

WILL-O-THE-WISPS WARP

BOOK 2 IN THE WEAVER SAGA

BETS DAVIES

CHAPTER 1

Weaver's finger flicked the whisper key. Her song gusted into longing. Stinging hot with dust, air swirled around her over the crumbling blacktop of the flat motel. The air sighed blue. The sad folding chair shifted and her seat strap slipped, but she ignored it.

I See leaned into her side. Sitting, his long muzzle bumped her breast. He sang through his nose. She glanced down at I See's emerald eyes that reminded her of Sam's.

She willed air through her bassoon to make the reed hum. A note trilled, and her voice followed.

““Adia I do believe I failed you / Adia I know I let you down.”” Her melodic alto soared through the thickening night while cars clanked by on the highway.

Her song pulled her soul from her chair, pulled her from this world until she could feel the notes descend her pain and her hope into Summerland. I See's whistle hum searched for his littermate as Weaver searched—

Sam was there. Tasting of evergreen and horses and days spent running through tick infested fields.

““Cause we are born innocent,”” Her voice spun a web of iron belief. ““Believe me Adia, we are still innocent.””

His sheer baritone took on a tone of tired reproof. She would not leave him alone. Her fingers shook with the effort to keep music pumping through her bassoon and sing at the same time.

Someone stood behind her. She swallowed her swearing, and let the music go. The summer and blood tasting sidhe home left her. But before her big brother—her twin, now her twin—disappeared again, a single line of electric bass notes teased her. “It's a family affair.”

Then nothing. The motel sign's light kicked off kilter. A semi went past, and abandoned her in a night filled with an acne of weak stars. Night. So one thing was good.

She dropped her head. “I'm still practicing pushing wind through my bassoon so that I can sing at the same time. I never thought about it till—” She swallowed Sam being able to sing and play. But that wasn't here. That was in the Summerland he chose over her.

“Mm.” Mez picked up Weaver's bassoon and sat on her knee. The indigenous woman barely topped five feet. But Mez smelled of a jungle, and her dark eyes held the grit of earth that had felt her Olmec ancestors' footsteps. “So how is Sam?”

I See licked his nose. He knew better than to crawl into Weaver's lap when she played. Weaver stroked his insulted red ear.

Weaver set her head against Mez. Her laugh turned into a gurgle. “He's still in Summerland. Still trying to strong arm our sidhe parents' identities out of the fey there.”

“Weaver, sweetheart.” Mez stood but lifted Weaver's chin with a firm hand. “You don't have to lie to me. That's what besties means. On the upside, he's not in Summerland preparing to make war against the humans.”

“You always balance me.” Weaver put her bassoon down on her chair.

Mez held up her hand in a high five. The door opened. “Hey, Temperance. Weaver, you will be with your human parents tonight. The moms who coddled you through seventeen—nah. All twenty-five of your years. That has to earn me some coddling points of my own.”

Weaver slapped Mez's hand. "I'm not sure I can deal. Two weeks ago you and I were teachers in the ugly of Oakland, and roomies, and shared everything. Only neither you nor Alice and Cobweb shared that me and Sam were really twins. And sidhe. And in trouble. Never going back to a life where my biggest problem was that the damn copier broke again and—"

"Breathe." Mez squeezed her shoulders. "That's why we are going back to your parents, remember? So you remember before two weeks ago."

Temperance skipped a stone across the parking lot. Then she scratched her scarred eyeholes, and Weaver had to remember that Temperance might be fifteen but—

Temp smiled at Weaver with that disconcerting lack of blindness. "Jamie finally got out of the shower. Want to see if you still have time to help him get dressed?"

Weaver's skin rioted pinks and reds that ebbed into the night air. "Would you quit doing that? We haven't—not since L.A.—and—"

Mez grabbed Weaver in a headlock. "Hence the helping him stay undressed. Your collision into hooking up was less annoying than this—"

"What?" Laurel's wolf song husk emerged from the doorway. Beside her, Rowan's European wolf bulk paced.

Weaver didn't jump. Even as she became aware that her senses ran deeper than those of humans, she couldn't beat Laurel or Jamie to the punch. The woman was smaller than Mez, but there was no mistaking her lithe frame for a child. Her wood char skin was so dark the tint of gray was almost invisible. She leaned against the brick wall. "What is up?" She shook her meticulous braids.

Weaver licked her lips. If anyone knew, Laurel would. And she'd never given Weaver bad advice on the subject before. "Is there something the matter—have you noticed—"

Laurel snorted laughter. "You take your time asking things, girl."

Temperance pressed her mouth to Laurel's ear. Laurel held her finger up to Temp. "Weaver, of course Jamie has been avoiding you since L.A. He's terrified of meeting your parents."

"He's scared of Alice and Cobweb." Weaver would have laughed, but Laurel waited on her, expression still.

"Oh, shit." Mez groaned. "Why didn't I think of that? Weaver, babe, my guess? Jamie's never met anyone's parents." Mez looked to Laurel, who shrugged. Mez shook Weaver. "And do you know what a deal it must have been to meet parents?"

Warmth goosed Weaver's innards. With all the things in the world Jamie was not afraid of, his being frightened of something so innocuous—and cute—had never occurred to her. If he'd gotten his clothes on, she'd take them off. But before she could turn, a complicated scent of sandalwood, citrus, and vanilla mixed with murky death surrounded her.

Jamie leaned in the doorway. Laurel smacked him on the back of the head before grabbing Temperance's arm and retreating. Jamie stroked Jiao's neck. The bitch wolf wiggled without the lounging grace of Rowan.

While Laurel attracted wrinkles in any suit she wore, Jamie's suit highlighted every aspect of his slick muscles without a single rumple. His porcelain gold face a shade pale, his inhumanity showed in black eyes struck with gold.

Weaver held down the urge to push him into the room. The danger he wore absently wasn't so evident in his usual uniform, though she knew he only wore those hoodies to give him room for his weapons. The first time they had met, she had thought him in high school. She had drastically underestimated.

His arm slid around her waist. She maneuvered around his fangs to writhe her tongue against his. He strove into her. His second hand joined the first with a slow slide downwards. Just at the hollow of her back, he tapped a finger, and stepped away.

"I have to walk noisily if I don't want to hear myself discussed." He touched a finger to her nose.

"Well, duh." Weaver bit his finger. "Everyone else figured that out."

He slid a hand down her arm. "You get to know all my secrets."

“You’ve handily provided me with Laurel.” Weaver jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

“Someday.” He touched the tip of his tongue to her ear. “I’ll tell you all my secrets.”

Weaver shivered.

“Come on.” Laurel spun him away. “We’ve got more important things to talk about than your sex life or irrational fear of two old women. First, Tulsa. I know the drive is short tonight, but I’m sure everyone but Jamie wants it over with. Rowan, guard.” Rowan’s yellow eyes slid to Jiao.

