

"Oh God," Frankie said, staring out the window. "Ohgodohgodohgod, it's getting closer. *It's coming this way.*"

Mom grabbed him by the collar and pulled him back down. "Quiet," she hissed. "It'll hear you. We need to be quiet now, okay, Frankie? Can you do that?"

He sniffled and nodded, clutching at her. He was eleven, just at the stage where he was starting to pull away from her, but this had made him regress a few years to the point where he wanted nothing more than the comfort of his mother.

I didn't blame him. I might have been right next to him, but I was too tangled up inside, fear and dread tying me in knots inside. And besides, they were counting on me. She hid it, but I knew the last few weeks had worn mom ragged. If I let myself go now, if I dropped the mask, I thought she might crack, and then where would we be?

*Hiding won't help*, I thought, with a quiet, numb sort of despair. *It knows where we are.*

But I couldn't bring myself to say it. There wasn't anything we could do anyway. Couldn't run, couldn't hide. Fighting was a joke, and not even a funny one. At least if I didn't tell them, they could spend a few minutes more thinking that we had a chance.

Besides, if I told them I'd have to tell them how I knew, and that would lead to all kinds of other things I hadn't told them. That conversation would get ugly; you could see it a mile away. I'd rather not have that be the last thing I said to my mom.

We sat there in the shelter and waited for the world to end, and I tried not to cry, and I failed.

"They say things aren't this bad everywhere," Nicole said, rubbing her hands together to try and warm them.

"Yeah," I said, glaring at the back of the next person in line. Not that he'd done anything wrong; he was just there. "I figure it's like hurricanes. Some places get hit by a hurricane and they come together, you know? People help each other through it. And then you've got places where people turn on each other, and there's all this rioting and looting."

"And we're one of the bad places," she said. "One of the places people are breaking apart, instead of coming together."

I glanced at her face, then glanced away. She'd taken the piercings out, leaving just holes behind in her nose, her eyebrows, her lip. It made her look tired, wrung out, and much older than seventeen.

"Yeah," I said. Nothing else. We both knew the way things were. We'd been run out of our house by a gang of thugs, and her house had been burned to the ground.

I stamped my feet in place, feeling the snow crunch under my shoes. My feet were freezing. We'd been standing in the snow for almost an hour now, and I didn't have good boots. I hadn't had time to grab mine when we were running, and the only pair I'd been able to scrounge up since was worn out, and two sizes too big. I'd stuffed them with newspaper, trying to make them fit a little better and give them a bit more insulation, but they still let the cold right through, and rubbed my feet raw.

After another half an hour or so, we finally made it to the front of the line. The guy in the National Guard uniform handed us both a box with an apologetic sort of shrug. When my numb, freezing fingers fumbled and dropped mine, he helped me scoop the food and medical supplies back into the box and gave me a chemical hand warmer before I left. I almost broke down crying in the middle of the street right there, because it was the first time a stranger had done something nice for me in weeks.

Nicole and I trudged back to the shelter we were staying at. We didn't talk. There was nothing to say.

We all heard the crash as the thing smashed a pair of cars together. It sounded almost exactly like a car crash, screaming metal and breaking glass. It was shockingly loud, though. The monster was only a block or two away now. It was getting closer fast.

Most of the people in the shelter jumped at the noise. A baby started to cry, and it took a few seconds for an adult to hush it. Frankie squeezed mom even tighter, burying his face in her shoulder. She seemed to be taking almost as much comfort in the contact as he was.

I just sat where I was. I didn't react to the noise. In a way, I felt like I was past being surprised. The last three weeks, and especially the last five hours, had left me numb.

I didn't know the guy's name, but I'd seen him around the shelter a few times. He was a scary-looking kid, around my age but a hell of a lot older in the head. He looked like he'd been living on the street since long before the world went crazy. I'd noticed that even the people who worked at the shelter gave him a wide berth. They didn't want to turn him away—they didn't want to turn *anyone* away, not now when it might well be a death sentence—but they obviously weren't happy having him there.

