

## **Balancing Act**

Emrys Vaughn

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## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

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Emrys Vaughn

Dedicated to some guy I met at the gym the other day. No idea what his name was, but he seemed pleasant enough, so here, have a book!

Chapter One

People seldom have sufficient respect for the power a thing can exert by being absent.

That's my experience, anyway. It's easy to look at something and say, "It's doing this and this and this, so these must be the important parts of what it does." It's easy, but it isn't always accurate.

A lot of the time, the *really* important stuff is what *doesn't* happen, just because it's there. Just look at the keystone of an arch; you might think it's ridiculously unimportant, right up 'til you take it away.

The same thing tends to happen, I've found, with people. It's easy to look at someone and only see what they *do*, which isn't much. But then, once they're gone, all manner of other things happen that don't have any obvious relation to that person, but which wouldn't have happened if they were still there.

Case in point: Erica Reilly. In life she'd been a vapid, greedy twit, approximately as self-centered as a gyroscope and with approximately the same intelligence as a lobotomized pigeon, who'd managed to irritate or infuriate practically everyone she met. Eventually one of them decided he'd had just about enough of that and flayed her alive.

Literally. I was there. It was not fun.

Anyway, as I was now discovering, Erica was having more influence after death than she ever could have alive—an irritation stronger than death, if you will. This was not exactly a welcome revelation, given that I'd had more than enough of her while she was alive.

Which is, in essence, why I was currently staring at my former employee Kris Lake across a small table in the corner of Pryce's bar. "What do you mean Jimmy's upset that you're working with Val?" I asked, sipping iced tea.

"Sounds like you heard me," Kris said acerbically. Snowflake, currently curled around my feet, chuckled faintly in the back of my head.

"Well, yes, but...what the hell? I mean, seriously, what's the man thinking?" Jimmy Frazier was a sorcerer specializing in fire magics with less than a decade of experience. Dvalin Kovac was a fae powerful enough to ignore the literally cutthroat world of fae politics. I was pretty suspicious that he'd *also* been the Dvalin who forged Tyrfing, which would make him one of the most skilled magical craftsmen alive. It also meant he had to be at least a couple thousand years old.

That is not a recipe for a fair fight. If I had to guess, in fact, I would say Jimmy was roughly as strong relative to Val as a poodle to a werewolf. For him to pick a fight with the fae was...unwise.

"Hell if I know," Kris muttered darkly, taking a long drink of some sort of cheap beer. "We're falling apart, Winter. Ever since Erica died, it's all just falling apart."

Given that this was the sixth time she'd said that, I was guessing that this wasn't Kris's first beer of the night. Given that it was just past sunset, that was somewhat concerning. "You wanted to talk to me about something?" I asked, hoping to redirect the conversation into a less depressing topic.

She nodded with the peculiar exuberance of the moderately intoxicated. "Yeah. Yeah, I was getting to that. Jimmy got into a fight with Brick a couple days ago—he won't tell me what it was about, but it was pretty bad. Yeah. Brick kicked his ass, but nobody's seen him since. I was hoping you could, you know, find him or something?"

I sighed. The problem with helping someone out of a couple of seriously unpleasant situations was that they started thinking you could do *anything*, when the reality was that I had less chance of finding Brick if he didn't want to be found than she did. Besides which, getting involved in this would put me smack in the middle of a feud between the various mages of the Inquisition, and that was as sure to get me embroiled in a hideously dangerous mess as anything I'd ever seen.

The bigger problem, of course, is that once someone starts to look at you like you're a hero, you start *wanting* to help them. Especially someone like Kris, who was both fairly pathetic and one of the few people I considered a friend. Which is why, rather than explain why what she was asking was probably impossible, I said, "I'll see what I can do."

She nodded some more, said "Thanks," a few more times than was strictly necessary, and wandered off towards the bar itself.

*You owe me five bucks,* Snowflake said smugly.

*Cheater,* I muttered. *Someone told you about this already, didn't they?* She'd bet me yesterday that Brick would be the first person to cause a schism within the Inquisition's ranks; I'd guessed Matthew.

*Come on, Winter. Would I really conceal a potentially dangerous situation from you for a measly five bucks?*

*Given that I wasn't willing to bet fifty? Absolutely.* I scratched the husky's ears idly, causing her to twitch a little—it was an astonishingly good impression of sleep, really. *I don't suppose they told you where he's hiding out, did they?*

*Nope.*

*Great. I'll add it to the list of things to look into.* Fortunately, it was a pretty short list at the moment. We'd had a few slow months now—a welcome reprieve, after the tumult of the spring.