Jamie rolled his eyes while Laurel pulled him to the Expedition. “Jiao, guard.”

Jiao licked her butt.

Weaver closed her eyes. The engine revved onto the street.

Mez touched her elbow. Temperance kicked a rock, her arms tucked inside her tee shirt. She opened her mouth. Then she closed it.

Weaver loosed her reed from her bocal. She nestled the slender shaved wood back into a soft case. Then she removed the bocal as she set about putting her bassoon to bed.

Home. The word tasted foreign and bitter. When they had started the journey to Weaver and Sam’s childhood stomping grounds, it had been all she wanted. Now, her home in Oakland had been ripped away by pained insight that had changed everything. Including how she had grown up. Already, she knew how to have no home.

She shook her head at the thought that a piece of land and a handful of humans could wipe the prior weeks away. She closed her bassoon case. An absent hand stroked it. A flash of gossamer ran through her skin, but she didn’t listen to it tell her that she didn’t want to go back to her former life.

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The white hallway with its rounded ceiling stretched out before Jamie and Laurel as if a set designer in the 1970s had built his sci fi vision. Closed doors with no windows flowed on both sides.

Jamie trailed his finger along the wall while he followed the prison guard. “All I’m saying is that my ex giving my lover advice is grounds for embarrassment.”

“Okay. A),” Laurel ticked off on her fingers, “if you gave the poor girl a hint that she still is your lover I wouldn’t have to do it for you. B) I’m give her info on how to deal with you being a stupid git as I have dealt with you being a stupid git for hundreds of years. C) If you weren’t terrified of her parents it wouldn’t be a problem.”

“I am not—” Jamie glanced at the thrall guard standing in front of the door. “Henderson. What do you do next? We aren’t meeting under the best of circumstances.”

The lankey guard swayed, his pupils wide in his hooded eyes.

“You are terrified.” Laurel snorted.

“Open the door, Henderson. It’s not like I avoid Weaver.”

“And we could have waited an hour longer for you if you weren’t terrified you’ll die if Weaver makes the vaguest allusion to the fact you slept with her without marrying her first.”

“I already did the dying thing.”

Henderson opened the door. “Allen. Get your lazy ass out of bed. You have visitors.”

Laurel grinned. “These new prisons feel inhuman. Sure, they have a skylight but they can’t shout at each other and be social.”

“What the fuck? Who the fuck can’t wait till—”

“It’s the FBI.”

Inside, Allen’s laughter grated. “You still calling this a hate crime? It was an extermination. All I’m sorry about is that we only blew up that pastor. It wasn’t a full homage without four little girls.”

Jamie's claws dug into his hand. "You have a thing for race crimes, you know that?" He scrubbed his face. "I have never done this before. Do you know the only reason Enlai—I—wasn't married when he died? Hoa's daughter hadn't had her period yet.

"My sister, An, told him Fenfang was in hysterics over being berated for that. And that stupid git," Jamie snarled at himself, "didn't care other than the marriage would raise his position in Hoa's opium business. He would have married Enlai to her anyway but Hoa promised Enlai a boy within a year. Hoa essentially told Enlai to dip his wick wherever he wanted as long as he didn't come home diseased for Fenfang."

Allen came out with a ratty Aryan pride eagle tattooed on his puffed chest.

"Huh. Want me to grab this one now, or drag his ass up to your asshole?" Laurel cocked her head.

Allen's skin went dusky. Laurel jammed her hand around his throat.

He scrabbled as she held him off the ground. "Henderson, what did we discuss in the office? I don't care if they can't talk to each other most of the day. The warden was an ass to put a team on the same ward."

"Drag him along." Jamie shrugged. "I hate to eat alone. I'm not a stupid git. Weaver's parents have reasons to hate me."

"Mm-hm." When Allen dug his fingernails into Laurel's arm, she banged him into the wall. "But Weaver doesn't. I had forgotten all the hang-ups that messed up Chinese mafia stuff you were in gave you. Your boss, married to your sister, was marrying you to his first wife's youngest daughter. So your fiancé was crying to your sister about not being ready for you, while your boss pressured you to do anything you wanted but get the pox."

"It was the 1700's." Jamie crossed his arms. "Call him, Henderson."

"Black!" Henderson opened the door they now stood before. "Get out here. It's the FBI."

Jamie ignored Black's grumbling. Laurel shook her head. "God damn. I did you a favor. Respect someone you don't sleep with or sleep with someone you don't? No wonder you are twisted."

"Hey!" Jamie grabbed Black.

"No offense. I always had fun with you." She avoided, "I loved you". He didn't correct it. She eyed him with Allen still scrambling to get ahold of her arm. "But come on. Other than our sporadic meetings, you've barely been more than a monk since Chastity—your succubus girlfriend."

Jamie sank his fangs into Black. Blood poured down his throat. Laurel enjoyed thinking she knew everything about his life. No reason to disabuse her of the theory. He dropped Black's husk.

Laurel had splashed the wall in Allen's arterial spray.

"Clumsy." Jamie's eyebrows rose. And gauche. "What did Temperance tell you?"

"Rather, planned." Laurel sighed. "And Temp meant what she saw for me."

"Oversharing is a bitch. If you are going to act like my 'bestie' or my pimp, you owe me."

Laurel used the blood to draw a quick series of lines that Jamie could have drawn with his eyes shut. She licked blood off her fingers. "She had a vision. It was Sam."

Jamie stiffened. "Why are you drawing that? What was Sam doing?"

"I'm using it because this was a hate crime. It fits the profile. You didn't use it because it didn't fit a hit man profile."

She leaned back to look at the symbol, then scanned Jamie's stiff frame. "You aren't a hit man anymore. I see no reason not to bring this symbol back to your old stomping grounds. Sam was laughing. Temp saw Sam laughing with Weaver."

Jamie's anger stretched his skin. "That's not happening."

"Maybe he sees the light. Maybe he stops acting like an asshole."

"Maybe he stops hanging out with scum that believe humans are meant to be tortured, killed, and kept in fear?" He floated. "He won't go near her again. It won't happen."

Laurel set a gentle hand on his shoulder. “It will happen. Temp saw it.”

“Temp can be wrong. The farther into the future she sees, the more possibilities there are. Besides, Weaver’s Fate is Weaver’s now.”

“Weaver must keep Temp’s Fate and meet her own. I know.” Laurel put her arms around him. “What we need to think of is how we use this. How will we manipulate this for the best for Weaver?”

Jamie turned on his heel, remembered himself, and yanked Henderson’s face around. “Henderson. You will go back to your desk. You will sit there. You will not remember doing anything this night but sitting there.” He pushed Henderson away.

“Inelegant thrall.” Laurel rolled her eyes.

“Ask me if I care.”

“Only shows up all the more what you do care about, my boy.”

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Jamie lit another cigarette. It was all he could do to keep from pacing.

Laurel grabbed his shoulders from behind. “Don’t worry. Just be yourself.”

“Yeah.”

