

PROLOGUE

TERREBONNE PARISH, LOUISIANA

For fifteen-year-old Jared Marlowe, midnight in the Terrebonne bayou was like drowning in a flask of ink. It was an endless, glorious swath of ebony; a place of drifting shadows and swaying moonlight, all of which served to tip one's imagination toward tales of mythic beasts and prowling snakes complete with pearlescent eyes. Among the ancient cypress trees and lacy Spanish moss, the swamp had always crooned a rich, sweet song that thrummed through the bones of those like Jared.

Those born of the bayou.

His home since birth, Jared knew every inch of the tangled waterways and black swamps of Terrebonne. He knew the tangy taste of the lakes that fell away into the crawling fog, and he knew the pebbled tracks of the lone dirt road that offered humans a rare, tempting peek into the edges of his dangerous world. Those few foolish souls who did wander further than the road never saw daylight again. Humans, Jared's mother would say, were far too tasty to leave to the jaws of the uncultured gators.

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This had always been his clan's territory, centuries before the humans ever settled the area. At over a thousand square miles, Terrebonne's human residents kept mainly to the few scattered towns, leaving the rich expanse of swampland to the Wreckers like him. And his kind - his family - owned this world by blood and right. His ancestors had ruled the endless bayous with ruthless yet balanced hands. His own family history was written in the detailed scrimshaw etched over his moon-white fangs - a right of passage gifted to all Wreckers on their thirteenth birthday. Theirs was a rich tale of treasures plundered, lives taken, wars fought, and peace won. Century upon century of stories. Century upon century of tradition, handed down a thousand times over.

And perhaps he was young and foolish to be so naïve, but Jared always believed that Mayhem was an unshakable fortress - a labyrinth-like expanse untouched by the other ancient, gifted clans. None dare set foot in Wrecker territory. None dare tempt the wrath of their ranking Elder, Midas, or the fierce water-born people he ruled.

Yet as Jared stumbled through the thick mud and sharp grasses of the swamp, his arms burning from carrying a little girl away from the carnage and into the safety of the deep bayou, his mind couldn't come to terms with what had happened. Because to Jared, the Wrecker village of Mayhem, and her central citadel, were unraidable. Unconquerable. His home was a vibrant, hidden jewel among the Louisiana swamps . . . until tonight. And nothing - NOTHING - prepared him for what he'd witnessed hours earlier through the warped glass of his grandfather's golden spyglass, the celebration between Midas' crew and Lawson Waite's turning from excitement to extermination.

He should've been inside Mayhem when the attack happened.

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He should have been there, fighting alongside his family.

Someone should've been wary the moment Lawson Waite came to Terrebonne with fifty Mortis in tow, offering to renew trade with the Wreckers. Everyone had been hopeful. Perhaps too hopeful. Too desperate.

So, instead of being inside Mayhem when celebration turned to carnage, Jared had been more than two miles upriver, pulling chilled copper kegs of River Whiskey with the other young mooncussers so that those inside the citadel could toast to a new era of trade and bootlegging with Waite. Dredged out of the thick mud at the edge of Lost Lake, the priceless liquor was what the Wreckers were known for among the supernatural world - a moonshine so strong that ingesting too much could easily kill you, immortal or not.

The celebration was supposed to be a new start for the Wreckers; a new bargain with Lawson Waite who'd finally agreed to begin transporting the high potency cocaine leaves once again. No one knew what made Waite cut Midas off from his drug smuggling business two years ago, but the effects of no longer having access to the best coca leaves in the world, which the Wreckers used in their whiskey stills, devastated their moonshine business. Buying sub-quality cocaine from a drug runner in the Caribbean led to Maia Moriarty ending her long-standing relationship with Midas, and soon other underground clubs followed suit. For two years, the Wreckers barely survived. But then Waite suddenly contacted Midas mere days ago and agreed to start running the coca leaves to Mayhem once again.

Everyone rejoiced.

Now everyone might be dead.

"Where's my mom?" whispered the little girl in Jared's arms,

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her cropped hair smeared with dirt.

He couldn't meet her eyes as he pushed relentlessly through the swampland, more teens and kids around his age carrying younger ones. Taking to the rivers was not an option, the fear that their magic could be felt by the Mortis too much of a risk if they entered the waterways. "I'm sure she'll come get you soon," Jared lied, rage burning through him at every word he spoke.