And now he'd cornered us with three of his buddies a few blocks from the shelter, and he had a knife, and nothing I'd ever done in my life had prepared me for this. Not even a little bit.

"P-please," I said, stuttering a little. I wasn't sure whether my teeth were chattering because of the cold or the fear. It hardly mattered. "Please, my brother, he's sick and he hasn't been eating enough."

"Do I look like I care?" he asked with a casual, mocking grin. "Come on, hand it over." He waved his switchblade in front of me. The blade caught the light, gleaming in an almost hypnotic way. Logically I knew that waving it around right like that was probably stupid, that it was just a scare tactic, but damn if it wasn't working on me.

I wanted to do something, but what could I do? There were four of them, with knives, and I'd never been in a fight in my life. Not a real one. Nicole hadn't either, I was pretty sure. She'd looked pretty intense with all the piercings and tattoos, but she was from an upper-middle-class family, the same as me. She wanted to look tough, but these guys were the real thing.

We couldn't fight. There were no police to call, not really. The response time in this part of town was somewhere around fifteen minutes, even if I could get to a phone. There were people close enough to hear me if I screamed, but they weren't looking. More than that, they were *not* looking in a way that made it clear that they didn't want to see. They knew what was going on, but it was inconvenient to pay attention to it.

I almost thought about using my magic—Christ, even in my head that sounded ridiculous. A month ago I'd dismissed the things I felt as a trick of perception or a sign of pending insanity. I'd actually managed to do something with it once, back when I was a kid, but over the years I'd convinced myself that was just my imagination. Now, though, crazy things were so normal that I had to actually think about it. I'd played with it a couple times since then, just to see whether it was for real, and if it was just my imagination I was a few steps beyond *pending* insanity.

But that didn't work, either. It was too slow, and if what I got was anything like what had shown up in the past, it wouldn't do much good anyway. It might keep one of them busy for a while, but that still left three more than we could handle.

So as much as I hated to do it, I bit my lip and handed the box over to one of the thugs. The food and medicine Frankie needed, the blankets and the camp stove to keep us warm, I just gave them away. Nicole waited a few seconds longer, but eventually she gave her box of relief supplies up as well.

"That wasn't so hard, now, was it?" the ringleader said, smirking. He folded his knife closed again and slid it into his pocket.

I shook my head, looking at my feet, and started to walk away.

He put out his hand, blocking my path. I could probably have pushed past him, but I didn't.

"You don't get off that easy," he said quietly.

The seconds ticked slowly past. I found myself thinking again that I could try to do something with magic, but it wasn't a good idea. I knew that.

And besides, I couldn't feel as much as usual. The doors weren't there for me to open, not half as many things waiting to happen as usual. I wasn't sure how much of it was because I was feeling so numb, so overstimulated that I was barely even conscious, and how much of it was because of what I wanted them to do.

Not even the monsters wanted to fuck with this. I couldn't blame them, really. After seeing what this thing was capable of, I understood why they wouldn't want to go near it.

In hindsight, it would probably have been a good idea to think about that sooner. In a way, I'd brought this on myself. I could almost convince myself that I deserved this for having been so thoughtless. I'd known that I was screwing around with things I didn't understand, I'd had all the evidence I needed to know that it might go very badly for me, and I'd done it anyway. Was it a surprise that it had all gone to shit? Not so much.

And then I caught my breath as I realized there was something else I could do. It might not work—from what I knew, from the tiny little scraps I'd heard from someone who heard them from someone who had some idea what was going on, I didn't think it was likely to do much at all. But it *might* work, which was more than I had otherwise.

And besides, it wasn't like I could make things that much worse. I'd already screwed up about as badly as a person could.

I stood and started for the door.

Almost instantly, mom was standing next to me. "Tawny?" she said. "Honey, what are you doing?"

"I'm going outside." I felt like I should be choked up, but I wasn't. My voice sounded almost disinterested. Numb.