Weaver’s body had raced with joy when she took off for her parents’ home. Jamie, Laurel and Temp stood outside the local Sponsor’s protection. Jamie’s anxiety had soared as Weaver’s happiness had built since they had reached the foothills.

Jamie spat the bitter taste from his mouth. “Which me?”

“I am assuming,” Laurel’s fingers trailed over him when she walked around him, “the one she fell in love with.”

Love. They hadn’t used that word yet. He had said he couldn’t fall in love that fast. She had said she couldn’t fall in love that fast. His heart hurt. He was a stupid git. He glanced down at himself. At least the Arachne suit repelled all the wolf hair. Jiao whined after I See. Rowan lifted his leg against one of the enchanted stones surrounding the Land. Jamie brushed his crisp suit.

Temperance made a sound like a gurking frog. Then broke into laughter. “Don’t worry. Alice and Cobweb will like you eventually.”

Jamie glared at Temperance. “Thanks for that ‘eventually’.”

Laurel twirled her sharpened staff. “It’s only funny because this pathetic kid thing isn’t you.”

Jamie leaned against the Expedition. He managed a rueful smile. He acted like the kid he looked like. “Go ahead. Laugh. Just do me a solid and keep a straight face when I meet them.”

A whispery giggle blew through. Jamie came to attention. He swore that he only had a gun, a couple of knives and a handful of salt on him in honor of the occasion. He held up his lighter. At least he’d kept that. Laurel brought her staff up. Temperance shook her head.

Jamie held out his cigarette. “Temperance, behind us. That laugh was made of leaves rustling. I don’t remember this place having a dryad.”

Remember. He winced at the word while he scanned the night with the ease a human did in daylight. Focus. A dryad wasn’t a fun thing to insult. He didn’t know if he should keep fire as a defense or put his cigarette out fast.

A black walnut shimmered. Then bulged. A new sapling green hand emerged. The dryad stepped out with a shake of her autumn leaves hair. Discretion was the better part of valor. In the face of the tree guardian, Jamie let his lighter die and pinched out his cigarette while Laurel did the same. Temperance lit another and nodded to the dryad.

The dryad put a hand on a willowy hip. “Come on. I’m not that old school.” She shook herself. When she finished a shake, a woman with long blonde hair touched with gray stood in a flannel shirt that sported a selection—

Laurel flipped around with a growl. Jamie stumbled back.

“Whoops.” Janet dropped the necklaces and prayer pouches into her shirt. “Sorry about that.”

Temperance took off her sunglasses. “Sponsor Janet? Sponsor Temperance of the Bay Area requesting entrance to your jurisdiction, along with these two jerks.”

“Oh.” Janet held out a hand to Temperance but blinked.

Jamie hadn’t thought five feet, fifteen-year-old Temperance looked much like someone Lung would hire to govern the People of an area as prominent as San Francisco Bay, either. But he had learned.

Then Janet watched Jamie with blue eyes that were too clear. “Jamie could have walked in any time he wanted. Hey, Jamie. You look like hell.”

Jamie didn’t look at his friends. “Hey, Janet. You look younger. Last time it was druid. Now it is dryad. Piss off the Green Man?”

Janet pointed to him. “Nobody ever accused you of being stupid. At least he left me the ability to look human and rove within the stones.”

“Better than pissing off Lung for messing with a good Sponsor.” He shook her hand.

“Has Lung hijacked you guys to fight in this mess yet?” Janet nodded to Jamie and Laurel.

“We haven’t got the call.” Laurel gave a stiff shrug.

Jamie would have volunteered by now if it weren’t for Weaver. He had a soft place the Chinese demigod dragon. Before Lung there had been no democratic council. “This terrorism is no joke. Making war on humans is a direct hit on the policy of having as little cross world contact as possible. Lung will have to react and give up his pacifistic reign.”

“Anyway, Temperance, Laurel, you are welcome.” Janet gave a mock salute.

Laurel shook hands but flicked Jamie on the ear. “Apparently, there’s been Jamie without Laurel.”

Jamie rubbed his ear. “Weaver was my contract. I research.”

For a split second, Laurel’s face faded to an inhuman still, but then she laughed, so Jamie would ignore how far he’d stuck his foot down his throat.

“All this chitchat is fascinating.” Temperance rubbed her eyeholes. “But are you going to let us in, or what? I’m beat and I have to pee.”

“Right.” Janet jumped into the driver’s seat of the SUV. “I’ll get you through the last bad turns. Get in. Temp, you might as well pee anywhere. Despite that suit, you know you aren’t going to a funeral, right Jamie?”

Jamie jerked, but got into the passenger seat. “What have you briefed Cobweb and Alice on? Back Jiao. Back Rowan.”

“I don’t want to pee here.” Temperance climbed in. “Why do I always get to sit with your damn wolves?”

Laurel slammed in. “Because the damn wolves would die for you.”

“You are going to pee outside somewhere.” Janet reached under her flannel shirt and pulled out a pink, bulbous plastic trough. “We don’t have toilets here and the outhouses are for shit only because they compost.”

“You have to be kidding me.” Temperance groaned but took the object. “What is this?”

“It’s a pee shooter,” Jamie answered. “You stick it over your crotch so that you can pee standing up like a guy.”

“How much time did you hang out here?” Laurel hung over his seat to punch him in the arm.

“Christ.” Temperance stared at her pee shooter. “I had better bathroom options when I was homeless.”

“I hung out here enough that I want to know how Janet explained our situation to Cobweb and Alice.” Jamie bit his lip. It bled. In all the teasing, he had kept this worry to himself.

Janet slowed into an even more rutted road. Her face flickered green. “As bare bones as I could. They knew about Sam and Weaver being sidhe, of course, and twins, and everything that came with.

“I had to tell them it had all been found out, and that their babies were in danger. I had to tell them Weaver’s roomie Meztli was actually Weaver’s Olmec jaguar spirit guardian. That Victor, Sam’s bandmate, was igmole—a Vodun guardian.”

Her knuckles went white. “That you and Laurel had been contracted to protect Weaver and Sam, and that you were the biggest, bad ass vamps to be bought—but the warm and fuzzy kind. Eventually I admitted Temp is a seeress.

“The war and the basic reasons why everyone was after the marvelous Weatherwax twins. As to how you and Weaver want to explain the rest is up to you.”

Jamie ground his jaw and got his priorities straight. Weaver was going to be the one to explain. Given the chance, he would be beside her.

The headlights hit the hulk of a stone house up ahead. Jamie cleaned his mind with the soothing repetition of his knowledge of Alice and Cobweb. The house was almost all stone because Alice had wanted Cyprus frames and exotic wood interiors but Cobweb had gotten weepy about the killed trees.

He’d seen the whole family the couple of times he dropped by, but hadn’t been able to get near the house with the amount of belief going on in the windows and on the porch.

