



## C H A P T E R

# 11

**I**t is dark. Darker than Winnie has ever experienced before. Darker than a windowless room with no lights even though a waning gibbous moon flickers down. It's as if the forest canopy presses around her, squeezes in. An iron maiden of shadows and shapes and noises unlike any Winnie has ever heard before.

It is also cold.

She stands for a time at the edge of the red stakes. A hemlock stretches skyward beside her, twice as wide as she and with grooves in the bark that glow like old scars. Two hops and she will be outside of the forest boundary again. Not safe, but at least safer, since if any nightmares chase her, the sensors will be tripped. The Thursday-night hunters will come this way.

They must be out there now, preparing for the mist that coils up from the soil. Searching for the nightmares that will form tonight or reappear from last night. There is no consistency to it, no pattern. No guessing where specific creatures will arrive or which ones might wreak death. There is only entering the forest and killing any that try to leave.

Underbrush rustles nearby. Winnie goes cold. Not the outer cold that was already numbing her fingers and toes, but an inner cold. Like the north wind has pushed beneath her skin and found all her organs.

Then she spots it: the mist. It is white, thick, and hungry. Moment by moment it slithers over the forest, erasing the trees from sight. In seconds, Winnie sees nothing. Not the nearby oak or balsam fir. Not even her feet, and soon, not even the hemlock.

She clutches a poison trap to her chest and watches the mist tendrils upward. Strangely, the mist warms her. She knew, in theory, that this would happen—just as she knew the mist would erase her sight. But learning facts from the Compendium is nothing like experiencing it.

Plus, the mist isn't something Winnie could draw, so she never quite focused on it like she did with all the nightmares.

At first the heat is welcome, melting away the numbness and caressing her muscles like a bath. Then it is hot. Cloying. Claustrophobic. She cannot see a thing. Panic heaves up her throat along with the night's lasagna. *You're fine*, she shouts at herself. *You're fine!* The mist is only temporary, and all she has to do is stand here and remember how to breathe.

If she were still training with the others, she would have practiced breathing, moving, and hunting through this in an obstacle course on the Sunday estate called the "hot room." As if in some massive spa, steam is pumped into the sprawling underground chamber. But Winnie only ever saw the entrance when she trained under the Sundays. She never got to go inside.

*Spirit mist*, she mouths to herself, *is both the origin of and end of the nightmares each night. It rises once the sun is fully set and dissipates once it rises again.*

She wants to take off the jacket. She wants to rip off the Kevlar and sprint back out of the forest boundary. But she doesn't. She just sucks in clotted heat and continues to recite the Compendium.

*Though initially thick and hot, it quickly fades into a more typical post-rain fog. The mist acts like a stage curtain. First it cloaks, then it reveals. Hunters are at their most vulnerable during the mist rise.*

Winnie definitely feels vulnerable, and though the mist is already starting to diffuse, she still cannot see her hands or the trap clutched within. She palms the device carefully. There was a button—she'd *seen* the button—but now she can't find it, and the last thing she needs is to have the trap explode in her face.

*Since there is no predicting the location of a nightmare's arrival, the hunter must keep moving. Otherwise, one could appear exactly where the hunter stands. In such cases, the hunter does not survive the experience.*

Winnie doesn't move. She just continues to search the trap for a button and imagine what it had looked like by the lamp in her bedroom. All while the Compendium pours silently from her mouth.

*Some believe the mist is a warning for the natural creatures of the forest to flee, and this is often the first sign a hotspot will soon form outside the forest's primary boundaries: the flight of local fauna—*

A wolf howls.

Winnie jumps. The trap falls from her hand. She doesn't hear it hit the soil, and she realizes with a fresh surge of cold that the wolf must be near if she can hear it so clearly.

The creature howls again, farther away this time, and the first stripe of hemlock bark wavers before Winnie's eyes. She can see; the mist is fading; no nightmare has formed directly atop her.

She drops to the forest floor and pats around for the trap. Each second that passes reveals more pine needles and soil. More moss and stone. And cold—the usual forest cold is leaking into her bones again.

Her fingers land on the trap, and when she squints down, she sees the button. It is very red, and she doesn't know how she missed it before.

Another wolf howl, still farther, and Winnie finds her lungs are loosening. Her confidence is returning, and long-forgotten instincts are prickling to life beneath her skin. It's as if the mist were paint thinner that just ate away years of grime gobbing up Winnie's insides.

She has carted countless nightmare corpses to the Mondays. She has drawn and redrawn every nightmare that lives beside Hemlock Falls. She can do this. Oh yes, she can do this.

The cause above all else. Loyalty through and through.

Winnie hefts her backpack into place and adjusts her glasses. Her front teeth click silently. If the wolf . . . or werewolf . . . is the only nightmare that formed nearby, she will need to go deeper into the forest to find her prey. And though she supposes she could just track the werewolf, she isn't *that* confident. After all, she saw what happened to that halfer, and paint thinner can only remove so much paint.

