

The Scene: In Book One of *Fear Club*, Lexie Carpenter was targeted by a group of Soul Eaters. Dark magic users, members of The Club, who steal the souls of their victims to nourish their magic.

A young British rogue Soul Eater, Julian Lake, is determined to destroy the Club one Soul Eater at a time. Lucky for Lexie, his plans include keeping her alive. Julian believes finding the missing pieces of her soul will lead him to the Club members. The stakes are high. If they fail to find all the pieces of her soul, Lexie will turn to dust and her spirit doomed to roam the world as a ghost. The clock is ticking.

After a battle in Tokyo, the pair retrieved one piece of Lexie's soul. Now they have tracked the second portion to Berlin. In Berlin, Lexie learns that she was targeted by the Club because her soul is enriched with magic from both sides of her family. A fact she knew nothing about. In this excerpt, she tries a dangerous spell to connect with the witch powers of her mother's clan.

Fear Club Book 2: The Summoning

Chapter 17

Which is Witch

The late afternoon sun was hot and bright when Hex and I stood beneath the snake lintel at Kaiser Wilhelm Church. I couldn't wait for dark. *Julian* couldn't wait for dark.

As I had sat outside the noodle café and puzzled over Mom's diagrams, a dark weight settled over my shoulders. Crazy as it seemed, the shadow felt like Julian. The now familiar aura of power and energy he carried with him. I could almost touch it. He wasn't hiding nearby, not like that. My nerves jumped and jangled and tiny flashes of pain pricked my skin that had nothing to do with my soul-lost state. I knew the pain and illness of an attack. This was different. Things were not good in Lord Lake land

Snake time.

I held my mom's sharp crystal in my hand. Looking over both shoulders to see we weren't observed. I whispered, "*Sulleabhain sanctum.*"

The snake's eyes glowed ruby red.

"*Sulleabhain,*" it hissed.

I had a little penknife, another gift from Julian. Gritting my teeth, I cut the tip of my ring finger. I thought I would keep my pointer and thumbs free from cuts if I could. The blood pooled into a red bead. Stretching up, I realized it was out of reach.

"Um, snake? Mind popping down here?"

The snake stayed silent.

Dang. Bending my knees, I jumped as high as I could, just managing to reach its snout.

The reaction was immediate.

"*Sulleabhain Sanctum,*" it hissed.

My mother's instructions were to repeat it three times after blooding the snake.

"*Sulleabhain Sanctum,*" I said.

The snake spun in a circle.

"*Sulleabhain Sanctum,*" I said again.

Once more the snake spun.

"*Sulleabhain Sanctum,*" I repeated for the third time.

The snake curled in a final spin and opened its mouth.

A puff of red smoke drifted to the ground at my feet. The smoke writhed and turned until it resolved into a snake's head. The apparition rose to hover at knee level.

Hex rocked back on her hind legs. With a low growl, she swatted it with a one-two punch. The snakehead whooshed into red mist then swiftly coalesced back into form.

Hex and I looked at each other.

"Now what?" I asked the lintel snake.

It had returned to sentinel position above the doorway and didn't answer.

I walked around the apparition. It puffed away from me. I walked a few steps back and the snake head floated in the direction of the steps leading to the street.

"I think it's a beacon," I said to Hex. The sanctum wasn't here but somewhere else.

Hex didn't appear to be listening. She was scrunched down with her butt in the air. Giving a wriggle, she leaped at the red mist trying to catch it in her paws. She fell through and the specter reappeared drifting purposefully away.

The crystal glowed hot in my palm. Time to meet the witches.

I followed it down the stairs onto the sidewalk. Hex, for some unknown reason, seemed determined to catch it. She was a cat, after all. Cat logic is not like human logic. Werecat logic was probably even more obscure. The snaky phantasm seemed invisible to anyone but us. No one paid me any attention. The same could not be said of Hex. The sight of a large, ugly cat leaping and pouncing her way along the boulevard chasing nothing at all was going to be the subject of many Social Media posts today.

I followed the bouncing snakehead and leaping cat along the sidewalk back in the direction of Zoo station. We approached a brick underpass where the street passed below the elevated tracks. The misty apparition came to a stop in front of a featureless bit of brick and concrete.

The snakehead seemed to look at me expectantly.

This must be the place.

Following the directions from my mother, I took out one of the vials of Julian's blood and dabbed some on my finger. This part called for blood not of the summoner. With some trial and error, I drew a simple pentagram near where the snakehead was bobbing.

A small door in the stone opened inward, soundlessly and with a small scattering of dust. The apparition drifted inside followed by Hex. I looked around. The traffic light had turned red. There were no cars and no people near. Getting down on my hands and knees, I pushed the backpack through and crawled in after. The door swung swiftly shut almost catching my shoe.

The interior was pitch black except for the gaseous glow of the snakehead. I switched on

my cell phone flashlight and was immediately glad I did. No more than a foot beyond the little platform Hex and I crouched on, a steep row of stone steps marched down into deeper darkness. That would have made a nasty fall. Hex lead the way; I followed cautiously. The crystal grew warmer the lower we went.