All the windows fired with light. Jamie’s most confident face was his lethal one, and he couldn’t let that show. Nothing repelled him. He glanced at the windows and porch. Multiple gaps appeared where crystals had hung beside figurines.

He grinned. Weaver had dragged Mez ahead for more than sheer excitement.

Janet walked backwards till she stood against a sapling that was smaller than she was, but that she faded into all the same.

“Good luck.” As her face sank in, her mouth dropped to a line. “Seriously, good luck. Your crew gives the People hope.”

Temp turned the pee shooter over.

“I’m sure Weaver could show you how to use that.” Laurel pointed. “I’m so enjoying that I haven’t digested in hundreds of years.”

“I’ll figure it out.” Temp trudged off. “It’s better than squatting.”

Jamie took a deep breath.

“Wait a sec before you screw your courage to the sticking place.” Laurel caught his arm. “How often did you check up on Weaver? How much—”

“Damn, Laurel. I wasn’t a stalker peeping Tom. Just doing my job.”

“I didn’t.”

“What?”

“I didn’t. I never once checked in on Sam.” Her face went bleak. “I only bothered coming when the Summons hit.”

Jamie pulled her into a hug. “You have saved more humans worth way more than that little shit. You had no reason to think he wasn’t happy and spoiled. You had an important job.”

“You had an important job.” Laurel rocked him.

“No. I didn’t.”

“It was pretty damn important to me. Without the money, I never could have helped those worthy humans.”

Jamie cupped her head to his chest. “You are more frightened than I am.”

She squeezed him tight. “Yeah, well. I have a real reason.”

“We back each other. Like always.”

A cacophony of barking struck. Jamie let go of Laurel before she shoved him away. A huge sheep dog, blinded with hair, stood up on the sheep enclosure to the countermelody of hysterical “baas”.

Jiao growled. Her body dropped low. Rowan moved to flank her.

Weaver crashed out the door. Her dirty jeans hugged her. Jamie smiled to see she was wearing her favorite orange tee shirt with the dandelion blowing away onto her framed breasts under his oversized, terra cotta hoodie. He had been so busy worrying about the impression he had wanted to make, he hadn't noticed the one she had chosen for her parents.

"Hey!" She ran over to crush them both in a hug. "What took you so long? Cobweb and Alice swear they got down everything they have spiritual beliefs in, but Cobweb especially has some odd senses of belief, so tell me." She propelled them towards the house. "Where's Temp?"

"She's peeing." Laurel leaned her staff on the porch. "Shouldn't we—"

"We can grab bags and stuff last minute." Weaver flipped to haul them by the hands. "There's a root cellar on the side that's big enough and we can give you the keys. Does Temp know not to pee in the outhouse? Cobweb can be a real passive aggressive bitch about that."

"Janet gave her a pee shooter." Jamie's body sang to watch Weaver this happy. If only he didn't do anything to mess it up.

"Did anyone show her how to use it? Maybe I'd better—"

"I got it." Temp appeared, holding the pee shooter in two fingers. "Plastic dick. Not that hard. What do I do with it, while I drip dry into some very nice underwear, may I add?"

"Temp!"

It was Temp's turn to get crushed.

"The last time Cobweb and Alice met you—"

"I'm going to get pee on you."

"I'll get you an old sock to keep it in. That's what we all do. Those things are so damn useful, especially if you are going to some sold out concert or—Jamie, Laurel. Go on in. You are invited."

Great. Jamie, Laurel, go on in without the shield of Weaver's exuberance.

"Jiao, Rowan, guard!" The last thing he wanted was to look more like a vampire. Rowan puffed his chest but Jiao's ears sagged.

The door was wrought iron. Jamie frowned. That door had to make Weaver ill.

Alice Emarthla—now Weatherwax. A punk who got in on the ground floor of hacking. She became one of the greatest hackers of her time and turned to writing anti-hacking software. What with the shares sold at the silicon valley boom, Alice was independently wealthy. Something Cobweb, Weaver, and Sam should realize if they looked at their lives. But if Weaver was an example, they had never thought once about the matter.

Laurel looked at Jamie. Jamie looked at Laurel. He was doing a lot of breathing lately despite the fact he didn't need to, but he took a deep breath before he turned the handle.

Pillars of stone held up a room that took up the downstairs of the house. A tight stone staircase spiraled next to a large fireplace. In the far corner an unassuming door led out back. To the left, sealed glass doors enclosed a space riotous with color and cloth. To the right a stainless steel kitchen gave way to what could be called an office, but looked more like a hacker's lair. Screens hung around an impressive rise of computer and keyboards.

In the center shabby couches slumped. Faux leather armchairs surrounded a low coffee table spread with chips, salsa, chicken, spinach dip, and ice cream. Mez grinned as she set out Oreos and half avocados. Her eyes were punched with circles.

I See inhaled several half avocados and wandered away.

Jamie spared a moment to give Mez a smile. Weaver had spent the whole night yammering to Temp and Mez about growing up—from what Jamie had been able to hear in the far back seat. Unfortunately featuring Sam, but that couldn't be helped.

Laurel's claws always looked like a manicured feature out of a hip salon. Jamie's looked like claws. He'd been ignoring it till that past night when he had a panicked vision of having to shake hands with Alice and Cobweb. So with most of their time spent on his claws, most of Mez's time had been spent driving.

Alice had her legs crossed as she sat upright in a recliner. Her dark eyes held his. Her hair had grown out into thin dreds around a flat, warm bread face. She still had some of her dreds dyed blue, but now she wore a hunk of the traditional Seminole woman's glass beads. She cocked her head.

"Well, come in." Cobweb rose, her sweet soprano frayed. Her sylph frame had filled into a Neolithic Venus since Jamie had last seen her.

Jamie got himself to smile. Then he remembered the fangs. He closed his mouth to smile. But that did nothing about saying hello. This was Weaver's haven. Her childhood. He took Laurel's hand to get her to follow him.

"Hi." He nodded. "I've heard so much about you."

Then he lost Laurel's hand when Weaver slammed into his back. She laughed as she set her hands to his hipbones. "Come on, you two. They don't bite."

"No." Alice's eyebrows quirked above a blue dred. "I guess that's your job."

Weaver laughed. But Alice stared.

Temp pushed past them both. "Oh, thank God. I'm starving."

Cobweb still had her floating step. Her waft of white blonde hair had gone silver. It swirled down to her butt when she hugged Temperance. "You!" She slapped Temperance's rear. "I'm not feeding you, you little monster. Do you know how I worried about you? That Alice came up with schemes to kidnap you? That Weaver called us crying over you?"

"And would you have believed me," Temperance broke free with a laugh, "when I told you I lived in the wall of a BART station and made a nice salary in a dragon's government? You would have been scheming how to get me into a psych ward."

"We already believed our children were fairies." Alice shrugged while she eyed Jamie. "Why not dragons, seeresses and vampires, oh my?"

