

# Samhain

The forest clearing is dark, leaving me a moment to breathe as Spook rolls in the grass, happy to be out in the fresh air. The zephyr mixes with the evening breeze, the sky painted in hues of orange, red and yellow. It's warm and inviting, bidding farewell to the day and preparing to embrace the night. The leather that makes up the hilt of my sword is comforting in my hand, aged and worn with time.

Looking down at my reflection in the puddle at my feet, I watch my mother's daughter stare back at me. Snowy white hair that brings out my pale skin, icy blue eyes that remind me of a frozen lake in winter. The freckles that line my skin are beginning to fade, the dark pirate's coat I wear ending near my ankles. *Dad's a giant compared to me or any of my siblings that aren't Sterling.*

Drawing my attention away from it, I take a moment to stop and collect my thoughts. Pausing to breathe and enjoy the night air before I go back and join my friends.

"Blessed Samhain, Spook." My words are almost a whisper, breath visible in the colder night air. "We've made it this far; we can make it until the year's end." Glancing over at my canine friend, twigs stick to her fluffy white fur before she shakes them off. "Not that you seem to—Spook, what are you doing?"

Pausing, her tail sways in delight before she steals the toy sword sheathed at my other hip. She lowers her front paws, watching me with a look of intensity that could put the sun's light to shame. With a muffled howl and a shake of her head, she gives a few small hops, trying to encourage me to play.

"What makes you think I want to fight you?" I grin, adjusting my grip on my own blade as she lunges at me. I do my best to avoid her sporadic attacks, but to no avail. Not watching my step, I trip over a tree root and land on my bum, my sword sliding away through the grass. "Shit," I mumble, going to reach for it before the familiar feeling of wood presses at my side. "Okay, okay! You win! I'm defeated!"

I lay back, watching her celebrate her victory by parading around my body, sword in mouth and all. A few minutes of this pass before Spook races towards the sound of approaching footsteps. "Where are you going?"

Scrambling to my feet, I hear Hades chuckle as he follows her back to where we were. "Having fun out here? It's peaceful in comparison to in town right now." Glancing behind

him, he looks back at me before holding out a hand to help me back on my feet.

"I didn't expect to get attacked by my dog, but other than that I'd say it's rather calming out here." Before I can continue my statement, Spook presses her sword to Hades's back.

It takes a moment for him to process what's happening, but when he does, his response is ever so dramatic. With a sharp gasp, my friend puts a hand to his heart and crumples into the grass, reaching for the heavens. "Spook... how could you do this to me-" He falls limp, feigning his death as she lays across his chest plate, tail thumping. *She's so proud of herself, isn't she?*

"Did you take down Hades, pretty girl?" My voice comes out in a loving coo, kneeling down to offer her a piece of jerky. "Most skilled swordswoman on this side of the turtle. No one could defeat you, could they?"

Her tail thumps against the grass harder as she takes the jerky from me with caution before gobbling it up. The light reflects her baby blue eyes, revealing the empty abyss that would be her brain behind them. "Today's not your day with the braincell, is it? There's no thought behind those eyes. No thoughts, only crimes."

"Anyway," Hades sits up, moving Spook off his chest with careful motions as he looks back at me. "What're you doing out here? Overwhelmed? I know there was a lot of noise back there." He glances back the way he came, standing up as his joints crack with the motions.

"Something like that." I chuckle, looking above at the now star-covered night sky. The way the moon lies, its light brings out the silver of Hades's eyes, and the way his raven black hair falls into his face. His light skin is complimenting to his features, sharp jawline with furrowed brows. Concern is evident in his expression, scouring my face for any sign that something might be wrong.

Holding my hand to him, he takes it with hesitation, keeping his attention on me. "I'm *fine*. I got overstimulated, that's all. I'm okay now, and if it'll ease your conscience any, I'll grab my earbuds from Lumina. They're designed to drown out outside noise and help me focus on people immediately around me. That and I have Spook with me, she's trained to help with things like that." I gesture to the canine now standing at my side, burying my hand in her thick coat of fur.

"That would make me feel better, but I don't want you to do that for *me*. You should do it if it's going to help you make tonight more bearable." He squeezes my hand in a gentle motion, a reassuring feeling that I reciprocate to comfort him.

