

## Chapter 1

I'm dead.

I know I'm dead. The darkness around me couldn't be anything besides "game over". I sigh, exasperated. Now, I'll have to start all over at the beginning of the level.

Haha. Gotcha.

I click my laptop screen down without closing the game I was playing. The black lid eases into position and the whirring fan dies down as the computer goes into sleep mode. The apartment I share is quiet except for the hum of the air conditioner and the occasional car rumbling past outside. I push back my chair and stand up. My favorite pajama bottoms catch on the side of it as I pass.

There is a glow coming from the other side of the table, coming from my cell phone. The screen indicates an incoming call and I grimace. Skye Donaghue's name along with a silly picture of her with cross-eyes graces the background. It's only her.

"Hello?"

"Hey—Ian?" Her high-pitched voice greets me as the lines connect.

"You called my cell. It'd be weird if someone else answered."

She scoffs. "I need your help! Could do me a huge favor? I have a party tonight and I need some help beforehand. Are you sure you don't want to come? Milly's gonna be there and

I invited Levi.”

Ah, Levi—my old nemesis. “Now I definitely don’t want to go. Can’t you call someone else to do it?”

“Ian.” She draws my name out in that whine. “That would cost money and I always do things for you when I can. Don’t we have this ‘fag-hag’ thing? Besides, I promise I won’t try to keep you until the party. I do actually need your help. Please?”

Oh wow, the P’s and Q’s are coming out. She must need assistance. “Alright, Skye. I’ll be over in a minute.”

“You’re amazing! Thanks!”

The line goes dead.

I shut off the phone as the familiar icon for missed calls and voice mails popped up. There’s only fifteen today; so the week is looking up. I slide the phone back onto the table and walk to my room.

I keep everything in its place. Messes just happen to have a lovely place in the corners. Clothes are piled up in a to-do mountain for laundry on one end and a stack of books with everything from Harry Potter to Weaving 101 almost touches the ceiling in another. An old military grade duffel bag leans like a tired hen against my closet door. I check over the contents to make sure I have everything.

Ceremonial drum? Check. Headdress? Check. Chalk? Awesome. I’m ready to go.

Well, almost.

I slip my pajama bottoms off and replace them with a

comfy pair of blue jeans. The t-shirt proudly emblazoned with “Zombies are Cool!” complimented the casual outfit I was going for and a maroon sweater swept over and completed it. It clashes with my red fur, or so Skye would tell me, but it was chilly outside.

I was about to turn the key and lock the door when I heard pawsteps coming up from behind me. They sounded heavy but not ones that I could recognize. A tall honey badger strode around the corner into the dark hallway that connected the apartments. He wasn’t wearing his usual combat boots.

“Oh—Adrian, you scared me.”

He grinned and looked me over. “Hey slut. Heading out for a night-on-the-cock?”

I punched his arm. “No! Someone called me and they need me to help them with something.” I don’t tell him that it was Skye who asked for me. The two don’t get along very well.

He made a vulgar humping motion with his hips.

“You need to get laid, seriously.” I brush past him and began walking. “I left the door unlocked for you.”

I heard the door opening before he called behind me. “Will you be back late? We’re supposed to finish the documentary on Margaret Thatcher tonight!”

“You’ll have to watch it without me. I might be out for a while.”

“Fine.” He affected a dejected tone and closed the door. I roll my eyes and continue down the steps of the building.

Outside, the night was indeed chilly and I was glad for the comfort of the sweater. My ears twitched in the wind as it picked up, blowing a few leaves down the sidewalk.

Neon lights lit up the night as I began walking to the nearest metro entrance. I'd left my car behind in the move. The familiar sedan would've been more convenient but the streets in a big city were a dangerous and foreboding place for me.

A bought ticket, a few metro hops, and a greasy slide amongst the less fortunate later, I reach Skye's house. The snow leopard had purchased the town home in the nicer district of the city with a much quieter lifestyle in mind. We should have switched. Skye loved to keep the night alive with her presence even if she wasn't physically there. Her house rang with music and she always kept company.

The steps up to her place were littered with the remains of last night's party. So, she hasn't gotten a chance to clean up then. I knock on the hard wood door a couple of times and wait. She doesn't answer but that's not unlike her. Ever have that one person that you can text and call all day and never get a hold of? Skye Donaghue.

I rap again and wait some more. It's really irritating, especially since it's cold outside. My red fur only does so much in this climate. Creeping over to the side window, I peek in to see if she's dancing in the kitchen with her headphones in. As my head clears the sill, I can see her in the living room. She's not dancing though.

Skye's talking with a spirit on the couch. Her eyes are half-lidded, be-spelled with glamour. The snow leopard leaned forward and said something that I can't hear. Laughing, the remnant put a hand on her thigh.

"Oh shit," I whisper. It was an incubite. Incubites were old world spirits that feasted on extreme sexual energy but they were usually more at home in red light districts. This one must've really liked Skye's home because it was sitting on her sofa, charming the pants right off of her.