Jamie's mouth went dry. Weaver quoted her parents all the time. Her idyllic non America lesbian compound and pow wow upbringing. She didn't have to obey them. She loved them. Shit.

Weaver grabbed his hand. "Come on. Sit. We don't have much time to introduce you."

For all he wanted to look like he went willingly, she dragged him across the flagstone floors piled with rugs. He could feel Laurel behind him, but she moved in silence. Weaver sat him in a chair that looked like it belonged in a smoking lounge. Opposite Alice. Great.

Weaver sat on his armrest. She stole his cigarette. Then fished into his suit coat to pull out his silver cigarette case.

"We don't smoke in here anymore." But Alice didn't watch Weaver lighting a cigarette with his lighter. She stared at the cigarette in Jamie's hand.

Laurel lay down on the couch to his right, propped her feet on the armrest and crossed her arms. Mez had become a round ball on the other couch. Her gentle snore sounded so much like a purr she could have been mistaken for a house cat.

Jamie glanced around for an ashtray, berated his stupidity, and smashed the coal between his thumb and finger. Which would have hurt a human a hell of a lot more. He winced. Her mothers could tell Weaver to stop seeing him.

"Oh, please." Weaver blew smoke in Alice's direction. "Cobweb's precious fabrics are locked up. Who here smokes?" She raised her hand.

Jamie hated to, but he'd look like an ass not raising his hand.

Temperance ducked her head into her shoulders, but raised her hand. Laurel's hand floated up as if it had a will of its own.

Cobweb stared at the floor as her hand crept up scant inches.

“I knew you were lying!” Alice animated into a wicked smile. “I have been so damn good so your wool can come from ‘a smoke free home’ and you’ve been—”

Cobweb’s hand went to her hip. “I never said we couldn’t smoke. I said we couldn’t smoke in here.”

Temperance slid to the floor and slugged a Guinness to use the can as an ashtray. Jamie lit his cigarette. Laurel already smoked to the ceiling.

Cobweb produced a pack of American Spirits from somewhere in her clothes. “It’s one night. The whole lot of us would spend our first night together standing by the outhouse.”

“Don’t worry about the cloth.” Weaver waved. “I can clean the smell out.”

Cobweb started, but Alice’s expression didn’t twitch.

Then her smile gentled. “Bum one, Temperance? On the other hand, give me the pack. You’re too young.”

“Hey. I got rid of my family for a reason.” Temperance handed Alice a cigarette.

“Real ashtrays!” Weaver caroled as she danced to the kitchen. The slight song of those two words sent a shimmer through the room.

Jamie felt a bit better without her confusing proximity. He turned to Laurel. She looked like morning had come before she had gotten to her dirt.

Cobweb “tch, tch”ed at Temperance.

Alice ran a hand through Temperance’s hair. “You have a nappy head for a white girl. Want some dreds? Or a little twist?”

“You are damn Seminole for nappy hair.” Temperance leaned against Alice’s knee.

“There was an African American in the woodpile.” Alice stroked through Temp’s hair.

Temperance perched in front of Alice. “Sure. It can’t get worse. I look like Orphan Annie.”

But no one looked at Laurel. Jamie might hate his place in this little tableau, but he had a place. His nerves frayed farther, but this time in anger. Mess with him, fine. Leave Laurel be. She had done nothing wrong. Not bringing back their asshole son was not her fault.

“You always throw out the ashtrays too soon.” Weaver’s ass obscured his view of Alice as she clunked several things onto the table. He closed his eyes. These were not the dynamics he had had with Hao or his daughter.

Weaver sat. This time on his hand. He yanked it from beneath her. Temperance laughed into Alice’s knee. Weaver had left a number of decrepit bowls on the table. She held out a chipped coffee mug to him. He asked.

He hated to admit it, but Laurel served a purpose. Without his defensive hackles rising, he never would have continued to face Alice. Or the fact that Cobweb wouldn’t look at him, either.

“I’m so sorry.” Alice held out a plate of Oreos. “Would you like an Oreo, Jamie?”

Jamie hesitated. She offered hospitality, and in his living world, not taking it would be a mistake. She offered it because she knew he couldn’t take it. Which made him want to take it out of spite. He could. He’d have to puke later. That or remember how to digest.

“He and Laurel don’t eat, Mom.” Weaver picked up a cookie.

“I’m sorry.” Alice’s voice went soft. “I misunderstood. Is that true, Jamie? You don’t,” a semi truck could have driven through Alice’s pause, “eat?”

“No.” Jamie splayed his legs. “We drink.”

Alice cocked her head. Then she stalked into the bathroom. She came back holding a jar of beeswax. She set the near asleep Temperance between her legs. With a few deft twists, a miniature corkscrew of hair formed.

Cobweb crept over to Jamie’s knee. “Shoo.” She displaced her daughter. Weaver slid to his feet. She leaned on his leg. Nice picture. Nicer picture if she turned her mouth towards his crotch. He shook his head.

All he wanted to do was not think about sex, but this whole exercise made him want to screw Weaver silly. Too bad that everyone's games meant he dawdled on the edge of dawn now.

"Where did you get this suit?" Cobweb's hand ran over his leg. Weaver and Temperance both laughed as she examined his inseam.

He shrugged. "New York. 1921. It's Arachne."

"I'm sorry, dear? I don't recognize that brand, and I guarantee you I would recognize anyone who made something of this caliber. It hasn't wrinkled." She sniffed him. "You don't smell like smoke."

"I am so sorry and so disturbed." Weaver put a hand over her face. "Cobweb, get out of his lap. She really does want to know about the suit. She's just—Mom, come on."

"I'm aware." Jamie raised his eyebrows at both of them at his feet. "Here." He slipped off his jacket. "Why don't you examine that, Cobweb?"

"Oh." Cobweb took the coat. "Thank you. Where is this from? Not vintage. I can't tell—" She picked up a magnifying glass. "This weave is amazing."

"You wouldn't know Arachne." Jamie smiled at her. Right about now he wished he still drank alcohol. Cobweb and Alice might not mind a joint, but he wasn't going to risk it. "Arachne is a People brand."

"And that is People with a capital 'P'? So it would only be available to People."

Alice got some of this too easily, unless Janet had spilled more than she had said she had. Jamie arched his eyebrows.

"What is it?" Cobweb picked at the threads.

"Spider silk. Rather special spider silk. When Arachne became a spider, she didn't lose her amazing weaving abilities, and the magic, as it is wont to do, sank in. She wove the most spectacular, strong, light, warm, comfortable clothing on earth. She married a mortal spider in order to have children—hundreds of children to pass on the secrets. They married other mortal spiders, and so it goes." Jamie kept his eyes on Alice.

"I thought the first generation all married each other to keep the bloodline strong." She slipped.

"My bad." Jamie nodded to her. "At any case, boutiques still exist. Everything is woven from magic spider web, and everything is custom. I love it. It does last forever."

"Oh." Alice looked up at him. "I guess as a hit man you can afford the best."