"Come on, let's get back to the group so we can enjoy tonight. The festivities won't wait on us, and I wanna go through the haunted house before it gets too crowded." Leading him

along, he chuckles, following me without complaint with Spook at our side.

"Do you think we could stop and get something to eat after? I can feel my blood sugar getting a little low... not so low that I'll pass out if I don't eat, but I definitely need to eat something soon." His thin lips curve into a sheepish smile, hand rubbing the back of his neck as he looks at me.

"Of course we can, I'm sure we could ask Lumina for snacks before we go in. I think she said she wanted to spend the evening with Beetle this time." Emerging from the line of trees, we weave through the crowd, the two of us laughing with my hand still clasped in his.

Merchants have stands set up to sell their goods, from baked treats to handmade trinkets. Festival goers dress in an array of costumes, from the littlest of children to the elders of our sleepy town. Trellises of ivy climb stone cradled walls, lights strung to illuminate the pathways.

Live music weaves through the open air, a small makeshift stage not too far off from us as we go to search for our friends. The sound of conversation chatter muffles into white noise as I do my best to drown it out once more.

It's not long before we find them, Lumina talking with Nikos and Beetle. Her smile is genuine, spreading across her features and creating divots in her cheeks. She looks beautiful standing there, mushroom outfit and all—but that's always been her. "Mina!" I call, waving to her as she holds up her inky cap mushroom hat, expression lighting up with delight.

"Starlight! There you are! Are you feeling better? You left in quite the scuttle, beautiful." She holds out a hand, stealing mine to hold. Her touch is warm, black nails fitting with her dark outfit without a flaw. "I was going to follow and check on you, but it seems Hades beat me to the punch."

"A little overwhelmed is all—"

"Here—" Letting go of me, she reaches into her bag, causing strands of her curly black hair to fall into her face. "I know they're in here somewhere..."

I can't help but admire her for a moment, taking note of how gorgeous my best friend is. Her sage green eyes focus on the task at hand, black painted lips pressed together in a thin line.

"I found it!" Her exclamation almost causes her hat to fall, catching it in the nick of time as she hands me the small case. "Put these on, it'll help with the noise..." She trails off, watching Hades a moment before reaching into her bag for one of the many snacks she keeps on her person. "I can tell your blood sugar is bottoming out; try and eat before it gets too bad, okay?"

"Thank you, Lumina. I appreciate it." Hades nods, letting go of my hand as she cups my face in her own hands after I put the earbuds in.

"You look beautiful tonight; I can only imagine what kind of pirate you'll be once we start setting sail. But once that happens, you won't be able to steal your dad's coat for Samhain anymore. Are you going to be okay with that?"

"As long as you're by my side? I can take on anything, my favorite Inky Cap mushroom."

"I'm hurt, you know other inky cap mushrooms?" Leaning over, she presses a kiss to my cheek and gives a bright grin when there's no doubt a black lipstick mark left. "Then, I'll have to keep my place as your favorite, now, won't I?"

"After Hades is feeling better, we're going to go check out the haunted house. Would you fancy joining us?" She glances behind me towards the haunted house, ears flicking in contemplation. After a moment of silence, I continue with another witty comment. "I'm sure it can't be any scarier than watching my parents hit on each other."

"Aw, Starlight, are you saying you don't want that to be us? Growing old together and making our nieces and nephews uncomfortable with our flirting?" Her smile returns once more, making my night all that much brighter. I don't quite know how to explain her smile, other than infectious and puts the summer sun to shame. "But, who am I to tell you no? I'll come with you to the haunted house—Nikos can babysit Beetle for me."

"Is that okay with you, Hades?" Looking back at our knight friend, he blinks a couple times before realizing what I asked.

"Oh! Yeah, that's fine. I'm down for Lumina coming with us—but I've been meaning to ask anyway. Why is it so important we dress in costumes for Samhain?"

Mina and I look between ourselves, biting back giggles and the urge to give him a ridiculous answer. I don't bother saying anything, letting my best friend answer his question better than I could.

"Tonight, the veil that divides the living and the dead is at its thinnest, so we have to be careful. This includes taking precautions like wearing costumes to confuse evil spirits. I know it seems silly, but when it comes to ghosts and the like, you can never be too careful."