It was by the grace of Fate that most of the children had not been inside the village when the assault began. Instead, they'd been shooed to the deep moat outside Mayhem's towering walls to catch frogs in the dark water as the adults partied with Waite and his Mortis inside the main citadel at the heart of Mayhem.

Jared's best friend, Farraye, who had delivered a barrel of whiskey to Midas with a few of the other mooncusser teens, had stopped to play briefly with the little kids, including his four-year-old sister, Neela. He told Jared that they'd only been in the moat with the kids maybe five minutes when the first screams started.

Thank God he'd stopped to catch tadpoles with his little sister.

Thank God he and the other mooncussers grabbed the children and ran.

It was the only reason the littlest of his kind were still alive.

Through the rippled moonlight, Jared could see Farraye trudging through the mud, Neela clutched to his back, her umbratael, Poe, squished tightly in her arms, its smoky raven form nearly unrecognizable in her tight grasp. Even at a distance, Jared could hear Poe offer quiet cackling sounds as Neela held it; as if the shadow tail was trying to calm its young mistress. Moving swiftly through the reeds, Raye's own umbratael, Edgar, had maintained its form - that of a badger, complete with broad back and clawed feet. Edgar made no

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noise as it moved in time with Raye, a true reflection of Farraye's own personality, focused and driven.

Raye's Aunt had been inside Mayhem. All the elders had been in there, and Jared fought back the nausea as his stomach rolled with the brutal knowledge that his mother had also been at the party. Was she even alive? Was she wounded?

At some point, Waite would realize that the Wrecker children were missing from the carnage, which meant that reaching the Barrie forts, miles away, was their only hope at staying hidden and protected.

"Farraye," Jared whispered as they passed on either side of the cypress trees cloaked in shadows and moss. Raye's exhausted face met his in the shadows. "We'll get the rest of them out, I swear. This shit ain't over. I'm not leaving my mom in there. No way."

"I should've been there," Raye replied quietly, hoisting his sister a little higher. Another child, maybe seven years old, had woven through the reeds to clutch onto the bottom edge of Farraye's worn leather vest - as if doing so could ensure the little one made it to the Barrie treeforts alive. Everywhere, fading in and out of the cypress, were children and teens, some walking on their own, others being carried in the darkness. They were a moving tide of exhaustion and grief, each one of them accompanied by their equally devastated umbraels.

"We had a job to do. We weren't screwing off," Jared urged, desperate to ease Raye's guilt and his own. "Had we known . . ."

"Had we known, they would've never been allowed anywhere near Terrebonne," growled Farraye. His gaze went back to the abyss of swampland ahead of them. They had to make it around Lost Lake, nearly ten miles across, and then head north, to Barrie. They had hours to go on foot before salvation welcomed them. "This is why we

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were always taught that Mortis couldn't be trusted. This is why we do not align ourselves with such . . . such evil. I can't believe Midas let them in!"

"Midas was desperate, you know that. We all were. I just can't figure out why they attacked. What do they want?"

"They wanted us gone! And now everyone is . . ." He glanced at the little ones around them and mouthed the word 'dead' as a tear trailed down his cheek. He brushed it away roughly with his shoulder, trying not to jostle Neela who had nodded off. Poe slid carefully out from her grasp and landed on the ground, shaking out her shadowy feathers. She ran on stick legs to catch up with Jared's umbratael, Sprout. The two tails began chattering to one another, the discussion not sounding all that friendly.

"They are NOT all gone! I refuse to believe we are all that's left, do you hear me?" Jared snapped, trying to battle back his own tears. "I just don't understand why? The Mortis entourage that came with Waite seemed to be made of stone - no reaction, no emotion. We have not been at war with the Mortis for centuries. The treaties have held! Why attack us? Why now?"

"They are soul thieves, Jared! Mindless killers," hissed Farraye. "They are not of the natural world. They are not like us. They were designed, created, by forces that should not meddle in the order of things. They should all be exterminated. This, THIS, is war. This ends the treaty."

Jared sighed, hiking the little one in his arms a bit higher. At only two years old, she'd yet to develop her umbratael fully, so all that drifted along on the ground behind them was a thin layer of smoke - her shadow tail, which would eventually take on its final form in another year or so. Thankfully, in Jared's warm grasp, the toddler's

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head finally lolled onto his shoulder as sleep claimed her. By his feet, Sprout slinked along, now arguing in an indignant, chirpy voice with Poe.