"But that...*thing* is out there," she said.

"I know," I said. "It's after me, not you guys. It might not keep coming for you if it gets me."

She didn't ask how I knew. Anymore, things were so crazy that practically anything was believable. The other day some guy had walked into a bank throwing fireballs from his hands, and set a clerk on fire just by looking at him when he didn't hand over the money fast enough. If I were to walk up to a guy on the street and he told me he was Jesus Christ, I'd think twice before telling him otherwise. It was *that* crazy.

So I wasn't surprised when she didn't ask questions, or try to argue. She just said, "I love you, Tawny."

"I love you too," I said. I didn't sound loving. I sounded numb. I hugged her mechanically, and then walked outside.

On cue, one of the other thugs grabbed Nicole, on cue. She struggled a little, but he was a lot better at holding people than she was at getting out. Then one of the other thugs punched her in the solar plexus, and she stopped fighting, sagging in his grip. She coughed, but the fight had gone out of her, as quickly as that.

"All right," the ringleader said. "Drag the bitch over there. She can pay us back for making us work for those boxes." He started walking in their direction.

I tried to run, while they were distracted, but the last thug was standing right next to me, and he caught me before I could go anywhere. They'd set the boxes of supplies down at some point. They would get ruined, if they were left to sit in the snow for long, but they didn't seem to care.

I knew what was going on. The way they were moving, the expressions on their faces, made it pretty obvious what they were planning. I knew I was sheltered, but I wasn't a total idiot. They were going to rape Nicole, and then they were going to rape me, and if we were very lucky they would leave it at that rather than killing us.

I wasn't feeling lucky.

I looked around frantically, hoping I could do something, *anything*, but nothing had changed. Actually, that wasn't entirely true. The people who'd been looking away were gone entirely now.

In an odd way, that was what got under my skin. I could deal with the monsters. Werewolves and vampires and people throwing fireballs from their hands? I could accept that. It was huge and terrifying and confusing, but I could accept it. When a werewolf ate the neighbor right in front of me, it was terrifying and it gave me nightmares, but I could accept it. Monsters doing monstrous things made sense, at least as much as anything made sense right now.

But these guys were just...people. They were just normal people, just human fucking beings like the rest of us, and they were doing *this*. The idea that people could do this was more than terrifying, it was disgusting. I hated that there were scum who'd just been waiting for the chance to do these things, and I hated that people just turned a blind eye to it rather than take a risk themselves, and I hated myself most of all. I hated that I'd tried to run, that if that thug hadn't grabbed me I'd have abandoned Nicole to her fate and never looked back.

And in that moment all that hate, the resentment, the disgust, the terror, it all seemed to coil together in my chest, a big ball of the worst emotions imaginable filling me up until it was hard to breathe.

I saw—except it wasn't *seeing*, not really—another door, bigger than any of the others. And the fear and the anger and the hate were so intense that I broke the rules I'd set for myself, when I'd said that I would be careful and cautious and not do anything stupid.

I'd reached out to that door, and I'd given it a *push*.

Something came through. There was a moment of total silence, as everyone present tried to process what had just happened.

Then the screaming started.

It was snowing again, small dry flakes falling from the cold, slate-grey sky overhead. The snow crunched dully under my feet. I was cold, but I wasn't feeling it. It was that odd state you get sometimes when the cold's set its teeth in you so deeply, and for so long, that it isn't really a *feeling* anymore, it's more of a state of being.

My tracks from earlier had been erased, wiped away by fresh snow and wind. No one was moving, and the street was essentially just a blank expanse of white. It felt oddly clean, like a new beginning, which was ironic considering that this was my ending.

The thing I'd called through that door was standing in the road, ambling towards me. It wasn't moving quickly. It had taken hours for it to get from where it had shown up to the vicinity of the shelter. It was in no hurry, obviously.

It looked almost beautiful, in an odd way. It was seven feet tall, but probably didn't weigh much more than I did. It had ashen grey skin and jet black horns like a goat's, protruding from its forehead above its huge golden eyes.