"That makes sense..." He trails off, looking through the sea of people in various costumes. "My dad's told me tales of how they can be a bit of a problem if you're not careful. But enough standing around, you said you wanted to go before it got crowded, right?"

"Right!"

"Should Spook stay here with Nikos? I don't want her to get protective and try to attack any of the scare actors." Mina comments, giving the canine plenty of love and affection.

Spook's tail sways in delight, happy tip-taps of her front paws as she leans into Lumina's touch. Her frog hat almost falls off, Hades reaching over to help fix it before the three of us agree to take off.

The walk isn't long, weaving through the crowd as we admire the vendors and various people we pass. It's endearing, watching parents with their children play around and enjoy the night. Though no one looks quite the same as they would on a normal night, their smiles are still very much unchanging.

"Are you guys ready to go in?" Hades inquires, looking at the two of us as Lumina links her arm with my own. "If we linger any longer it'll get crowded, and we won't have as much fun." Glancing ahead, he looks at the looming, open iron doors that lead into darkness ahead. "Unless you're scared."

"It was my idea in the first place?" I retort, furrowing my brows in disbelief and confusion at him. "I was the one who suggested the haunted house and now you're calling me a chicken? Don't project, it's not a good look on you."

"Oh, shut up. Do I look like Beetle to you?" He rolls his eyes at me, gesturing for the two of us to go ahead of him. "Ladies first. Into the house of horrors, we go."

Up ahead I can see scarlet lights that illuminate the inside in a faint glow, eerie music playing in the back. The painted walls resemble a woodland horror movie, a little too quiet for my liking. A lot of the rooms are like this, eerie music and ambiance, a particular horror setting to help scare us.

It isn't until about halfway through that I see Lumina actually startled. This room in particular stands out, reminding me of a bloodied cabin lost in the middle of nowhere. The music is louder now, but that might be me picking up on things I shouldn't be. A bloodied clown in a somewhat formal outfit jumps out at us, holding a fake hatchet.

Doing my best to bite back my laughter, I glance over to Hades. His expression is unreadable, except for the single brow raised in inquiry. The best way I can explain his face was a look of 'is this actually supposed to scare me?' He looked so unbothered in that moment, it's more amusing than the actual scare actor themselves.

Then, I turn my attention to Lumina. Her hat tips down, hiding most of her face out of either laughter or fear. From this angle I can't quite tell. Her hand wraps around my forearm, using me for support as she reaches to her hip for not her sword, but her cane.

"Mina, don't beat the poor scare actor with your cane." I tease, bumping shoulders with her as she puts her head against mine in a loving fashion.

"I'm not going to; I was grabbing it so I could walk better. Chronic pain strikes again, and that's scarier than anything the actors could put on." She holds up the device as if to show me what she's talking about, before glancing at the actor.

He pauses mid motion, hatchet inches away from her hat as they keep a moment of eye contact. "I like mushrooms in the soup that Doctor Bozo gives us." His voice is raspy, causing both Mina and I to burst into laughter, Hades giving a snicker as well.

"Come on, we're almost there." Our friend leads us along, sparing one more glance to the actor as we make it to the next room. The rest of it was fun, but not quite as memorable as that moment. Making it to the end, Hades looks at the two of us, shaking his head. "Are you serious, Mina? Letting that clown try and eat you? Inky cap mushrooms can be fatal if you drink alcohol after eating them. You can't go around killing scare actors."

"Like you're much better?" She retorts, ears flicking in amusement. "I saw that eyebrow raise you gave him when he first jumped out at us! You're as much of a problem as I was—if not worse! And *you*," She points at me, her smile widening as I raise my hands in mock defeat. "I could tell you were laughing the entire time, even when I got spooked."

"Have you seen my dad? Growing up with him makes it hard to scare me anymore. That's not even counting all those horror movies Sterling made me watch as a kid." Snickering, I avoid her piercing sage eyes, biting my tongue to avoid laughing more.

"I suppose that's fair."

We spend the rest of the night laughing and enjoying each other's company. I've always loved Samhain, but this year was special. The memories we made tonight will be the kind we hold until we're nothing more than a fragment of the stars. *And for anyone who stuck around to the end, Blessed Samhain. I wish you the spookiest of tricks and the sweetest of treats. Be safe out there, and don't anger the ghosts.*