Hex growled and stopped abruptly. She arched her back and growled again, low and long. I didn't blame her.

The flashlight illuminated a circle of twisted dried vines large enough for a person to pass through standing up. At intervals in the ring, bleached white bones of some large bird with vicious curved beaks hung upside down, tied by their legs to the vines with intricate knots, their long wing bones dangling. Between the birds were more bones, long and thin, tied together in groups of seven. They looked like boney snowflakes.

My mother's instructions had been to follow the sentinel into the sanctuary. The snakehead cloud floated on the other side of the macabre gate. Hex wriggled on her haunches and made a leap through the gate, still in pursuit of the red cloud. A crack of sound echoed deafeningly in the enclosed space. Hex shot backward, smashing into me. We fell in a jumble of arms, legs, and paws. I lay awkwardly half on and half off the werecat. With an angry howl, she pushed me away.

I aimed my light at the creepy circle. It appeared no different. The snakehead apparition still bobbed up and down on the other side.

This was the threshold into the inner sanctum of the sanctuary. Maybe only Sullivans could pass through?

"Stay here, Hex. Let me try."

Hex ignored me, busy smoothing the fur on one shoulder back into place and muttering to herself in an irritable growl.

There was no other path except forward. I pulled myself to my feet.

Jaw clenched, gripping my phone tightly, I took a step. As I passed under the arch, I stopped. Not by choice. Unseen hands gripped me on either side, holding me in place. Cawing and screaming, the birds came to life. They flapped their wings, crashing from side to side as if trying to tear themselves free of the gate. They knocked into me, snapping at my skin and

clothing with their sharp beaks. I struggled against my invisible bonds but was held tight.

The screaming of the birds grew unbearable. I wanted to scream with them. They cut the skin on my hands and I felt one rip my cheek as I desperately whipped my head this way and that to keep away.

The frenzy stopped as suddenly as it had begun. The bones drooped limply, swaying on the gate. Shakily, I swung my phone around and saw the blood, my blood, on some of their beaks.

Guess I'd passed the Sullivan blood test. I stepped through, happy to put the bird-bones behind me. Hex sat on the steps above the gate, her head cocked to one side.

“Looks like I have to go it alone from here, Kitty.”

With a disinterested sneeze, she resumed grooming. Though given her condition, I couldn't see how even the most industrious grooming would help her looks. Never mind. All of us, even werecats, have our delusions to maintain.

The red-smoke snakehead floated forward. With a shiver of apprehension, I followed, fighting a rising sense of panic with each step. Thankfully it was only ten or twelve more steps to the bottom. At the last step, as I set one foot on to the floor of the chamber, the pendant inside my shirt burst into life. I grabbed it, though the heat from the metal burned my hand. It shot beams of light in all directions and wriggled in my grasp as though trying to escape.

Tentatively I backed up. The energy powered down exponentially.

I repeated the process. Step forward and the pendant high-beamed like nobody's business.

That meant I couldn't take it into the sanctuary.

Faerie magic and Witch magic. Oil and water.

Reluctantly I took it off and set the half-moon on one of the higher steps. It glowed an angry red in the darkness. The pendant was not happy to be here. Well, neither was I to tell the truth.

As I moved fully into the chamber, the room became suffused in a soft, white glow. On impulse, I took the crystal out of my pocket. The glow grew bright enough to take stock of my surroundings.

I was in a circular room, no windows or doors that I could see. The snakehead apparition bobbed in what I judged to be the center of a chamber covered with rough stone. The floor, from what I could tell, was dirt. Tucked in under the stairs I discovered a cupboard about three feet by three feet. The bottom of it was one big bin divided in two halves. One was filled with what felt like very fine dirt. The other was almost as fine but grainy. Salt? Sugar?

Dipping in one fingertip, I tasted it. Salt.

Both were probably for spell work. Salt was a vital element in spells. In a magic circle, it kept your power inside, and bad things on the outside from getting in. I'd watched Julian construct a magic circle in the complex spell he used to summon the killing word that finally took Vanessa out.

Next to the bin, a twig broom looking way too much like a broomstick leaned against the supporting wall.

A steady *drip, drip, drip*, was coming from somewhere. On the other side of the staircase stood a metal pump, miniature trough, and drain. The pump looked a lot like ones I'd seen in old Western movies, except smaller and more delicately made. Moving the handle up and down would pump water from a well. Okay. Pure water was important in some spells, too. They probably tapped into an aquifer below the city long ago.

Time to follow my 'How to summon your inner witch' manual. For most of the rituals that followed, I needed another's blood as an offering, not my own. Had Julian known when he left me those vials?

Step One: Draw sigil with crystal.

Since the floor was made of dirt, this turned out to be easier than I feared. The sigil had to be precise and I paused often to check the silk square, illuminating it with my phone. There were several turns and crosses and a sharp bit at the end. Four smaller sets of line, runes I guess, had to be drawn at the four compass directions.