This one was strong too. Its ashen skeleton hummed with power and the eyes glowed brightly in their sockets. Their glamour worked on the mentally incapable best and Skye was more than likely very drunk. Shit. She probably didn't know how much danger she was in. How did it get in there? Old world spirits can't cross the security thresholds that most home builders install. Homes are havens and they shouldn't be able to enter those.

The remnant must've slipped into the house from some gap in the barrier, probably from one of Skye's parties. The people that come in weren't the most reputable and some of them carried their problems with them.

They seemed to be the sort of people around New Avalon for the past couple of months. Crime has been on the rise and there have been a rash of murders recently. It's a big city but with the N.A.P.D. trained for most psychic or other paranormal circumstances, we've been pretty safe.

And speaking of the police, a familiar white and

blue car pulls up behind me. Now, I know exactly what this looks like: a male red fox peeking in the hedges of an uptown girl's apartment through her window. Dammit, Skye. She must've known something was up so she called the police. Then, the incubite got her. I had to get in there. The police officers wouldn't be able to see it or help her, not if it was this powerful.

A panther and a hart got out of the car, all business with their policeman walk, paws stuck to their belts. My heart started to pound in my chest. What do I do? I look around wildly but that's not helping my situation.

"Step away from the window, kit." The feline partner stepped onto the sidewalk and spoke first. At least, I assumed they were partners. Cops traveled with their partners, right? Oh, and that rumor about them being fat and lazy? It doesn't hold in New Avalon. These guys were built, cut and muscled. Not wicked jacked built, but they looked strong enough to slam a slim fox like me against their car if I tried anything funny.

The seconds ticked by and I tried to think of something to say. Anything. My mouth opened and closed a couple times and only a few croaks escaped.

"I'm not gonna ask again. Step away from the window and walk over to us, nice and slow." The hart was watching my paws. Right, I could be a slinger. That's the term for the more adventurous folk with weaving. They gather energy right in their paws and sling it at people. It's extremely dangerous for

both parties and highly illegal.

I raise my paws up without being told. It might help my case with them if I'm polite and willing. If my case is helped, the sooner I can get into the town house and at that incubite.

"Officers, please. I was checking on my friend, Skye Donaghue. She lives here and said something was wrong so I wanted to make sure was okay."

"Skye Donaghue...you mean the Skye Donaghue?" The hart perked up, his ears and eyes alighted to the door. I sighed, precious moments were ticking by.

"Yes, the Skye Donaghue. I think she's in trouble. Look, please Officer..." I risked a glance at his shiny nametag. "...Barlow. Just knock on the door and make sure she's okay. Not for me, for her."

My earnest expression worked. The hart walked up to the steps as I exited the greenery around the window. My paws stayed politely above my head and I laced them on the crown between my ears, standing next to the panther. His nametag read Capman and he kept one eye on me and the other on the door.

Barlow pounded on the door in that knock only police can do. "N.A.P.D., ma'am. We're responding to the call you made earlier." His deep voice reverberated through the quiet neighborhood. So, she did call.

No one was out looking but I could feel eyes on me through closed curtains. People tried to be so nice about it but

everyone wanted to see what the police were here for. My tail swished behind me in agitation as I sat and waited for something to happen. Please, please answer the door.

It opened a crack and I could just make out her white fur and those beautiful spots that landed her so many positions opposite a camera. The snow leopard verified that the police were actually there and opened her front door more fully. The incubite stood next to her, one skeletal arm casually draped across her shoulder. My vision blurred when my eyes passed over it and I saw what it wanted me to see like double vision. It showed the police a male snow leopard, worry shining in its eyes as its arm was offered as a shelter, layered over the fiery bones. Officer Barlow shook his head a moment and stood in surprise. He must feel something too. My pulse started to slow as she looked past the hart to me and the panther.

“Thank you for responding so quickly, but my boyfriend came over.” She laid a hand on the skeletal chest, ribbons of energy coursing from her into it. I watched as she paled and swallowed hard. “I’m so tired, though. I think I won’t be having that party tonight.” The thing brought her close to its chest in a mockery of comfort.

“It’s alright, babe.” It pressed its toothy maw on her forehead and I shivered. Please, c’mon Barlow, you have to notice something is off with this. I looked up at the feline officer. “Sir, that’s not her boyfriend.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. I hated when people

did that. “Then why is he in there and you’re out here?”

Should I tell him the truth? As long as I kept them talking, I had a chance to help her out. Why hasn’t she noticed me yet?

“Because he’s an incubite, sir. He’s throwing up glamour to overcome your senses.”

That got its attention. The malevolence turned those hollow sockets towards me, aglow with a building fury. “Hey, I told you to quit bothering her.” It lifted a finger at me. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

Fuck you, you burned out husk. “Skye,” I looked directly at her, ignoring it and willing her to speak and vindicate me. Her sparkling, baby-blue eyes turned to me but showed no recognition. She blinked and stared hard at me as if trying to find out what I am. The spirit grinned at me, full of hate and ground its teeth.

“I don’t know this fox.”