The two umbrataels halted suddenly in front of Jared, and he nearly kicked right through their smoky forms as he stumbled to a stop, trying not to wake the girl. “Sprout! Dang it, can you two stop arguing for two seconds?”

Sprout turned his slug-like form to Jared, his black, featureless face looking right at his owner. He chirped sharply, showing off his two stubby fangs as he relayed the insult that Poe had flung his way. Jared glanced at Poe, who simply ruffled her foggy feathers and turned her beak up at Sprout.

Jared sighed, “Jeez, you’re not fat, Sprout. You’re just . . . wrinkly,” he urged, shaking his head. He couldn’t even believe two shadow tails were arguing about shit like this right now. Sprout glared at Poe, demanding an apology in his squeaky voice.

The raven turned back to Sprout, stomping over in his direction. She squawked out what had to be the worst version of an apology ever, then took off, choosing to fly between the branches above her master, who Farraye carried, rather than hang on the ground with Sprout anymore.

Sprout watched Poe go, his shadowy mouth hanging open, horrified. He then turned back to Jared and let out a string of disgusted squeaks.

“Dude, yesterday, you accused Poe of having chicken legs! What did you expect?” Jared argued.

Shaking his head, Jared knew one thing to be absolutely true: dealing with umbrataels was far easier when they were fused to their owners as actual TAILS. Unfortunately, such a shifted state only

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occurred when a Wrecker took to the water. On land, however, a Wrecker's tail transformed into an opinionated, smoky little creature who literally followed their owners everywhere, like a shadow. Hence their nickname: "shadow tail."

Sprout muttered something less than civil under his breath as Jared started walking again, his wrinkly, CHUBBY umbratael sulking as he followed along. Silence seemed to slowly infect the group of young Wreckers, voices dropping away as hope seemed to bury itself in the mud, like whisky casks.

For a long while, no one spoke as they made their way through the swamp, midnight's clutch on the sky slowly falling to the demanding light of dawn.

Throughout the long trek, memories of what Jared had seen through the spyglass stirred over and over in his mind on an endless, terrible loop. He recalled how Farraye and the others had come running through the cypress trees after the attack, yelling for Jared. He'd and a few other 'cussers had been hauling up whiskey from the boggy ground, oblivious to what had happened.

Confused as to what was wrong, Farraye had quickly explained to Jared what he had heard through the towering walls of Mayhem - the screams, the sounds of things being smashed and orders being shouted. He told Jared he'd grabbed the kids and run, but Jared had to know more. Had to know what was happening inside the village.

So he'd climbed the largest Cypress near the lake, Sprout weaving through the branches alongside him, his flowing form of starlight and shadows allowing the umbratael to perch on the thinnest branches. Jared finally wedged himself in a large fork in the tree, brought the spyglass to his eye, and froze. The citadel and the surrounding homes and villages were being shredded. Bodies of his

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people were strewn like trash among the glittering buildings and dark rivers.

It was absolute carnage.

Even at a mile distance from Mayhem, the gently swirling current of water that rippled around the gnarled roots of the cypress trees had begun to run red with the blood of his people. Above him, Sprout's mournful wailing was unlike anything Jared had ever heard, freezing the blood in his veins. Guttled, he'd ripped the spyglass from his eye, breathing hard as panic and rage, fear and nausea flooded his body. Sprout had reacted immediately to the change in his master and quickly descended the tree, wrapping around Jared like a second skin, ready to phase into his master's aquatic form. But Jared had eased Sprout from his body, and instead called down to the other mooncussers and children, all of them confused. All of them terrified.

"We need to stay off the river and head to the Barrie treeforts," he told them, his eyes landing on Farraye, whose little sister was clutching tightly onto her big brother. Farraye simply gave a tight nod, knowing that Jared was right. The Barrie treeforts, built by the children over the years as a fun hideaway, represented the one safe spot among the bayous. The one place wrapped in such powerful spells that only Wrecker children up to a certain age could enter - only Wrecker children could even find the skeletal treeforts built from the pieces of the shipwrecks their parents had caused. Whatever wasn't deemed valuable to the elders became the spoils of plundering little hands for their beloved hideaway.

