

CHAPTER ONE

Wherein a Werewolf, a Wicche, a Vampire, and a Demon Discuss the Likelihood of a
Zombie Apocalypse

No one can sneak up on you if you keep your back to the wall. No one can hide in the shadows if you never turn off the lights. No one can hurt you if you never let them touch you. Trust issues? You bet. I have my reasons, but we'll get to those later.

"Give me a break, Sam." Owen, my trusty boy Friday and wicche extraordinaire, smirked.

"All I'm saying is that zombies have undergone more of a transformation over the years." Hiding a grin, I blew on my tea and watched the waves hitting the glass wall of my bookstore and bar.

"Speed, maybe," he said as he stacked glasses under the bar.

Perched on a stool, I sipped while Owen checked the liquor bottles, replacing empties. Tables were scattered throughout the bar, green leather chairs surrounding them, with small stained-glass lamps topping most. I scanned the room, checking if anyone needed a refill, but it was a ruse. Clive, a certain ridiculously handsome vampire, drew me like a zombie to brains.

"Nuh-uh," I continued. "Remember the whisperers in *The Walking Dead*? Speech requires thought."

“I beg to differ.”

Ignoring him, I forged ahead. “In *I am Legend* they could reason, and in *28 Days* they were wicked fast. No more shambling around and bumping into trees for modern zombies.” I paused. “You know what, I’ve changed my mind.”

Clive sat at a corner table, lost in shadow. His eyes felt like a soft caress and an unfamiliar shiver ran through me. Swirling the tea in my cup, I allowed myself a quick glance in his direction. He took a sip, watching me, his storm-gray eyes crinkled in an almost smile.

“Are you shitting me right now?” Owen dropped an empty whiskey bottle into the recycle bin and pulled a fresh bottle from under the counter. Owen’s hair glinted in the light, a natural black liberally streaked with electric blue. Or maybe it was the piercings in his ears and eyebrow. The boy sparkled. He reminded me of a shiny Chris Peng.

What were we talking about again? Clive scattered my thoughts without even trying. He was Master of the City, the highest-ranking supernatural in town. He’d show up once a month, have a drink, and I’d start considering things I had no right to consider. I was not good romantic material. Still, Clive made me wish things were different, that I was different.

“Sam?” Owen waited for a response.

“No, what I mean is, I don’t think zombies have changed the most in pop culture; I think women have.” I totally had this argument in the bag.

Clive leaned forward and cleared his throat. “You believe the depiction of humans has changed the most?”

Clive never joined our reindeer games. I sat stunned for a moment, his voice a decadent rumble in the quiet room. Shaking it off, I said, “I was just messing with Owen on the zombies. He’s terrified of—”

“Who wouldn’t be? They’re zombies!”

“Here’s the thing, though. In Romero’s 1968 *Night of the Living Dead*, Barbara is worthless. She’s a walking cliché. Weak, childlike—”

Heavy footsteps pounded down the stairs into the bar. I could have kept arguing, but I’d clearly already won the argument. Clive and his stupid sexy face were making it difficult to hold on to my thoughts.

“Nice tee.” Dave, my half-demon short order cook, came behind the bar, interrupting the excellent point I forgot I was making. He stared intently at my chest. I was wearing my zombie survival guide tee today. It was what had prompted the argument with Owen over the depiction of supernaturals in pop culture.

I hid beneath shapeless, sexless clothes to avoid attention. Seven years after the fact, and I still cringed when I noticed gazes drift to the scars trailing out of my sleeves or collar.

I used to be considered pretty—long, wavy brown hair, green eyes, a thin, athletic build. That was before. My efforts at androgyny, though, were wasted on Dave. He enjoyed fucking with people too much. My issues made me easy prey. He smirked, knowing his scrutiny was making me sweat. Grabbing a bottle of cinnamon schnapps, he poured himself a glass.

“Glad you like it,” I said. “You can never be too careful. It pays to be prepared for the shambling undead.”

Dave made a dismissive sound in the back of his throat. “Please. They’re only as dangerous or as focused as the demon who calls them. Most will give out before the fight gets interesting.”

I never knew how seriously to take Dave. He was a good guy, albeit one with deep red skin, pure black eyes, and occasional bouts of uncontrolled anger. But no one was perfect.

“I swear,” he continued. “Most demons have ADD. Just when things start to get good, they wander off to start some new shit. It’s why they never get anything done.”

He winked at me as he walked toward the kitchen.

I spoke to Dave’s massive back. “I’ll have to remember that. Thanks.”

Clive, impeccably dressed in a dark suit and snowy white shirt, tapped a long finger on the table. ““Weak, childlike...””

“Hmm? Oh, yeah.” My brain went on hiatus while I watched him take another sip. The man gave good swallow. “Um.” And that British accent did funny things to my stomach. Clive was stupidly handsome, with dark blond hair, intense gray eyes, strong jaw, and broad shoulders. It was good he only dropped in every once in a while. I’d never be able to interact with him on a daily basis.

“Sam?”

How did a single syllable undo me? “Barbara was weak and childlike, tripping and falling. She’s almost comatose with fear in the 1968 version of the film. When Romero remade it in 1990, Barbara was a warrior. She strapped on the ammo and started blowing away zombies.”

He tilted his head, studying me. “Better to be fearsome than fearful?”

“Yes.” Seven years of battling back the fear that wanted to swamp me, wanted to pull me back down into the dark, pushed the harsh sound from my lips.

Nodding slowly, he stood. “I’m glad to hear it. Good evening.”

Like a slavish zombie to a juicy frontal lobe, I watched him climb the stairs and leave. What was it was about today’s conversation that prompted the normally brooding vampire to speak? Zombies? It felt more like it was women fighting back that had piqued his interest.