In the meantime, I had business to conduct.

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

I've always liked making things. There's a...satisfaction, I suppose, to be had from it, which you can't quite replicate anywhere else. I mean, it can be intensely frustrating work, but the feeling you get when you look at something beautiful and know that it was *your* hands and mind that shaped it...well, there's just nothing quite like it, and there's nothing I can say to tell you what it's like. You either feel it, or you don't. There isn't much ground in between.

Over time, though, the things I make have changed. I spent a sizable portion of my life working with Val, mostly making furniture, and that was good—but making things with magic is better. It adds a whole new layer of artistry, of intricacy in the crafting. I'm not that good at it—my gifts are in other areas, and it's rare to be talented with multiple types of magic. But I'd put in a few hundred hours practicing, and I'd gotten to the point where I could make things that I was genuinely proud of.

I also had some practical reasons for the switch, of course. Namely, you can make *really* good money in magical items, if you're clever and you can do something people will pay for.

I, generally speaking, am not renowned for my cleverness. So, naturally, it took me a couple years to come up with something good, and when I did it was Aiko's idea. But it didn't take me long to put it into practice, and for a few months now I'd been making and selling jewelry. Between spinning shadows and moonbeams into something almost solid and producing ice with a melting point in the vicinity of gold, I could make things you weren't likely to find anywhere else.

Which, in turn, meant that someone might be willing to pay an absolutely ridiculous sum for one of those rings—on the level of a hundred to a hundred and fifty bucks a pop.

The cost of materials is nonexistent. I spend somewhere in the vicinity of an hour on the work. That translates into an obscene amount of cash for what is, really, very little work. I mean, I did the math a while ago, and we're talking more than two hundred grand a year if I were to do that work full time. I don't, but it's still a pretty decent income.

More than that, though, is that I just don't have any real expenses. I don't have to pay rent, or a mortgage—Fenris gave me my house outright. Likewise, I don't pay property tax, because I don't officially own the dilapidated house that the Otherside mansion connects to, and the land where my now-burned trailer once sat is long since sold. I don't pay income tax either, because all of my income is of the shady sort to say the least—in cash, for the most part, and with the sort of customer who thinks you're insane if you say the word "receipt."

So what's that leave? Groceries? Eh, not so much—Fenris's deal also included a steady supply of food, and while I occasionally bought something to supplement it, there was absolutely no chance that we'd be going hungry. I still had my Jeep, but it had been in long-term parking outside Pryce's for months now, and I drove it once or twice a week at most. Not exactly spending a fortune on gas.

I understand a lot better, now, how someone like Aiko can have a family fortune and not even think it's noteworthy enough to talk about. What good does having money do, when there's nothing worth spending it on?

Oh, don't get me wrong. I've been spending money. I buy books, some of which are quite rare and expensive. Laboratory equipment and reagents, too, are not cheap—the two pounds of silver sitting in a lead-lined box alone cost me more than a thousand dollars. I have several thousand more stashed in various locations around town—none of which is a bank, because my accounts have been closed for a while now—and in other places where I can get to it if I need to. And I *still* had a hard time figuring out what to do with the money.

Which is why, when I sat down at one of Pryce's corner tables to start bartering, it wasn't for the money. It was mostly for something to do, and partially to continue building my network of contacts for the next time something goes disastrously wrong and I need a favor.

I would rather that didn't happen, of course. But, speaking from experience here, that isn't a realistic hope. Better to prepare for it, so that when the inevitable happened I had some chance of surviving it.

And the third reason was that sometimes, you find something *much* better than money. You find something *interesting*.

I did a brisk trade, over the next two hours or so. I'd been stopping at Pryce's to sell stuff one evening a week for several months now, which meant that people knew where to find me.

It didn't even occur to me to go anywhere else. I mean, why should it? I was catering to the supernatural crowd, and when it comes to the supernatural in Colorado Springs, everyone goes to Pryce's sooner or later.

This evening followed the same pattern as usual. First, once Kris had gone on her way, Snowflake and I ate a leisurely dinner. Then, pleasantly full, I pulled out the small black backpack that had been concealed beneath my cloak, and Snowflake went to sleep.

The first person to approach me at my table was a jittery young man who'd been watching me eat for the past twenty minutes. My bag had hardly hit the table when he was standing on the other side of it. He bought a narrow, glittering band of ice for his mother, in an extremely rushed manner. I knew it was for his mother, because he insisted on telling me so five times, with the slightly panicky tones of someone who's lying and knows he's lying and knows he's lying *badly* but can't think of anything else to do.