Many of the 'cussers demanded to go back to find their parents. To ditch the Barrie idea and head back into Mayhem.

In his heart, Jared wanted to as well.

But he'd seen what was happening and he knew the reality of

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what awaited them if they returned to the heart of Terrebonne. Waite's fighting Mortis had ripped Mayhem apart. They were unlike anything he'd ever seen. Unlike any chilling horror story he'd ever been told. They moved like phantoms, wrapping themselves in the blackness of bayou shadows and making themselves near impossible to track in the night. Their strength was . . . endless. They had beheaded people in one move.

As the memories of what he'd seen hit him all over again, Jared staggered with the girl in his arms and she startled. "I'm sorry," he whispered to her and she let out a sad, broken cry - so soft, it was barely more than a whisper. In the dim light of the rising dawn, he could see a small bruise on her cheek, no doubt from when she ran on her own little feet through the bayou with Farraye and the others.

Jared swallowed as he eased her head back down to his shoulder. "We'll be to Barrie soon, I promise."

"I want my mama," she whispered, and Jared bit his lip, trying choke back the rage and pain. Tears flowed down his face silently as he patted the girl's back, her body relaxing once again in his strong arms. Beside him, Sprout slipped by his leg offering a soft caress, as if to let Jared know he wasn't alone in his sadness. Unable to take another step, Jared leaned back against a tree, Sprout curling up next to him and purring sadly. The girl in his arms drifted back to sleep as others walked by, all of them bone weary.

"Jared? You okay?" asked one of the 'cussers who paused before him, another smaller boy clutched to his back. On the ground near him, an umbratael in the shape of an otter waited patiently. The kid couldn't be more than thirteen, and now here he was, slammed suddenly into adulthood by Lawson Waite. By Mortis. As the kid stood before him, Jared realized that he'd never even taken the time

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to know his name. The knowledge that life could be snatched from those around him was a punch to the chest.

“I just need a second, uh . . .!”

“Sam,” the ‘cusser offered. “Name’s Sam.”

“Thanks. For helping, Sam,” Jared replied, looking at the boy on Sam’s back.

Sam tightened his jaw and simply nodded, no longer able to speak lest the pain of what had happened tore from him in a tidal wave.

Jared knew the feeling well and simply offered a brief nod in return. The cusser gave him a long, sad look before moving on, the little boy on his back watching Jared as they disappeared through the high reeds.

One minute.

Jared would give himself one minute to stop shaking. To halt the memories and to focus on the tasks ahead.

He dragged in a breath as he looked down to Sprout, “We’re gonna need help.”

His faithful umbratael paused and watched Jared, his small, smoky shape rippling as if tickled by the dawn. Jared’s older cousins had joked that Sprout looked like an oversized slug, but Jared loved him. Shadow tails like Sprout were the truest confidants to a Wrecker – a piece of oneself, reflected in a sliver of smoke that traveled alongside their master, day and night.

As Jared studied Sprout, he realized that he didn’t even know if his cousins were alive anymore.

He swallowed hard, “I’ve got an idea. It’s one messed up plan, but it’s the only people I know that may be able to help us. But Farraye ain’t gonna go for it, so I got a feeling it’s just gonna be me

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and you, my friend.”

Sprout cocked his head and chirped out a question, demanding details, but Jared just shook his head. “Not here. I can’t tell you here, but I will. I promise. As soon as we have everyone in Barrie, and we are certain all the wards are solid, you and I . . . are leaving. On the sly.”

Sprout’s little lip curved into a devious grin, revealing one stubby fang. “*Caaa chee neek ta?*” he squeaked.

“Yup,” Jared replied, trying in his mind to map the best route north that would avoid the Lesser territories in the Blue Ridge mountains. “Let’s just pray she’s still just as ruthless as Midas said she was and that she’s willing to cut a deal.”

Sprout’s grin widened and he purred darkly in response.

Jared pushed off the tree and started walking once again, the little girl in his arms. In front of him, dawn was slowly transforming the eastern sky, painting streaks of purple and pink on the horizon. And though his feet were slowed by the mud, and his skin was sliced over and over by the whip-sharp reeds, Jared felt nothing - no pain, no sadness.

For now he had purpose. He had a plan.

And if he was lucky, he’d also have Madame Moriarty.

And revenge.