I'd have been lost without my phone. Julian had downloaded a compass app that worked without WiFi through the phones GPS system. Thank god I got signal in here. I located and marked the directions in the same order as the cloth: north, south, east, and west. When that was done, I spoke a four-part phrase. One phrase for each directional rune starting counter clockwise

at 'west.' At the end of the last syllable for each phrase, I tipped the vial and dripped a little blood on the rune. I spoke the last phrase at North and as the final drop of blood hit the ground, a cold chill rose from the packed earth.

Step Two: Draw a second symbol around the sigil using the charcoal. No blood was necessary for this. It was more geometric than mystical, I thought. There were a lot of straight lines that came out slightly wavy as I dragged the charcoal stick through the dirt. When I finished, it looked a little lopsided. As did many of my attempts at geometry.

Step Three: Draw a large circle, big enough to stand in with sand, leaving an opening at one end. Keep a handful of sand for later. This must be the reason for the sand under the steps. With the little wooden bucket, I scooped out a large measure and made a circle. Again, slightly lopsided.

Step Four: Draw a larger circle with the salt, but don't close it yet. Keep enough salt to close it.

When that was finished, I took off my backpack and set it near the steps. I filled one front pocket of my jeans with sand and the other with salt.

The chamber had become increasingly colder as I worked and I was shivering. Though that might be nerves.

Step Five: Get inside the circles. She'd written a short phrase to repeat as I sealed the salt circle with several drops of my blood and the rest of the salt. This time there was an audible whoosh and I felt air rushing by as if being forced out of the circle.

The procedure for the sand circle was the same.

Step Six: Use the charcoal to draw a diagram. The diagram was a stick figure with a simple rune repeated four times in black on both palms, forehead, and heart. Following the picture, I drew on both palms -- a little awkwardly for the right one -- then my heart, and forehead, exactly as in the diagram. The charcoal left glowing silver lines.

There were bright red dots in the center of each symbol. Blood probably. Mine or Julian's?

I looked closely at the square of silk. Nothing about blood type in the diagram. Think,

think, think. I was the supplicant in this ceremony. Asking to be inducted or included or whatever into the Sullivan bloodline.

My blood.

Maybe. Hopefully.

Grimacing, I made a little cut on the same finger and squeezed out four drops of blood. I did not like this. Self-harming was not something I ever wanted to do.

The stick figure in the following diagram was facing the sigil I'd drawn on the ground with the crystal. Oh damn, the crystal! I was supposed to put it in the center of the main symbol.

Had I messed up the sequence? Swearing under my breath I took it out of my back pocket and placed the crystal in the little open space inside the symbol. It was like flipping a light switch. Silver light flowed from the crystal running like a river to fill the indentations on the ground. The four points of the compass sparked, *pop, pop, pop, pop*, before the light jumped into the circle of sand and to the circle of salt. The inner circle glowed in a cold silver light so bright I had to shade my eyes

The magic circle was now active. My heart was beating awfully fast and I desperately wanted to go to the bathroom.

The snakehead apparition coalesced above the crystal in the center symbol. A grinding sound made me jump. The ground under the sigil I'd drawn loosened and rose about a foot in the air. It wasn't floating. The sigil sat in the dirt on top of some sort of stone container open on two sides. Inside was a small cup.

Squinting against the silver light, I looked at mom's directions.

Step Seven: Place the offering in the cup. Blood was the common denominator in a lot of spells. Both to activate and as an offering. I'd seen that first hand in Julian's ritual to summon the killing word. An offering of Soul Eater blood would be valuable to the powers I was summoning.

Even as I thought it, I wanted to laugh. Blood witchcraft, summoning spells, arcane symbols. Before meeting Julian, I didn't know what the word *arcane* meant. What the hell was I doing? I was a seventeen-year-old girl from Santa Monica, not Alexandra Princess of

Enchantment. Except, I *was*. Magic was real. People wanted to kill me for my soul. They wanted to kill Julian, too. And now I was going to become a Witch.

Were events controlling me or was I controlling these events? And did that even matter? My vanity; my weakness lead to my downfall. Julian warned me off weeks before the Club took my soul. Did I listen? No. My ego slipped on a pair of sound-cancelling headphones that blotted out all the warning bells until too late.

There were no guarantees becoming one with my bloodline would prevent me from turning to dust. It might, however, give me the strength to help Julian. For all Julian's faults, he'd made hard sacrifices to keep me alive this long. Whatever his reasons, I owed him for that.

A rumbling sound took me by surprise. The air looked thicker outside the circle. A mist that swiftly turned into roiling clouds crowded the chamber from floor to ceiling. A miniature thunderstorm took shape and form. Thunder boomed making me jump. Those clouds might be small but the thunder was on steroids. Light flashed first inside the clouds in bright bands of gold. With a crack, lightning snapped out to strike at the circle. The magic deflected it into the ground. Hex gave a battle howl louder than the roar of the storm.

More lighting strikes hit the invisible dome of magic. This was my storm. My belated sixteenth birthday present. The one I was supposed to master or die trying. Now I was glad the Sullivans had stopped coming to my birthdays.

