need them on both sides—which will be tricky right now, because access to the underworld is limited.”

“Okay,” I said, not liking at all how this sounded. “What’s a pillar, exactly?”

“I can be one on the underworld side of things,” he said. “It’s best if it’s a ghost you have a strong tie to, someone powerful in their own right. You’ll need a second one, but I have a suggestion for that. However, we’re going to have some trouble on your side of things.”

James made a pained sound. “Necromancers.”

Douglas nodded. “He’ll need two, and while I know you have Nick…”

“Sara is too young,” James said. “We’re short one.”

“No other necromancers will come near this,” Douglas said. “Not anyone with any sense.”

Which wasn’t really the problem, anyway. I didn’t know any others.

“Does it have to be a necromancer?” This was from Lock—I’d forgotten that he had been watching with Ava. “Can something else with similar magic work?”

“Like a vampire?” Ava asked.

Douglas frowned. “I don’t know. I don’t think so—their magic is similar, but not quite what we’re looking for. This doesn’t seem like the best time to experiment.”

I wracked my brain in desperation. I couldn’t fail at the first hurdle. It wasn’t an option. I was going to get my friends back, Brid back, I just needed to *think*.

An idea came to me then—a desperate, mad, surely couldn’t work kind of idea, but what did I have to lose. “What about a vessel?”

Douglas’s attention sharpened back on me. “A vessel…”

“What’s a vessel?” Ava asked.

“Something full of our power,” I said, not taking my eyes off Douglas. “Or as you would think of it, a zombie.” I was, after all, chief zombie wrangler. Time to get back to what I knew best.

“That could work,” Douglas said slowly. “At least, I don’t see why it wouldn’t. The power signature would be the same.”

James’s eyes gleamed as he straightened, a fierce expression on his face. “I know just the vessel for the job.” He clapped his hands once, the sharp sound echoing in the quiet air. “Okay. Ramon, make a list—have Douglas tell you everything we’re going to need.”

“What are you going to do?” Ramon asked, fishing out his phone.

“I’m going to make a few phone calls. He won’t ignore an official summons, but he’ll still have to catch a plane.”

“Who will have to catch a plane?” Ava asked. “Do we have time for planes?”

“We don’t have a choice,” I said, catching up to James’s plan. “We need him. We’ll just have to have faith that our people can take care of themselves a little longer.”

They had to. Imagining any other scenario—I couldn’t. Not if I wanted to function. I would hold onto my faith, and in the meantime, do everything I could to bring them back safe, just as I knew Brid would be doing everything she could to come back to me.

And she *would* come back—even if I had to go to the underworld myself to make it happen.