Jamie smiled. For the first time all night, he relaxed. Alice had tipped her hand in correcting him. Only a Person would know about Arachne. Or someone who had hacked People web. He'd never heard of it happening, but he wasn't underestimating Alice.

He didn't have to worry. If she had been on People web, she knew more about his life than he did.

"I'm not rich. Or, rather, I am comfortable. The clothing happens to be gifts. Most of my earnings aren't meant for me. Money only matters in how you use it, right Alice?"

Laurel jerked and turned to him.

Alice leaned over Temperance. "You were hired to protect Weaver."

"The contract has lapsed." He touched Weaver's hair. "However, I have come to believe the only way to protect Weaver is to follow in the wake of her plans."

"Hey." She punched his thigh.

"This is amazing. I can't figure out how it was done." Cobweb held up the coat. "May I—er—I wouldn't hurt it."

Jamie smiled at Alice. She could answer how it was done. She blinked at him. Then over at the coat. He wouldn't call her out on it.

Jamie waved. "I doubt you can. And if you did it has a warrantee. Just get it back to me before we leave."

"Why are you still here?" Alice pounced on each syllable.

This one neither of them could read off People web. He blew a smoke ring. It wasn't that he had no answer. He had too many.

Weaver launched to her feet. "Stop grilling Jamie, Goddess. We've all had a rough day. You just meet my friends—"

Alice sat back at the word "friend" and Cobweb's spine went so straight you could see the dance aspirations she'd once had.

"—and you lay into Jamie. You—"

Laurel sat up. Jamie had gotten distracted.

"May we please have the key to the root cellar. I am afraid it is dawn." He stood, then pulled Laurel up.

Weaver sucked in her cheeks but produced a key scudded by dirt and time.

Weaver slammed down into the seat Jamie had been using. When he passed by her, he touched her cheek, but gave gentle pressure when she moved to rise. He had meant to leave more time to talk to Laurel tonight. Whatever dark there was left belonged to her.

Alice had tipped her hand too late in the evening. To call her out would have created more anger, hurt feelings, and lies than anything else. That, he was sick of. Someday soon, though, he was curious to know what she did know. Plus, he was Weaver's lover, not her friend.

* * * * *

Weaver bounced a leg over the side of the seat Jamie had vacated. She kept her eyes steady on Alice. Her mother had that hook smile that meant trouble. Weaver was not eight. Alice would not get whatever she wanted with a simple smile.

Mez stretched at the slam of the door. "Whassat? We going to bed?"

Cobweb picked up two large baskets from behind the couch and sat beside Mez. "Maybe you should go to bed, sweetheart. Temperance is nodding off, too."

Cobweb's lips puckered while she carded wool. Her hands would move the entire time she had "a talk" with Weaver.

Weaver wanted to look as casual as Alice, but her skin crackled in jumps of purple and orange anger.

"Oh." Cobweb's eyes went wide, her carding falling from her hands.

Weaver's smile tasted bitter. Not till that display—they had never believed it. They had never believed her alien despite the fact she had handed her to them.

As long as Mez wasn't a jaguar, as long as Weaver stayed collected and didn't use magic, as long as Temperance didn't make pronouncements that came true—her parents could lie to themselves.

Not their children. Not their darling friends. It's those vampires. The ones who passed for so long, and had tried so hard, but one smile and the fangs couldn't be undone. No wonder Jamie had spent so long on those claws.

Alice smiled. She would if the world ended around her. Which it might.

Mez scrubbed her face. "Shit. I'd really hoped I'd slept through the melodrama."

"Second act." Temperance got up with partly corkscrewed hair and got on the couch Laurel had been on. "Going strong. Do you want a preview of the future, or do you want to go the long way?"

"No offense." Cobweb's hands tightened on her carding once more. "But Temperance, we don't believe in fate. Perhaps this had better be a matter for family, after all."

"Fate believes in you." Weaver touched the peeping, burbling double stranded skein of her and Temperance's Fates in her bra.

"What?" Cobweb squinted at her. "Don't tell me you've gone religious in the middle of this mess. Mez, Temperance?"

“It’s something the Norns once said to me.” Weaver’s words were barely sound, but Temperance gave a watery smile.

Temp picked up Weaver’s hand. “Sorry, Cobweb. No can leave. If you can be scarier than arguing down an ogre on his slum lord housing, be my guest.”

Mez stretched. “Well, I’m up now, and refreshed after a power nap. I have no intention of abandoning one of my best girls.” Mez slid onto Weaver’s armrest. “Here’s a secret. Pulling that older and wiser crap on People doesn’t work unless you really are at least one of those. I’m eighty-three. Want to see who wins?”

As funny as it was, and as much as Weaver knew her friends would like to hear her laugh, she kept staring at Alice.

“What does your eyes looking like mercury mean, anyway?” Alice ate a cookie.

Weaver shrugged. “Strong emotion.”

“So,” Alice wiped her hands off on her shirt, “your eyes would do that when you were fucking Jamie? Incidentally, how long have you been fucking Jamie?”

Weaver’s head knocked back at the word.

“Curious—how long have you known that?” Weaver sat up. “Because I don’t think anyone—”

“We found out when you came in here crawling all over him, that’s when.” Cobweb pulled wool between the cards till her hands mottled red.

“That wasn’t crawling all over him.” Temperance drew a line across her throat. “We’ve seen crawling all over him. You don’t want to see that.”

Cobweb ripped wool, dirty to clean, with all the more force. “We are concerned.”

“Actually.” Mez scrounged a cruddy receipt from her pocket and held it up. “We all are. This is an intervention, Weaver. Temperance, would you like to read your statement first?”

“This is not a joke.” Cobweb’s mouth turned to a small cut. Rip. Dirty to clean.

“Okay, okay.” Weaver laughed. “Nice joke, but really, we’ve spent two nights together and a lot of frustration between everything else.”

Alice cleared her throat.

Rip. More clean wool.

Thank God for Weaver’s friends.

“Why not fuck Jamie?” Mez turned to the two women. “He’s charismatic and sweet and—”

“But not in a girlie way.” Temperance flicked the notion away.

“And not in a macho way.” Weaver pushed between their two voices. “He was scared to talk to you two because the last time he had to worry about this kind of etiquette, marriages were arranged. Parents were important and—”

“Oh. Now I understand.” Alice picked up a teetering pile of papers from her desk.

“Stop it. Don’t you dare laugh.” Cobweb stood. “Your mother has not slept since we found out. She’s lived on cigarettes and coffee and computer screens. Her carpal tunnel has come back and she still won’t stop. She’s gone black hat trying to find out about this. She could be arrested.”

“Stop what?” Weaver still refused to stand. Those with the most comfy chairs won. That’s what teaching had taught her. Her nerves twinged to take that pile of paper from her mother. She should have known what Alice would do when she was told little, and not allowed to help.