"Thanks, Grandmother Sullivan," I said sarcastically, "great timing for some Sullivan-on-Sullivan battle magic."

At least the circle protected me for now.

Storm or no storm, it was time for the main event. The cup. Julian's blood. My gift for the unseen powers lurking in the dark.

There was no phrase I could find connected to this step. I guess I was just supposed to do it. Three vials of Julian's potion went in the cup. Remembering the Faeries, I sliced off a little lock of hair and put that in as well, so they'd know it was from me.

The effect was immediate. A spider web of golden light spun out from the cup, covering the dome of the magic circle. The light revealed words, symbols, and images. A booming throbbed through the chamber, beating as hard as the blood in my temples. Red smoke boiled

from the cup. The mist roiled up and out, expanding and rising until it swirled into definition: A skull, hollow-eyed and grinning. So big, it filled my vision.

The skull spoke. Not out loud. In my mind.

“Summoner, your offering is accepted. Will you embrace your bloodline?” it screamed in my head. “There is no return.”

Crap, crap, crap. Damn it, what choice did I have at this point?

“Ye... yes, yes!” I stammered.

“What will be done is done for all time,” the skull said.

It vomited forth an oily black smoke. More and more until the smoke filled the magic circle blotting out the gold and silver light until there was only the glowing skull.

The smoke reached out to grab me like a living thing, pinning my arms and legs. My courage and my legs gave out. The smoke held tight. I felt my feet rise from the floor until I floated before the skull’s hollow eyes, unable to move.

“Now, you belong to us,” the skull said.

Hot smoke rushed in to fill my nose and mouth, choking my throat, filling my lungs. Thick and tangible as though an arm was reaching down to crush my heart. I was burning from the inside out. On fire. Melting.

People say you faint when pain becomes too great. People say stupid things. I screamed until I had no more voice.

The burning black smoke penetrated every part of my body. Sobbing and crying I thought I was dying. The pain increased and then I was afraid I wouldn’t.

I was falling. In the dark. Through the dark. Through time and space. I came to a stop abruptly, jerked so hard my spine cracked like a whip. The pain didn’t stop, nor did the screaming. Through the agony, I saw a light. A bubble of light and inside a figure. A... a woman. Slim. Blonde. Pretty.

She came closer as I howled.

Closer still until, through my tears, I saw her face.

I knew that face. I'd cried over it for months. Years. Cried my heart out and begged for her to come back to Dad and me.

My mom.

CHAPTER 18

That Old Familiar Feeling

She hardly looked older than the day she left. A few smile lines around her eyes. Those quirky wrinkles on her forehead from raising her eyebrows in curiosity about the world and people around her. She must have turned to the Soul Eaters within a year or two of leaving us. Maybe sooner.

"Who..." she started to say then stopped and gasped, her hands out in front of her. Her face changed from wariness to what seemed like total terror.

"Lexie," she cried more than said the word. "Oh God, you're Lexie. What are you doing?"

"I think I'm dying," I sobbed between spasms.

The bubble moved closer and I saw her clearly. "The Summoning," she gasped, "you're summoning the Sullivan bloodline. Oh no, no, no."

The pain peaked and I couldn't say anything, even though I had so many questions.

My mom floated alternately closer and farther away. She appeared to be talking but I could only catch random phrases as my pain ebbed and flowed.

"Bastards," she choked out, her face twisted in fury. "Bastard Soul Eaters and Witches. I won't let you die..."

I floated in limbo, the pain twisting inside my body, tearing me into ragged pieces. My head filled with a loud buzzing and I could hear her more clearly. As if she'd fine-tuned the

connection.

“I haven’t given up my immortal soul to let them take you too. I’ll kill them all if I have to. You found the crystal. Listen Lexie, precious, that’s my blood crystal. I broke it in half and left it for you inside CoCo. That’s what anchors us together. Giving me the power to help you survive this.”

She reached through the bubble and grabbed my hand. I could feel the smooth skin of her palm, the warmth of her living, breathing body. An electric hum as loud as a transponder on overload engulfed me. She began to vibrate, the light glitching in and out of focus. My mom’s image buzzed with static. Her face so close to mine I thought I could feel her breath.

“I’m giving you weapons. Use them to fight the Soul Eaters. Julian can help you. When the time comes, ask him to join with you. Use the crystal. Once he touches you, he will understand.”

A jolt of energy hit me so hard, the pain of the summoning faded to insignificance. Fingers were crawling inside me, moving under my skin, trying to hold onto my bones, rip out my lungs.

“I have done terrible things, Lexie. I wanted to save you. We never thought we were giving birth to a pawn in a tug of war between the mortal and Faerie magical worlds. I love you, baby.” I think she said it several times. Her voice couldn’t seem to hold a steady connection anymore.

The darkness melted away and I was back in the summoning circle, floating weightless. The smoke began to flow in the opposite direction. Ripping and tearing at my insides as I coughed and choked it forth. It was almost worse than when it came in. I tasted blood, silver and metallic.