Fortunately, were-creatures hunt more than just humans. They also

feast on other nightmares, so if Winnie can follow the wolf from a distance, she can assume it will lead her to different monsters.

As if on cue, the wolf howls again. Northeast, Winnie decides, and she pastes on her vicious hunter smile before setting off after that sound, her thumb beside the trap button and her throwing arm ready.

The wolf howls intermittently, which later Winnie will realize is strange. Normal wolves howl as a way to communicate to their pack, but werewolves are solo creatures. So for whom is this one howling?

Yet as she creeps through the wispy fog, watching for movement and straining to see in the forest dark, she only thinks about which direction the wolf hunts. What creatures he might be after.

Which is why she misses the second sound. It is soft, subtle, and so human it takes her a moment to register what it is: someone is crying. Not a mournful wail or a hiccuping sob, but more like a sniffing. As if someone attempts to stifle tears so no one else will hear.

Winnie stops moving, and instantly the page in the Compendium scrolls across her mind along with the drawing she'd sketched beside it.

*Banshees: Known for weeping and wailing, they lure prey to them via the natural human instinct for empathy. From afar, they appear as gnarled, elderly women, but closer examination will reveal their differences: vertical pupils, green skin, and claws that come to needlelike points. Their tears produce a lethal poison that burns to the touch.*

The sniffing ping-pongs around Winnie, hiding where the creature might be. She tightens her grip on the trap. Mom always warned about banshees because they're good at disorienting, and one almost took her down eighteen years ago. Before Dad left, before Winnie was even born.

Mom has a long, jagged scar the entire length of her leg from that encounter, and Winnie always thought it was the coolest feature Francesca Wednesday bore. A stretch of puckered skin to wear proudly. But that's because Winnie has never considered how much it might have hurt to receive. She has never considered that her mother *almost died* from it, and that she wouldn't exist today if not for Aunt Rachel right there to help her.

*I shouldn't be here.*

The thought interrupts the constant flow of the Compendium, and with it comes fresh cold in Winnie's organs. The winter that doesn't like to let go.

Winnie can't believe she was naive enough to walk into the forest alone. Naive enough to think she could follow a werewolf. Naive enough to think she could face the mist—face any nightmare—without backup.

She is not invincible. She is not prepared for this, and Darian and Andrew and Aunt Rachel were all right. Now she is too far from the red stakes to escape. Now, she will die and the Thursday-clan corpse duty will ziplock her body with the same bored detachment Winnie uses.

*Banshees*, her mind repeats—she can't stop the Compendium from playing like some macabre song stuck on repeat. *Known for weeping and wailing, they lure prey to them via the natural human instinct for empathy.*

Winnie squints around her. She is surrounded by evergreens with twiggy lower branches. The sniffing is louder, she thinks, though that might be her growing panic playing tricks on her. Doesn't matter one way or the other. She needs to think. She needs to act.

*From afar, they appear as gnarled, elderly women, but closer examination will reveal their differences: vertical pupils, greenish skin, and claws that come to needlelike points.*

Every muscle inside Winnie screams to run. Her bladder wants to release, and she wants to sprint away from here as fast as her legs can move—even as another part of her wants to move toward the tears and ask what's wrong.

Fortunately, tucked beneath those warring instincts is another footnote. Another piece of the Nightmare Compendium Addendum she was smart enough to read.

*Never run from a banshee.*

She can't remember the exact reason. Something about how they hunt—like maybe they follow exhalations. Or they move too fast to escape. But it doesn't matter. The fact is, *never run from a banshee* is definitely in that appendix and Winnie is going to obey.

Mom ran, and it didn't work out for her.

The sniffing tears are getting louder now, and though Winnie would

really like more space in her brain for planning, she can't seem to turn off the Compendium.

*Their tears produce a lethal poison that burns to the touch. If collected from a banshee corpse, the venom can be used to induce temporary comas and even a mimicry of death, slowing the recipient's heartbeat to near stillness.*

Winnie has no plans to collect tears and no need for a false death. Her only choice right now is to lay this trap and hide.

Except there are no branches she can climb onto, no convenient logs to clamber under. There are only herself and the red button that looks gray in this leached light. *Press it*, she tells herself, and somehow, her thumb obeys. Prongs poke out, although in the darkness, she feels more than sees how metal spines eject like scarab legs.

She sets it down, then slings her backpack around to grab for the second poison-mist trap. The zipper gets stuck. The bag won't open.

The crying is now overwhelming in its nearness and its power. Winnie's chest twists in on itself, a sponge wringing out. There's something so familiar in that sound, as if this creature has lost her own father and been cast out from all she ever knew. As if she too knows how big loneliness can feel. How it settles over everything, muddying edges the way tears muddy ink.

Winnie yanks at the zipper, again, again. Harder, harder, her fingers numb and pulse booming against her eardrums. The banshee will be here any moment. Winnie needs the second trap. She needs to set it down and move—

The underbrush shivers. The banshee appears.

