Chapter 24

The Bad Kind of Zombies

SOWA power station was built in the late 1800’s as—you guessed it—a power station. The facade gave the impression of three different buildings sharing a wall, and the building itself invoked a sort of old school brick glamour. It’s difficult to imagine a time when we used to make such buildings beautiful. I really hoped we didn’t wreck this one. At some point someone had renovated the power station to be an event hall. According to their website, you could book weddings, parties, craft bazaars and apparently illegal underground fighting rings. Okay, that last one wasn’t on the website and in the owner’s defense, I’m completely certain that they had no idea what we were up to.

People were already trickling in though it was early, and if I didn’t know better, I would think they were here for some kind of private company event. The area out front was cordoned off and manned with staff accepting invitations. They wore tuxes and looked professional, and since most people ignored staff they might not notice that every single one of them looked like the kind of person who could take apart a gun in seconds while wearing a blindfold. They were security in the truest sense of the word.

The people with the invites wore gowns, casually worn tuxes by those clearly used to black tie affairs, as well as suits of varying style and worth. Those could be shrugged off by onlookers as new employees coming to their work event but not being able to afford a rental—or a bespoke tux of their own. Once past security, there were a few food trucks set up, and a few bar stations. People were mingling and looking glamorous.

After meeting with Ava and her team, we’d separated for a few hours to prepare before following their minivan over to the power station. We’d paused to take in the lay of the land from the parking lot before hauling our bags to the competitor area.

Lock let out a low whistle. “Fancy.”

Sid grunted. “Any chance we could sneak into the crowd a bit? All those shiny baubles…” His eyes lit up with the possibilities.

Ava looked down at her outfit and grimaced. “I hope we’re not meant to go in through the front.” She frowned at Ezra, who was dressed to the nines in a slate gray suit, with a purple dress shirt and shiny boots. His shirt was open at the throat, no tie. He could walk in the front door with no problem. He could walk down a runway no problem. “How did you know?”

Ezra’s smile was a quick flash of teeth. “I didn’t.”

Ava grumbled something about foxes.

“We’re going in the back,” I said, grateful. “Except for Tally and my dad.” Tally had pulled a necklace out of Loki’s clutch purse and Loki’s sense of humor was in full effect. The necklace had turned her into a witch. I mean, she didn’t have green skin or anything like that, but the stereotype was still in full effect. Her bones looked gnarled and there was a wart on the end of her nose. She had thick black hair shot with gray, and a slight hunch to her back. She was the crone in a power suit of deep, rich purple. Again, Loki had a sense of humor. Tally could have walked out of central casting to play a Baba Yaga character, or an evil witch. My dad wasn’t dressed up, which might be a problem. I looked at him. I looked at Ezra. My dad was a little wider, and about an inch taller, but it could work. “I think you two might need to swap outfits.”

Ezra’s whisky colored eyes swept the crowd and he surprised me by not arguing. “I think you’re right. Into Lock’s mom van with you, Russel.”

“Don’t mock the van.” Lock unlocked the sliding door on the van. “That wasn’t weird for you at all, was it? It’s still strange to me to call adults by their first names.”

Ezra slipped out of his jacket. “That’s because you’re respectful and were taught that adults occupied a tier above you in the pecking order. I’m a fox. As far as we’re concerned, the only pecking order is foxes at the top, everyone else in a sad, jealous heap below us.”

My dad clapped his hands together, strangely gleeful. “We get to play dress up.”

I shoved my dad into the van. “This might be a good time to give my dad a warning about your clothes if you want them back unstained. Nacho cheese is hard to get out.”

“Ask her how she knows,” Grant said dryly.

“Lena,” my dad chided.

Ezra’s eyes narrowed before he climbed into the van. “Okay, first rule about my clothing—stains are fine, as long as you get them for something I would do. The great part about this rule is I would do just about anything—”

Ava shut the van door with a firm slam. “Trust me, you don’t want to hear any part of the list he’s about to give your dad.”

“Agreed,” I said with a nod.

This fight was set up similarly to the last one—tents outside for the combatants to prep. We checked in and found our spot to get ready, all of us donned our assigned necklaces. Ezra was saved from having to awkwardly wear my dad’s clothing because apparently Lock carried several changes of clothing for all of them in a bag in the back of a van.

“Your boy is like a boy scout,” I said to Ava. “Always prepared.”

She grinned. “He’s more like the team mom, which makes sense. Lock was raised by a bevy of women. If he’s around you long enough, he’ll start fussing at you about eating healthy and getting enough sleep.”