The smoke surged back into the mouth of the huge grinning skull. Heaving, crying, coughing and sobbing, I watched the apparition as it loomed closer, filling my vision.

“Sulleabhain,” the skull’s voice boomed in my head. “Your blood is our blood. Our blood is yours. The summoning is complete. Fight the light.”

The terrible pressure around my body released and I fell in a heap onto the dirt. The skull shrunk in size but did not dissipate completely.

'Please let it be done,' I begged silently, *'please.'*

I lay on the hard dirt floor for some time gasping, overcome with the dry heaves. I sobbed and coughed and gasped and cried. I felt helpless and hopeless. Overcome with despair. Outside the circle the clouds and miniature thunder and lightning storm raged, soaking the ground. Lightning zigged and zagged striking the stone walls and stairs, sending sharp chips of stone flying. None of it could penetrate the barrier of the magic circle.

My mom had appeared. Spoken to me. She'd done something else as well. My skin crawled in memory of that energy transfer. She'd given me something. A dark, dirty energy I had no point of reference to identify. Had she saved me or done something far worse?

I couldn't seem to stop crying. It was a useless reaction to my situation. I was being weak and stupid. But I was afraid and lost. Not sure how to go on or if I even wanted to. Faeries, Witches, lost souls and magic. My mom loved me? How did that help? Answer. It didn't.

The weight of this avalanche of magic was crushing me. I don't know how long I lay there feeling sorry for myself and sobbing into the dirt. At some point I cried myself out, as you do.

When I finally pulled myself into a sitting position, I could no longer see the red skull. The golden light was gone, the silver rapidly dimming, leaving me with the pulsing glow of my mother's crystal. The storm dissipated. No clouds. No thunder. Perhaps I was no longer in danger. I'd survived the summoning.

I didn't feel much like celebrating.

The skin on the inside of my wrist burned. Squinting in the dark I saw a red skull grinning back at me. The magic had left its mark. During the Summoning, the apparition said: "Fight the light." That did not sound good. Had I willingly embraced the darkness?

There was no going back to my non-Witch self. The skull made that crystal clear. Even if I managed to get my soul back, perhaps I'd lost it all over again. Like my mom. A strange rippling sensation in my arms and legs made me stare. My skin moved, ever so slightly, like something was squirming under the surface. Oh, Mom.

I sniffed and snuffled and wiped my runny nose with the hem of my T-shirt. Was there something else I was supposed to do? My hands were shaking as I picked up the square of silk from the dirt.

The skull burst back into brightness, “Embrace your Familiar!” it boomed as I squealed in surprise.

Embrace my *what?*

The skull winked out.

Something slithered around my ankles.

I squeaked.

A long dark form wound around one calf.

I tried to scream but my voice was gone. All that came out was a hoarse croak. Scrambling like a lame crab to the edge of the circle, I kicked it away.

A snake.

“Get off! Get off!” I wheezed.

It wriggled back and looked up at me. The snake’s eyes were huge. Not black and beady. The thing had anime eyes. Big, soft, and brown like a puppy dog. They took up a good third of its head.

The skull reappeared and I scrambled to my feet screeching in surprise.

“Embrace your familiar!” the skull repeated again before fading.

The snake poked my ankle.

“What?” I snarled.

It backed away, blinking its big eyes and smiled.

Can snakes smile? Because I swear I wasn’t mistaken. It was grinning.

The skull appeared suddenly. “You are bound together as you are bound to your blood. In this life and the next.” And *poofed* out once more.

“And stay away!” I shouted at the skull, shaking my fist.

The snake poked my ankle again, smiled more broadly, and wagged the end of its tail.

'Embrace your familiar...'

“Are you my familiar? Like, a Witch’s familiar?” I asked because in my crazy new world you could ask animals questions and they answered.

It nodded its snaky head enthusiastically.

Leave it to Lexie Carpenter to get a snake for a familiar. Why couldn’t I have a puppy? Or a talking kitty? But *nooo*. I got a snake. What the hell was wrong with the Sullivans? They were sick, sick people!

After poking me another time, it stretched up and made little springing motions like it wanted to be picked up.

Oh my God, I had to touch it. My tiny knowledge of supernatural creatures told me the snake was now part of my magical entourage. Whether I liked it or not.

Cringing inwardly, I leaned over and reached out.

The snake joyfully jumped into my grasp, twisting its long sinuous body around my hands and arms. It was heavier and longer than I realized at first.

‘Don’t cry, don’t cry, don’t cry...’ I chanted.

The snake stretched up to nuzzle me under the chin, its tongue flicking in and out tickling me. Oddly, the thing felt soft, warm... comforting somehow. Not nasty and scaly at all. It curled around and around my shoulders in a loose caress.

I dry heaved a few times. I couldn’t help it.

“Nice snake,” I gasped when I could speak again, “good snake.”

A soft, sibilant hissing caressed my ear and I swear it said, “I am yours to command, my mistress. In death. In life. I swear my fealty and my love.”