“Mom. You didn’t have to do that. Did you hack into Langley?”

One of Sam and her endless questions to their mother was whether or not she had ever hacked Langley. She had always just smiled.

Alice set the stack of papers on the coffee table. “Yes.”

A bead of sweat formed on the back of her neck. Weaver squeezed Mez’s hand. Mez crushed her hand back until Weaver stood. “Ma, let me help.”

“I got it!” Alice held up a hand. It shook. No wonder Alice had been so still all evening. Weaver had assumed it had to do with tormenting Jamie. Now Weaver could see how Alice’s clothes hung off her. Weaver had had the self involvement to assume it was a natural result of age.

“You looked the whole time.” Weaver sank back in her chair.

“Do you think we will lose you?” Cobweb’s words snared. Behind them hung, “like Sam.”

“I figured out his M.O.” Alice held out a handful of pages. “His and Laurel’s. Sometimes they cross, or are in the same place or—” Alice grabbed another handful of papers. “I could track him and a lot of the time—”

Temperance turned a piece of paper over. “Alice, who didn’t you hack? This is F.B.I.”

“Jamie.” Alice scabbled for paper. “Or Laurel. Janet gave me their email—or that bouncing set of glyphs both of them use for—”

“You hacked Jamie and Laurel!” Weaver stood. “What the hell?” Was what she said but, “do you want to get yourself killed?” echoed through her mind.

Alice straightened. For the first time in her life, Weaver noticed that didn’t make Alice taller than her anymore.

Alice glared. “Janet—our supposed you’ll never have to use it failsafe—walked down here one day and said the two of you were known twins, in play, but it was okay because the best protection had been hired. Jamie and Laurel. That’s it. That’s all I got. And I stole the email addresses off her computer.”

“And, well?” Weaver spread her arms. “They are the best, so—”

“Whoa.” Mez sat up in a whoosh. “Did Janet give you this? How did you get this?”

Weaver snatched the sheet of paper. A picture that looked newly minted showed Jamie in the suit he’d been wearing tonight. He held a shotgun over one shoulder. A girl with a long face, high cheekbones and a highbrow nose wore the right amount of lush to be a flapper and defined Jamie getting crawled over.

Weaver glanced at the title of the article. “Our Answer to Ness.” “Okay. Jamie in the twenties with Chastity if I’m guessing right.” But then— “I don’t get it. This is People info. None of us would flash a paper like this—Alice,” Weaver yanked her mother to her. “Where did you get this? The F.B.I.?”

Temperance crumpled the paper into a tight ball. “You hacked People web.”

“What’s People web?” Weaver tried to get the paper back.

“It’s the web but it is for People with a capital ‘P’.” Alice stopped. “Why didn’t you know that?”

Weaver coughed. “We haven’t been exactly doing computer research.”

“It’s a great system.” Alice walked over to her computer. “Years above ours. Instead of semi-two dimensional, it works on a three dimensional matrix. Not just pictures but everything. Any search you put in there comes back with the three different searches born of the three interpretations that most—”

“Alice.” Mez put a hand over the keyboard. And then the other one. Then pinned Alice’s arm.

Alice’s look of insane genius fell to sheer exhaustion. “You are about to tell me I can’t do that, aren’t you? Only those in this room know. And Jamie. I let something slip. Then he trapped me.”

Mez hugged Alice. “See—see how Jamie got a hold of you through a slip? People web—it is supposed to be one of the few safe ways for us to communicate or get the news or read history—all the things humans use the web for. If anyone you have been communicating with finds out you are human, if any of the human hack patrols catch up to you, they will kill you and Cobweb both. There has never been a hack or a leak in history.”

Weaver hugged Alice. “You knew you were in deep this time, didn’t you?”

Alice nodded into her.

“And you didn’t care.” Which Weaver could interpret as Alice worried about her children, but it as likely meant Alice had challenged herself and won at a spectacular new hack.

Alice pushed her away. “I don’t plug back in. I got that.” She dug for another sheet of paper. “This.”

Now Cobweb stood to look at the glyph on the page. “What is this?”

Temp took it.

“I found Jamie’s signature, and Laurel’s—a true vampire kill. To hide from persecution, the others usually slash the throat into the artery, put their mouth over to drain the blood, and then move the body to make it look like another slash and dump. So why him?” Alice paced but Cobweb caught her.

Temp bounced her eyebrows. She handed the paper around Weaver’s back to Mez.

“Where did you get this?” Mez chewed on her hand.

“What?” Weaver tore the paper from Mez. A waving line above a quick crosshatch. She rubbed the paper as if something else might come out of it. “Is this Japanese or—” she could feel where this led now, but her mouth couldn’t stop—“Chinese?”

“Yeah.” Temperance shrugged, but her small face froze. “I know the sigil. Everyone does.”

“Is that from the F.B.I. or the C.I.A.?” Mez took the paper from Weaver. “People web? Sure, I know what it means. I’ve used it.”

“It’s everywhere. But no one says what it means. People web has a world map covered with those things, but it doesn’t say what they mean.” Alice’s hand hovered over the page.

“What it does show you is that glif shows up a lot when Laurel or Jamie is around.” Weaver rubbed her temples. “That’s where we’re going, isn’t it?”

Mez sat. “Well. I can tell you there will be some pockets of activity away from them. I can tell you that if you want to know about that symbol, you need to talk to Laurel or Jamie. Really, you ought to talk to Jamie.”

Alice gave a jerk of a nod. A small smile emerged.

“If you thought this was about Jamie and Laurel in the first place, why didn’t you do this, this,” Weaver flung up a handful of papers, “whole presentation when they were here?”

Mez cleared her throat. “All right, girls, maybe this one should wait till we’ve slept.”

Mez’s muscles swam into readiness. Mez blocked Weaver because no one else in this bullshit night had a chance.

“You don’t trust them.” Weaver’s words were an autumn song that gusted through the room till the papers went flying. Mortar edged out between stones in the walls. “Will I have to give you a blow by blow account of each time they saved my ass?”

Cobweb turned away. Alice’s dreds battered her face, but her mouth stuck firm.

“Weaver!” Mez pinned Weaver’s arms. Weaver whistled. A whirlwind spun up around Mez. Mez flicked her hold to a headlock. Weaver smiled. If Weaver attempted to move Mez anymore, Weaver would choke.

“Dial it down.” Mez shouted through the sun soaked music. “I’m not asking you to step off. Just dial it down.”

Weaver grinned. Only Mez. Weaver’s open pores attempted to suck instead of blow. The power felt like a crazed animal.

Mez flipped Weaver behind her again. “Alice, Cobweb, do not act like you are talking to—”

“My daughter?” Cobweb hipped her way in. “Because I am talking to my daughter. I don’t care what color you turn, Weaver. Those vampires put you in danger.”

“I put me in danger.” Her song warped to a minor key. “God damn it, I insisted on going after Sam. They wanted to take me to safety.” She settled into Mez’s arms. “So quit being bitches to Laurel.”