“And staying hydrated,” Lock said softly. “That’s important.”

Grant nodded. “People don’t drink enough water. Last time I told Lena that, she argued that she drank plenty of liquids and I had to tell her coffee and soda don’t count.”

Lock huffed an exasperated breath. “And let me guess, you have to tell her coffee isn’t food?”

Grant rolled his eyes. “Only every morning.”

“Coffee is totally food,” Ava said at the same time as me.

“I’m with the boys on this,” Edda said, as she dropped her bag to the ground. “Water is important, and you drink way too much caffeine.” Garm woofed.

“You’re a traitor,” I mumbled at the wolf. Then scratched his ears, because how do you say no to giving the wolf of wolves a good scratch?

Ezra slung his arm around Ava’s shoulder. “Don’t let them boss you around. If you want to eat poorly, that’s your choice.”

She shot him a look that said he clearly wasn’t helping her argument. “What about you, Sid?”

He slid a foot long blade into a thigh sheath. “I limit my caffeine, but then, do you really want to see me or any of my people jacked up on too much coffee?”

Ezra paused as he bent to unzip his own bag. “What if after this, we give Olive a bunch of those little five hour energy drinks—”

“*No*,”Lock, Ava, and Sid chorused, the response firm.

Ezra didn’t argue, but I didn’t trust the gleam in his eye, either. Especially since Olive might very well be here right now. Sid hadn’t given me any details, but I knew his people had infiltrated the crowd, searching for information. Hopefully they would be able to uncover something about Tally’s sister or the people behind the fights.

Everyone continued to bicker in a good-natured fashion as we suited up. Except for Sid, who had strapped an arsenal of blades to his body, our new friends were decidedly light on weapons. Ava didn’t have any that I could see, besides an asp, which is a small, metal collapsible baton. Lock had a knife, and a vest full of tiny pockets. He had double checked them all, pulling out various seed packets to make sure he had what he needed. Ezra had a crossbow. That was it. Our bout was the first one on the list, so I told them all as much as I could about it so they knew what they were getting into. I wish they’d been able to watch one first.

Before I knew it, we were walking through the doors and into the makeshift arena. Long strands of white fairy lights were strung along the ceiling, casting warm light down on the gathering. Rows of bleachers were set along the sides of the building, but the front and the back were left open and free. They were already crowded, and I spent a second looking for my dad but didn’t see him. Again, there was a VIP area, but I didn’t spot the two guys from the last fight. It wasn’t empty—a handful of young, handsome men filled it, looking like a cologne ad. So many sculpted cheekbones. The fighting area had been chalked off, with stanchions—like you see in a bank, or a movie theater—placed along them. The red velvet ropes didn’t look like they were going to stop anyone from slamming into them, but my guess would be that magic was involved. The floor was some sort of concrete, polished to a high shine. Like everything else with these fights, little was as it seemed.

A guard stood in front of the stanchions, and as we approached he unhooked one and let us inside. I stepped over the line and like before, the landscape changed from one breath to the next. I could still see the crowds, but they looked further away. Snow crunched under my boot. The fighting space was wide and long—the size of a football field. Dark evergreens dotted the snow, and to the right a small hill rolled up out of nowhere, making me wonder if it was natural or human built. I was in awe of the amount of magic being casually tossed around in these fights. This wasn’t a basic glamour like the last fight, but something more. I could barely wrap my mind around it, and I had no idea how they’d managed it. I could feel the cold, winter light of the sun on my face. The sharp scent of pine and the ozone of snow filled my nostrils. The crisp sound of snow beneath my boots sang in my ears. No, this wasn’t a glamour. We were in two places at once. The power use was heady and unease filled me.

Across from us stood our opposing team. My mouth went dry and I swallowed. The setting now made sense. Our opponents weren’t the kind you’d want to turn lose in downtown Boston.

Grant cursed and Edda shot me a look as my team fanned out alongside me.

“There are only five of them,” Ava said, her mouth tipped into a thoughtful frown. “That’s not right, is it?”

Across from us the other team stood. Three of them stood almost stock still. They were completely naked except for helmets and swords, despite the snow, and I bet if we got close they would stink to high heaven. Even from here I could see that something was wrong about them. Twisted. Rotted. Black patches on their pale skin—necrotic flesh. The fourth one was seated on a large, shaggy wolf-like creature, like it was some kind of war pony. He wore an outfit of brightly embroidered animal hide, his white hair falling in a long sheet behind him. He was inhumanely beautiful, which made sense because he certainly wasn’t human.