It rubbed against me and licked my face again and again. It appeared to be a very affectionate snake.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I reached out to pet it back. The creature hummed and wriggled in happiness.

Snakey face was going to help me with my magic, that's what familiars did for Witches. Maybe it was poisonous and would bite Magnus. That would be good.

"Are you poisonous?"

The snake grinned widely and popped its fangs. They were big fangs.

Crap.

"Could you put those away please?"

Immediately the snake tucked them back in place.

"Now what?" I said out loud.

The snake slithered off to drop onto the ground. It paused at the salt circle looking from me to the salt and back.

Right. I needed to break the circle. Julian had done that at the end of the ceremony I'd observed.

I swept aside first the sand and then the salt. Nothing happened. No whoosh. No lights. The skull stayed gone. It felt a little anti-climactic.

The snake went to the steps. It wriggled up several before looking expectantly back and beckoning with the tip of its tail.

I guess we were done.

As I put my foot on the lowest step, the room went dark except for a tiny glow from my mom's crystal. Damn! Can't forget that. I skipped back to grab it and tuck it in my pocket. Switching on my cell phone flashlight, I put on the backpack – rather damp from the thunderstorm -- and followed the snake.

Snakey reared back in surprise when it encountered my half-moon medallion in front of the bird-bone gate. I let the snake investigate it. There was much sniffing and tasting with its tongue until it looked up at me.

"Are we good?" I asked as I slipped the medallion on. "I'm half-Faerie you know."

The snake nodded and continued up the stairs.

We had to pass back through the circle of vines and bird bones. Except for a little

shudder, this time the bones stayed quiet.

“Hex?” I called.

I shone the light higher up and saw her standing at the top of the stairs, back pressed to the doorway, her fur on end, one good ear flat against her head. She was soaking wet and half transformed into her frighteningly large werecat form.

“Good kitty?” I said hesitantly, freezing in position.

Maybe she wouldn’t like me anymore now that I had summoned my Sullivan bloodline. That would be awful.

Snakey retreated quickly behind me. Cautiously it peeked around one of my calves.

“Hex, not sure if you are mad at me or the snake. I am still me. A little *witchier*, maybe. And this is my familiar and new friend... um...”

I looked at the snake.

“Are you a girl snake?”

It shook its head.

“Boy snake?”

It, or rather he, nodded.

“Okay, boy snake. Do you need a name?”

He nodded faster.

Hmmn, snake names. I never liked snakes, especially as a child. My mom hadn’t wanted me to be unnecessarily afraid of any animal. At the zoo, we’d go to the reptile house and she’d encourage me to look at the “Snicky snakes.” She’d call them that in an attempt to make them cuter. It didn’t work. But I liked the sound of the words. Snicky, Snicky....

“Snick!” I said out loud. “How about Snick?”

The snake smiled.

“Hex, this is Snick. He’s going to travel with me. I’m not sure if you don’t like me or him or both of us now. Please, can we still be friends? I like you Hex. I’ve said goodbye to so many

people in my life, I don't want to say goodbye to you, too."

The werecat's menacing growl scaled down considerably and she wriggled back to her more normal size.

I sat on the steps and carefully extended my hand. She sniffed it all over and then, to my surprise, bit my finger. Instead of jerking my hand away, I made myself sit still. Snick started to coil up and I pushed him down with my other hand.

Hex sat back, licking her lips as if testing my blood. She leaned over and licked another drop that had beaded up. Cocking her head, she looked at me.

"Did I pass the test?" I asked. "Am I still me?"

She sneezed. I assumed that meant yes.

"You need to meet Snick, too."

Snick reared up and seemed to double in size. He wasn't smiling anymore. With a hiss, he bared his formidable set of fangs. I had a feeling he was saying, 'don't try to bite *me!*'

Instead of ramping up into werecat mode, Hex visibly relaxed. Her ear came forward and she yodelled a few of her strange meows at the snake.

Snick deflated, for lack of a better word, reverting to his long, skinny form.

The snake gave a sibilant little hiss and to my -- and probably Hex's -- great surprise flipped over on his back, showing the imposing werecat his throat.

Hex looked at me and I shrugged, "I think he wants to make friends."

She looked back at the snake. Snick raised the tip of his tail and wiggled it like a dog. He inched a little closer and wagged his tail end more.

Hex cocked her head first one way then the other. Finally, she crouched low and leaned cautiously over the snake. Her fur was still puffed up and she looked ready to jump at any moment.

The snake kept wagging his tail. Hex got close enough and sniffed at the snake's face. If I was the snake I would not have lain there so calmly. Snick did not move. Hex leaned in close and opened her mouth. I was about to jump in and grab my new pal when Hex gave his throat a

tentative lick and then another and another. The snake rolled over and Hex licked its head. Snaky coiled up and rubbed his head against Hex's cheek before they both looked at me.

“Are we friends now?”

They both nodded.

“Come on then. Let's go save Julian.”

Gawd my life was weird.