Icy fingers gripped my heart and I could feel my eyes widening. Barlow turned around to look at me and the panther gripped my arm just above the elbow. It was strong enough to tell me that I wasn’t getting away but not strong enough to hurt.

“Skye, look at me. You know me. It’s Ian!” I tried unsuccessfully to keep my voice down. My window of opportunity was closing, quickly.

“Alright, buddy. Let’s leave the nice girl alone.” Capman started to pull me toward the cop car. His tone

immediately irritated me but I fought to keep myself from turning to anger. Calm, Ian. Don't panic. "Sorry about all this, Miss Donaghue."

"She called me earlier, too. I have her number in my cell phone." Desperate, I reached in and pulled out my phone. Before I could swipe the screen to unlock it, Capman had it out of my reach in his paw. I protest but he doesn't seem to be listening.

"Look, just call it, please." I plead as Barlow comes around to open the door to the car. The house's door was already closing. "Please?!"

"That's enough, okay? We're going to take you down to the precinct if you keep resisting." Barlow had come around now, taking my phone from the panther. Adrenaline shot through my veins as her door closed. She was going to die. She was going to die and it was going to be my fault.

"No!" I wrench my arm out of Capman's grip and make a dash for my duffel bag. I'd left it near the doorstep by the bushes nearby. If I could just get to my headdress...

A hard body tackled me to the ground and stars exploded in my vision. I could numbly feel my arms being pulled behind my back as I was cuffed. Gods, help me.

The blackness swimming around my peripheral cleared in pockets of silence, punctuated by my own gasping. I was hauled upward. The car sped closer. The backseat rose up to meet my cheek and I bit my tongue on impact. Blood started to seep out of my mouth but the pain pushed back the

fog.

Capman was driving the car away and we were already a block before I could muster up the strength to slump upright. Barlow was calling in something on the radio and I turned around to see Skye's house disappearing around the corner. I could feel my eyes heating up from my frustration. How can I escape this car? All of my supplies were back at her place. I couldn't do anything unless I resorted to slinging and that would be assault on an officer charges on top of an instantaneous attempted murder charge. Would I do it to save my friend though?

Yes. Yes, I would.

With the decision made, the energy started building up in my mouth. With my paws behind my back, I wouldn't be able to sling it that way. It was a closely guarded fact that you can also strike from the mouth, as long as the energy was expelled forcefully, you could pretty much do it from anywhere. It just takes skill.

"Ian, was it?" The hart looked back at me with those soft, brown eyes. To him, I must be sitting there, sullen. I was calculating where I could shoot that would not kill them but still incapacitate the two. Then, I could kick the door or window out and escape. Hopefully.

"Be reasonable, huh? Sometimes they just don't go for you. Rejection hurts but you have to move on. There are plenty of other girls out there." He smiled at me. Great. He was trying to play nice while hauling me in.

Wait. If he was as nice as he was playing at, maybe he would listen. He wanted reasonable? Fine. If reason didn't work though—blast city.

I released the energy build up in my mouth with a quick inhale/exhale exercise. The sizzling bolt dissipated. "I'm not an admirer, that's for sure. I've known Skye since we were in high school. She's an arrogant bitch with a penchant for story-topping but she's been one of my best friends for a while now."

Barlow nodded. He seemed to be listening. I looked out of the window as we stopped at a red light. Good, more time. I could see his partner make a face through the rear view mirror. "Yeah, they're always friends to start out with. Then, you ask 'em out, they reject you, and then what? Stalking?"

"I'm gay." I spat at him.

He rolled his eyes but Barlow tilted his head to look at me.

"Please, Barlow. Before he took my phone I was going to show you that she actually called me not two hours ago. It has her name and number right in my call logs."

The panther looked at his partner as he took out my phone. I told him the password and he unlocked it to show the past couple of phone calls. "You have a bunch of voice mails."

"Yeah, I know. Skip to the call list."

He traced a finger down to the list and there was

Skye's name and number. "Well there's the call and it was incoming." He showed the screen to the panther, surprise in his voice. "He's right."

"It could be anyone's number." Capman licked his lips, whiskers twitching. The car slowed down anyway and he pulled over to the side of the road. I sat up a little straighter.

"Call it, then." I jerk my head toward the phone.

Barlow tapped the touch screen over the number and the phone began to ring.

Once.

Twice.

Three times.

Fuck, Skye. If you have any self-preservation at all, if you have anything left in there, Gods please, let her answer that damn phone.

Click.

Tears were running down my face.

"Hello...?"

The policemen stared at each then back at me. It was the voice of the incubite. Skye screamed in the background.

"Shit, call for backup." The hart hung up as his partner whirled the car around, throwing me against the door. It hurt but at least they were on my side now. It took two minutes with the siren on to get back to the house.

"Stay in here." The panther said as he slid out of the driver's seat.

I threw myself against the door again to get their attention. “I’m a weaver! I can help. If that’s what I think it is, you’re going to need someone better trained and we don’t have the time to wait anymore.”

He had the grace to look guilty. Then, he turned to regard Barlow. The stag looked from the house and back to me.

“Fine, but stay close and don’t be a hero.”