"Hello there," it said, loudly enough for me to hear it clearly despite being several hundred feet away. "Did you finally come out to play?"

I swallowed hard and walked forward. "I called you here," I said.

It smiled, showing very human-looking teeth and shockingly red gums. "I know," it said. "And you obviously forgot the first rule of summoning. *Do not call up what you cannot put down*, little girl."

I thought about fighting it, but again, it was a ridiculous concept. I'd seen at least a little of what it could do, and I couldn't even come close to it. I'd have had a better shot at fighting the thugs with knives. I could maybe have talked to it, but I didn't think that was going to get me anywhere. I didn't know what this thing was, but I knew what state of mind had let me find the door that it came through, and somehow I knew that it was *connected*. I'd been feeling angry and destructive. In that moment I'd wanted to destroy *everything* in that moment, myself included, and it was that wanting that had let me form a connection to this creature.

It wasn't going to be swayed by talk. It wasn't a reasonable creature. When I'd opened that door, I'd been about as far from reasonable as it was possible to get.

Instead of talking, I tried to reach for it with my power, with my *magic*.

I could feel it, but it was dim, cloudy. It was like there was a curtain between us, masking the light it cast.

It was getting closer, though, and I knew that I only had one chance at this. I tried to put myself back in the state of mind I'd been in when I first called it, but it wasn't working. The connection was getting a little clearer, but it was too slow.

In the end, it was disgust at my own incompetence that pushed me over the edge into that violent, destructive mindset. The second I did, that door snapped back into focus. I reached out and pushed the creature, trying to shove it back through.

It fought back. I wasn't sure how; I didn't have the words to describe anything that I was feeling now. But I could *feel* it fighting.

It had stopped moving. The two of us stood in the street, staring each other down. I was shaking with fatigue, but I didn't, couldn't let myself fall. Somehow I knew that falling now was as good as losing, and losing was as good as dying.

Finally, it lost its traction on the world. It wanted to stay, but there was something that wanted to pull it back as much as I wanted to push it out, and in the end it couldn't hold on against both of those forces. It faded out of existence, sliding sideways from the world.

As it vanished, I collapsed on my face in the snow, like the struggle against it was the only thing holding me up. I laid there for a minute or so, getting colder and wondering why I was supposed to care. I knew I should get up, but I was so tired, and it would be so easy to fall asleep here.

Then I heard slow, measured clapping. I pushed my head up, more to see who was clapping than anything, and saw someone offering me a hand. I took it, and he pulled me easily to my feet. It was a man in a neat black suit, with a copper pin on his lapel.

"Well done," he said. "You've got a lot of potential, Miss Hutchinson. Creatures like that are a fair bit beyond what you can safely handle, still, but that you managed to contact it at all is a promising start. Not many people find something that powerful the first time they call something out of Limbo."

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. My voice was shaking, both from chattering teeth and sheer fatigue. I couldn't remember having ever felt so tired before.

He smiled. "No," he said. "I don't think you do. That's why I'm here, in fact. I work for a group that would like to offer you a job."

I considered him, and I wasn't sure whether it was having immersed myself in that attitude so thoroughly or just the reaction to weeks of tension and fear, but I wasn't fooled for a moment. "This is one of those 'offer you can't refuse' sort of offers, isn't it?"

"I'm not threatening you," he said. "But I doubt you'll find anyone else to teach you how to use your power, and with what you just did, I don't think you'll last long without some instruction. You'll

summon something that you really *can't* put back down, or someone who isn't as nice as I am will come to recruit you by force. A knack for pulling things across worlds is a rare thing. There are plenty of people who would be interested in using you, whether you like it or not. I'm probably the best offer you're going to get."

I sighed. "Fine," I said, still feeling exhausted and numb. "Let me talk to my mom. But fine. I'll do it."

He smiled and handed me a business card. "Talk to your family, and then call that number," he said. "It's been a pleasure doing business, Miss Hutchinson."