In a flash of inspiration, I rummaged around the backpack. I had my passport in a zip-topped plastic bag. Another quart bag had my parka squished inside. Emptying both into the pack, I filled first one with salt and the other with sand out of the containers beneath the steps. They were both pretty damp from the thunderstorm and weighed twice as much as they should. No matter.

Dumping a half-filled water bottle, I refilled it with the water from the cistern. If I had embraced the Craft, maybe I could create some magic of my own.

Getting out proved surprisingly easy. I touched the wall and much to my relief, the little bolt hole slid open. Fresh air flowed back in.

Snick wound himself around my waist looking like nothing more than a wide black leather belt.

The train rumbled overhead. Cars, trucks, buses, and motorbikes rushed back and forth through the underpass. People walking through didn't give me a second glance.

My phone buzzed telling me I had text messages.

Dad!

He must have the name of the Soul Eater they'd tortured their captive for.

I opened the message eagerly. Who could this person be? Maybe I'd talked and laughed and drank coffee with them as they planned my death.

The name hit me like a punch in the stomach. My knees grew weak and I sagged against the brick wall.

Oh, Julian, what have you done?

CHAPTER 19

Cat Mapping

That name changed everything and yet must alter nothing. Magnus held part of my soul. If I didn't succeed in getting it back, the name wouldn't matter. I wasn't going to roll over and die though the odds against me kept getting stacked higher and higher. There was no way back to what I had been; only forward.

Evening was on its way, the summer light starting to fade. I had been inside the chamber for hours. Hex led the way across the street to the station. She stopped in front of a large transit map and pointed. Heaving her up in my arms, I held her to the map. Her fur was still very wet and I swear she weighed twice as much. The werecat wriggled searching this way and that for something. Many people stopped walking by to watch. I couldn't understand most of what they said except for '*katzen*,' or cat and '*gross*' which means big. Wriggling to the left she tapped the map and voiced her little meow.

"There?" I asked.

She tapped it more urgently.

Schonefeld Airport?

She moved her paw around in quick circles. What if Hex meant he'd flown away for parts unknown? Not chasing Magnus at all. Or Magnus took off and Julian was in pursuit?

"Snick," I whispered, "Do you understand werecat?"

Blinking his big brown eyes open he nodded his head.

Then I realized I was being an idiot because guess what? I don't speak snake either.

Goddamn it.

"Are you sure, Hex?" I was willing to believe werecats had some exceptional powers, but the ability to read?

She wriggled and stretched higher. I tightened my abs and held my breath trying to take the strain of holding her. Leaning to the right she threw me off balance and we bobbed and weaved precariously before I could stand firm again. Hissing in displeasure, she motioned me back a few steps. I did my best and she slapped at the transit map again. This time with both paws.

Tempelhof Airport.

Before I could pose a question, she wriggled hard and nearly slid through my arms. I only managed to hold on at the last second gripping her under her front paws.

I heard Snick give a hissing gasp as the weighty werecat pressed against him.

Hex growled ominously.

Quite a crowd had gathered around watching my antics with the enormous cat and making comments, helpful and otherwise, in a variety of languages.

Lifting one thigh under her back paws for traction, I gave a mighty heave and got her back in my arms. She was resting her hind feet on my Snick belt. Snakes can moan as well as grin. Who knew?

With a high-pitched yowl, Hex placed her paws on another airplane symbol.

Tegel Airport.

She couldn't read but she could compare!

"Julian is near an airport," I stated.

Hex gave an audible sigh of relief. I let her down on the ground and did the same.

Quietly I asked her, "You know the name. Is it Schonefeld?"

She shook her head.

"Tempelhof?"

Again, a no.

"Then Tegel. He's near Tegel."

Hex rocked back on her haunches and held up one paw. I high-fived her. Snick groaned

again. My position was squeezing him between my hips and rib cage.

“Oh, sorry snakey.” I stood to scrutinize the map.

How to get from here to there? Dad and I always took taxis. There were dotted lines from my current location to the airport. Further investigation showed the best way to reach Tegel was by bus. Tegel was due to be taken out of service soon with a new airport in the final stages of construction. Dad had been involved in financing technology for the airport’s computer grid. Maybe Tegel was already gone.

Tote bag time. I held it open for Hex. Reluctantly and with many dirty looks, she climbed in. Snick stayed wrapped around my waist in belt-mode. I heaved the cat up. A few minutes and some quick questions at the information counter inside the station later and we were standing at a stop for an express bus to the airport. Tegel was still in operation. It would take around forty minutes or so from here. That left another couple of hours of light. Twilight was a long, slow part of the day in summer.

Julian wouldn’t be at the airport. Too much security. Too many people. He would be somewhere nearby.

A map. We, *I*, needed a map of the area. Likely spots to hold a crazy occult ceremony opening a gate to another world. As if I would know when I saw it! Hex, at least, appeared to have an idea of where we were going.

Waiting for the bus I thought about what Dove said. If I had all I required to defeat my enemies and achieve my quest, then it was time to start taking stock.