“I think they decided to shake up the format,” Edda said, as she loosened her stance.

As if on cue, the loudspeaker crackled to life. “Gentlefolk, welcome for an evening of fun and fists—of blood and snow!” The crowd cheered. “Tonight we’re bringing you something special. Instead of teams fighting head to head, your hosts have put together their own squad to test the mettle, the strength, and the endurance of our fighters! Last chance to place your bets as team Ancile goes toe to toe with these fearsome beasts of Jotunheimr!” The crowd went absolutely nuts, some of them leaping out of their seats, presumably to run and place last minute bets on our imminent demise. Weeee.

“Okay,” I said. “Gather up. Quick team meeting.” Everyone circled around me, Garm nosing his way through until his head stuck out between Grant and Edda’s waists.

Ava had to yell over the roaring of the crowd. “This is bad, isn’t it?”

I nodded, a grim feeling settling in my stomach. I didn’t dare to look for Tally and my dad now. I didn’t want to give any indication that they were with us, because I was now worried that the change had something to do with us fighting—our team specifically. It couldn’t be coincidence that we were going toe to toe with monsters out of Norse mythos. But I couldn’t think about that now. None of it would matter if we didn’t survive the fight. I needed to fight this battle first before planning the next one.

“Okay, those three naked dudes?” I didn’t bother pointing. They were pretty obvious. I mean, three naked dudes stood out. “Those are draugr.” For a brief moment I wished Sam had been able to catch a flight and fight with us. He would come in real handy about now. “They’re revenants. That hill is probably their burial mound.”

“Zombies?” Ezra said, glancing over at them. “Cool.”

“No,” Edda said. “Not cool. Terrible. They’re worse than zombies. Draugr are insanely strong. Think of them as sort of Icelandic undead berserkers. They will beat you to death with your own arms and then eat you. I am not hyperbolic—they will *eat you*.” She paused to make sure her words had sunk in. “If we’re lucky, none of them are spell casters, because sometimes draugr have been known to control the weather or foretell the future.”

“So, the bad kind of zombies,” Sid said.

“What about the hot guy on the wolf?” Ava asked.

Lock glanced at her. “Though I’m not concerned about you leaving me for the hot guy, I feel like I should warn you that you don’t get to take home a wolf. No new pets. You already have a killer pony.”

She rolled her eyes. “That guy is at least twice my age, and clearly not human.” She frowned. “You’re right about the wolf though. Are you sure I can’t get one? What if I found a puppy and trained it—”

“No,” Lock said.

Ava crossed her arms. “Fine.”

“The hot guy on the wolf,” Edda said, “is a jotunn.”

They all blinked at her.

“Likely an ice giant,” I said. “We don’t have time to go into it, but there are other kinds of jotnar.”

They all turned to look at the wolf rider, even Grant and Sid.

“I thought they’d be bigger?” Ava frowned at the wolf rider. “The Marvel universe has lied to me.”

“That’s a warg, not a wolf,” I said, “and I wouldn’t suggest trying to ride it. And trust me when I say, that jotunn can grow into his troll form, who is just as strong and nasty as you can imagine. Despite what some of the myths say, they’re not stupid. A lot of the jotunn is wise—but in the midst of battle fury they can be rash.”

“How do we kill them?” Lock asked.

“The draugr need to be beheaded, their bodies burned.” Edda glanced over at the other side. “We might need to destroy the burial mound? I’m worried that it might contain backup.”

“The jotunn?” Grant asked, his face worried.

“I have no idea.” I shrugged. “I’ve never actually seen one, let alone fought one.”

“We’re not gods,” Edda said. “I’m not sure if we even can kill it. So let’s just try to stay alive and get its necklace.”

“I’m so glad you told us to stay alive,” I said, my words suddenly a little loud to my ears as the sound of the crowd hushed. “Because I was going to try to do the opposite.”

A chant started to issue from the crowd. “*Fight, fight, fight.*”

Crowds were never very original. “Okay.” I put my hand out, waiting for everyone to put theirs on top. Garm was the first to add his paw, and the rest followed. “Go team Stay Alive.” I shoved up, dislodging their hands in a half-hearted cheer.

Then we fanned out, Edda and I taking point.

The starter pistol cracked through the air, and whatever had been holding the draugr back snapped as they sprinted forward. The jotunn let out a bellow, his heels digging into the warg as it leapt forward, mouth open and ready for blood.

I let out my own battle yell, letting the fury of the fight heat my blood. Today I would vanquish these enemies. I would live to fight another day. I just needed to make sure the rest of my team did, too.