She is close enough that there is no mistaking her for human. What might look like a green cape from afar is actually her skin, sagging off bones with a velvety sheen. Her hair, spun silver, hangs in long strands that shine as if lit from within. Her humanoid face is strangely smooth, strangely serene, as if this crying frees her. As if it will free Winnie too if Winnie will only give in to the pain.

Winnie drops her backpack and straightens. She knows not to run, but she has to move *some* if she doesn't want her lone, pathetically tiny trap to release while she, Winnie, is still in the way.

It's all she's got. This one trap she almost didn't have at all is her only chance.

The banshee, still crying, wipes her eyes. Her claws glint, and Winnie realizes that the creature has no knuckles. That each finger is like a fat syringe waiting to inject. As illogical as it is, she thinks, *I need to update my drawing.*

The banshee takes a single step forward. Winnie takes an achingly cautious step backward. Surely this is safe. She's not running, after all. She takes a second step. A third—

The creature lightnings toward her, a streak of silver hair and a scream to shred hearts, and where Winnie has always believed time must slow in moments like these—isn't that what the movies and stories say?—it doesn't. The banshee is somehow before her. Somehow on top of her while her back crashes against the ground, and the poison-mist trap hasn't fired.

She can't see the creature's face. The banshee is too close and there isn't enough light. She can feel the weight of her nightmare body, though. She can smell a breath that is fetid and ancient like a sarcophagus opened for the first time.

Winnie wants to fight. Deep down, along with the footnote not to run, she *wants* to fight this nightmare and get away. But she can't, because she is so overcome by grief that now she is crying too. And not just the sniffling tears like the banshee had made, but a rough, heaving sob that scratches up her throat and ejects from her mouth.

She misses her dad. She wishes he hadn't chosen the Dianas over his family. She wishes he hadn't chosen the Dianas over *her*.

A teardrop hits Winnie's cheek, but it doesn't burn. It's like the mist when it first enclosed her: warm, soothing. It melts down her cheek to her jaw, where it mingles with her own tears. And somehow, that feels even better.

She doesn't smell death anymore, nor does she feel the banshee's weight. Her sobs are quieting, her chest relaxing, as if the banshee tears are an antidote that have somehow smoothed away scar tissue Dad left behind.

*Thank you*, she wants to say, but her lips don't move and her body

has gone completely limp. She would have thought herself asleep and dreaming if she didn't still see the silver hair cascading around her, erasing the forest, encapsulating her, not like an iron maiden, but like a cocoon. She will awaken from this and be a different person.

The wolf howls. An odd sound that pierces Winnie's awareness and punctures her cocoon. Another howl, nearer this time and almost frantic. Distantly—in a tucked-away spot still functioning—Winnie wonders if it's the werewolf and if it now hunts the banshee. If she is about to have two nightmares to contend with.

The banshee's head turns. Silver hair scrapes Winnie's face, stealing away the warmth of her tears—and stealing away the cocoon and the safety and the certainty that everything will be all right.

Reality crashes into Winnie as hard as the banshee had only moments ago. She is trapped beneath the creature, and three needle claws are stabbed through her Kevlar vest. Pain scrapes the surface of her skin, and rotten, wasted death fills her nose.

She needs to get out of here.

Winnie arches her back upward, slinging up a single knee. She has practiced this move a thousand times, but never with a partner. She's weak and clumsy.

The forest seems to favor her, though, for the banshee is distracted by the wolf howling. With Winnie's kick, the monster slings sideways like a pile of shed clothes, skin sagging and body unresistant. Needle-claws snap—still stuck in the Kevlar—and fragile light slices into Winnie's vision.

She scrabbles away. Then to her feet. She doesn't flee but instead dives for the trap and her backpack. The werewolf is almost to her, and it could be coming from anywhere. Its howling bounces and flings around her, so loud she worries it isn't alone. That others like it might follow.

And underneath that sound, she hears something else. Something whispery. It susurrates like wind through branches and bites like winter gray. It's different from the banshee's crying, and Winnie doesn't recognize it. This isn't something she remembers from the Compendium, isn't something she remembers *ever* hearing about or studying or sketching from an anatomy book.

Winnie slings on her backpack and swoops up the trap, still her only

weapon. She will trigger it manually if she has to. Better to risk the poison than get eaten alive by the forest. The banshee is now on her feet and racing into the trees, her silver hair a vanishing moonset.

Not far ahead, a white shape streaks through the trees. It is the wolf, and it is not in fact running toward Winnie. It is zooming away and yipping with alarm.

Behind it, the forest seems to change. At first, Winnie thinks it just a trick of her eyes, the result of filthy glasses. But no, the longer she stares, the more the forest really does *change*. It warps and bends, it shivers and quakes. Trees undulate and shadows stretch long—all in time to that frozen whisper that seems to bleed out from every pore and surface in the forest.

Then the wolf is past. The kaleidoscoping thing behind it disappears. And the forest falls silent as a grave.

Winnie shoves at her glasses and runs.