I squeezed onto a seat at the back of the bus with other travelers and their suitcases, backpacks and duffel bags. Hex sat in the tote bag and licked her paws as I made some plans. Probably stupidly naive plans. So what? I was tired of being a stepping stone for other people’s magic. I had my own magic. In fact, I seemed to be packed with it on both sides of the family tree. Julian had spells and talismans and hexes by the hundreds if not thousands. Me? I had magic inside. In my blood and bones. That had to count for something extra.

At unnervingly regular intervals the gruesome rippling sensation passed over my skin. The surface of my arms, legs, stomach, and chest would move. Almost as if there was someone in there with me. I wished Albert Pantera was here. As I often did the past week. He was a

touchstone, someone I could talk to without being made to feel like an idiot.

Hex nodded off and was snoring loudly by the time we exited the bus at the departure terminal. Struggling under the weight of the enormous cat, I glanced up and noticed several crows peering over the outside roof of the entrance.

“*Kaw*,” they said.

“Kaw yourselves,” I said back.

The airport would have good Wi-Fi and I had research to do on a bunch of diverse topics. I slung Hex onto an empty seat and got to work.

When my phone buzzed, I slid off my seat in surprise taking Hex down with me. Half in and half out of the tote bag she woke up spitting and hissing.

The phone kept buzzing.

It was Julian’s number on the display.

“Julian? Where are you!” I gasped out.

“Miss Carpenter,” a deep, accented voice answered. Magnus. It had to be.

“You. What do you want?”

“I have your friend. Do you wish to help him or facilitate my spell? Or perhaps both?”

“How do I know he’s still alive?”

“You won’t until you come here and see for yourself.”

“Yeah, right, whatever. I’m a little busy now. I’ll call you back when it’s convenient.”

And hung up.

Magnus needed me for something. The ceremony, my Faerie blood or latent witchy power. Whatever it was, he wanted me together with Julian. I had the power. He could threaten, he could even hurt Julian, but he couldn’t go farther than this point in his planning without me. The phone rang again. I put it on silent and went back to my research.

An hour later I’d decided what to do and how to do it.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

“Food?” I said to Hex.

Her head popped up immediately. Hex was always ready for a meal.

I tickled Snick under the chin. “How about you? You hungry?”

Snick nodded and smiled.

“Wait,” I paused. “There aren’t going to be any mice. Do you want mice?”

He made a horrified face. Again, something you wouldn’t think a snake capable of.

“Don’t you have to swallow your food whole?”

Fangs tucked back, Snick opened his mouth wide.

He had teeth! Like, chewing teeth.

He stuck out his tongue and I only then noticed it was wider and flatter than those skinny snake tongues you always see flicking in and out.

“You can *chew*?”

He nodded enthusiastically and licked his lips. Although, technically, maybe snakes don’t have lips. Even magical ones.

“Great. Chewable food for everyone!”

The departure area hosted a couple of well-stocked cafes. I took the time to load up on calories for all of us. Unsure of the airport’s policy on pets, we went outside to enjoy our sandwiches and French fries. Snick hid inside the carry bag and I tore food into bite-sized pieces for him.

When I decided we were ready, I checked my phone. Magnus had texted me a few terse words. ‘*Tegeler See.*’

That was Lake Tegel, not far from the airport. Berlin had several lakes within the city limits.

Then, ‘*the old Oak, Dicke Marie.*’

No idea what that was.

Followed by a picture.

The picture was of Julian, tied to a tree. His eyes were closed.

WiFi told me Dicke Marie was the name of a nine-hundred-year-old Oak. The oldest tree in Berlin. The name meant 'fat Marie' and the nickname was younger than the tree by a few hundred years. The location made sense. All the relics Magnus needed for his ceremony were of ancient lineage. Maybe that was the tree Julian was tied to. Poor Julian. Or maybe not poor Julian. This could all be part of his plans and Magnus totally oblivious to his impending doom.

A bank of thunderclouds hovered protectively above the station. My bank of clouds. There was no doubt in my mind I had summoned the lightning storm that struck during our meeting with Simon Peter. Also the one at Kaiser Wilhelm Church that flushed out Magnus. *Plus* the storm inside the summoning chamber. Thunder echoed loudly, scattering the crows.

Dad said the Sullivans were particularly adept at Battle Magic. That must include tossing lightning bolts. The mind boggles.

There was no time to study the principles of Elemental Magic. Elemental meaning earth, air, wind, and fire. Wait. Wasn't that a seventies R&B group? I laughed out loud. I was losing it. Reality had become slightly ridiculous. Years of therapy were waiting for me. Speaking of. If I did survive, I had to go back to school and then to college. A good college. The only way to afford all that expensive psychological counseling was with a well-paying job. Goals! I had goals again. I laughed some more.

Snick poked his head out of the bag and gave me a worried look.

"Not to worry," I reassured him, "only slightly hysterical."

Sheet lightning flashed brilliantly high in the sky. I was counting on the clouds following me to the rendezvous. They were as likely to zap me and Julian as my enemies. Chaos, however, is not always a bad thing.