Cobweb’s voice guttered. “She lost Sam.”

“Shit. Sam’s guardian lost Sam. He didn’t even stick around to give us the update.” Weaver’s power ebbed to a salty wave. “I lost Sam.”

“I don’t know why everyone is getting so upset about losing Sam.” Temperance sighed to a cross legged lump on the couch. “What Sam is is a lost cause.”

Three “fuck you”s slammed into Temperance.

Mez ground her jaw. “Ah, shit.”

“You never met him.” Alice spat at Temperance.

Temperance wiped the goo from her face. “Unfortunately, I did.”

“You know what he’s been through.” Weaver started forward.

Mez kicked the back of Weaver’s knees. “We are not doing this again.”

But they were. No one could walk into this house without feeling that preserved room upstairs, waiting.

“Fuck you.” Temperance glanced up at Weaver. “My grandma stuck pins in my eyes so I wouldn’t look at boys when I was twelve. When they got infected, my uncle scooped them out with a hot spoon. So Sam’s life didn’t go perfect. Join existence. Did I become a dick?”

“Yes.” Alice rammed her hands on the couch to either side of Temp. “Right now you have no idea what a dick you are.”

Weaver opened her mouth to join in, but then her brittle laugh shredded the air. “Oh, nicely played, Temp.” She jerked free of Mez. “No wonder you were a Sponsor.”

“What?” Alice flipped around.

“What’s a Sponsor again—like Janet?” Cobweb blinked.

Weaver crashed back into her chair.

Mez hip checked her over so that they tangled into a heap. “A Sponsor controls an area—balancing human and People power. Janet is the Sponsor here. Temperance oversaw the Bay Area.”

“She’s so young.” Cobweb brushed a finger across Temperance’s cheek.

“Being a seeress is useful in a Sponsor.” Temp frowned at her nails. “So how into unknowingly lending her manicure kit do you think Laurel would be?”

Weaver’s anger dropped out of her so fast she felt light headed. “I’m sure she’ll understand extenuating circumstances.” Weaver lunged forward to kiss Temperance’s cheek.

Alice thumped down in the chair opposite Weaver. “You were a bitch about Sam because you knew we would unite, and have an easier time forgiving you than each other. Bravo, indeed.” Her hands twisted in her lap. “Is he—is there no hope?”

Weaver embraced both her mothers so hard their heads knocked together. “I’m not giving up. I never will.”

“Look at it this way,” Mez knelt beside them. “You know more now than you have in thirteen years. So he’s a dick. He has thousands of years to change that.”

Cobweb looked away.

Alice nodded, but her eyes shifted back to the floor. “The vamps kill. They kill every night to survive.”

“Jamie and Laurel are separate from the main vamp society. They refuse to kill anyone who isn’t at least worse—way worse—than they are. They will not turn a human. Weaver’s sidhe parents would not have hired them otherwise.” Mez’s words stepped over the broken glass of thrown ideas, but it was too late.

“You think being killers is good reason to hate someone?” Weaver’s skin took on a lumpy goo of memory.

“Well, certainly not to hang out with them.” Cobweb went for light.

Nothing in Weaver’s world was light. Temperance kept her head down as she picked the Oreo plate from beneath I See’s nose. She carried the plates to the kitchen. Mez didn’t move, but in a blink, jaguar eyes stared at Cobweb.

Weaver set down her words and her hurt with care. “I have killed. Temperance has killed. Mez has killed. You are the only ones left with the luxury of judgement.”

Temperance returned to pile her warm jabs of elbows and awkward angles atop Mez and Weaver. Weaver tickled up her spine. When it was just them, no one shoved it in their faces. They all let the blood and death not exist so they could continue being who they were meant to be.

“Self defense.” Alice touched I See’s head. “It was all self defense.”

“I See, don’t you dare come up here.” Weaver held I See’s questing muzzle. “The first, the Skinwalker, would have killed us. I killed him for trying to seduce me into seeing humans as a plague. I don’t know.”

Bile made a familiar home in her throat. “But the others? The Wild Hunt? They were on the wrong side of a war, but does that make it better?”

“And Titania—yeah she was on the wrong side of a war, but I killed her because she sliced my bassoon in half and wouldn’t let me have my brother back. Not that he wanted to come back in the end.” Weaver closed her eyes. “She looked like the kind of horror movie Cobweb refuses to watch. I did that.”

Cobweb’s hand went to her mouth. Weaver’s heart strove to triumph at their pain.

Weaver stared at the rugged stone ceiling. “You know, Sam ended up some strange places after he hitchhiked out of here. Wasn’t more than a year before he ended up traveling around with dog fighting White Supremacists, because they made My Girl their star.”

Cobweb hiccupped. Alice turned away.

“My Girl always won.” Weaver waved a hand. “Not the point. One night on the way to L.A., the guys start beating this Latino guy to death. When Sam tried to stop it, he was beaten—told he would be next. Lying bleeding on the side of the road while a man was being kicked to death, the dogs surrounded him. He told them to kill.” She drew her parents’ eyes with her low croon. “He questions himself that in those moments he didn’t think of a better way out.

“He lived on the streets in L.A.” Weaver’s gaze pulled the eyes of everyone in the room. She stood. “I asked him why he didn’t come home. He said how could he, after what he had done. What would you think?”

Weaver turned for the door. “I told him you would always love him.” It was cheap, but she shot over her shoulder. “Maybe he had the right idea.”

Her hand took the wood handle, but didn’t turn it. Pin pricks went through her skin being this close to iron. Her body roiled in waves of nausea. The worst was the punch to the heart that her parents had been so stupid as to put it in. Mez rolled up with a smell of jungle.

“Excuse me but I need to go see Geronimo,” Weaver croaked.

Temperance’s voice fell stone even. “Goodnight, Alice, Cobweb. We stay awake nights and sleep into the day. You should have time to talk about the vamps behind their backs again if that is how you feel most comfortable.”

Weaver still couldn’t turn the handle. She stood in her cradle. In what she thought of when she thought of her safe place. That door put her on the wrong side of her life. She turned her head. Cobweb had her arm around a slumped Alice.

Weaver turned back to the door. “You guys really worried about me. I thought about you all the time. I wanted so much to talk to you—not fight. I love Jamie.” Please don’t let anyone pass that on to Jamie. “I love Sam. And I love you. It would mean so much to me if you—”

She yanked the door open into crackling mountain air. As soon as she got out the door, Mez and Temp barreled into her. “Okay, okay!” She sorted herself out. “But I have to pee.” She flipped down her pants and squatted. Pee shot into the mushy ground.

“I so don’t know how you do that.” Temperance took a step back. “You know we always have you. Laurel, and of course Jamie, always have you.”

“I guess I was looking for family.” Weaver shrugged. “I will always love it here, but maybe—” She couldn’t say it. Maybe she should have followed Sam if she wanted family.