I didn't care why he wanted the thing, but I don't take kindly to being lied to. And his smell was unpleasant—too much cologne, not enough washing. So I charged him two hundred, thinking perhaps it would make him just go away.

Instead, somewhat to my surprise, he paid asking price in used twenties, seeming positively grateful for the chance to do so. Then he stood back up, jittered a little more, seemed for a moment as though he would say something, and left.



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That was not a particularly unusual customer interaction. Dealing with unaffiliated members of the supernatural world has a number of upsides, foremost of which may be a real aversion to any sort of question at all, but nobody's ever said it came without liabilities.

After that, things settled into a routine. Rachel took the time off from her pool-shark career (she actually works as a counselor, I believe, though she's in Pryce's so much I've no idea how she has the time) to chat for a few minutes. She brought her current boyfriend, too, and within a few minutes had him talked into buying something pretty for her.

I would have given it to her for free—money didn't mean much at the moment, and she was a longstanding acquaintance, almost a friend. But there was a gleam in her eye, and a tenseness to her posture, that told me not to go easy on him. I didn't gouge him like the last guy, but I got my usual price. She walked off, a patch of shadow touched with moonlight wrapped around her wrist, and proceeded to thrash him mercilessly at pool. From *his* posture I guessed that she'd been letting him win until now.

It's sort of sad. Rachel's an empath—a small-scale mage with a natural gift for detecting other people's emotions. She doesn't go rooting through your brain unless she doesn't like you—that sort of thing's deeply impolite. What she's really doing, as I understand it, is sampling the energy surrounding you, energy which is naturally influenced by strong feelings. Theoretically any mage could learn to examine that cloud of energy to such a fine degree as to pick up emotions, but Rachel did it as instinctively as examining a person visually.

It makes her a great counselor—when you know *exactly* how a person feels, it does a lot to help you help them. It's an useful talent, and one of great benefit to society, but not one I'd wish on anyone I like.

I know it was hard for her to grow up with that kind of power. Even if I couldn't guess as much, which I could, the occasional comment or sudden silence made me pretty sure that when she'd first started coming into her power, the sensations it had exposed her too hadn't been pretty ones. I've never asked her about it, of course, just as she never asked why I was so quick to change the subject when werewolves came up. Such things are simply not done, among people like us.

But you could see the effects in her behavior. Because she'd been exposed to something bad and she could feel people on such an intimate level, she was only too aware of how vile human beings could be—she knew, from the inside out, how it felt to be a bad person. As a counselor, that helped, because she could sympathize and she knew what people were going through. But it had left her with worse relationship issues than mine and Aiko's put together, and that's saying something.

I'd lost track, over the years, of how many boyfriends she's gone through. They're typically scum-of-the-earth sorts, because she doesn't want to inflict herself on anyone halfway decent. From that interaction, I was guessing this one had two weeks left, tops.

That's the problem with hanging out with the small fry of the supernatural world. Most people fall into one of three groups. They're either so pathetic you want to give them a hug, so unsettling and

generally spooky you want to back away slowly when you see them coming, or—most commonly—both. Rachel was definitely both.

Fortunately, it got less depressing from there on out. Luna, who spent so much time working out of Pryce's that it was functionally her office, stopped to pick up her order. As she was the center of a small-scale but very active black market and information brokerage, I did a lot of business with her. Not the most ethical work, perhaps, but realistically speaking there's no point trying to shut her down, even if I wanted to. Someone else would pop up to fill the demand within a week, and they probably wouldn't be nearly so nice as Luna.

After twenty minutes of fierce bargaining, she took away three rings, a necklace, and a pair of earrings. She *also* took away four stored spells—two would produce a dense localized fog when activated, and one a fairly sizable patch of shadow that wouldn't be dispelled by any natural light. The last was something she'd ordered special, a piece of slate that, when broken, would cause every dog in a mile to start going crazy at the same time. I wasn't entirely sure what she wanted it for, but she must have wanted it pretty badly, considering what she paid for the thing.

In return, I took half a dozen stored spells, a large uncut ruby, and an envelope describing how the rakshasas were going to vote on the upcoming trade agreement between the Council and the Daylight Court. The information was useless to me, but I might be able to sell it to someone else. That was how the business worked.

Other than that, I didn't sell to anyone I knew, although there were a number of strangers, and even more people I vaguely recognized, who were interested enough to fork over some cash. I chatted briefly with a few other regulars, who didn't buy anything—if they wanted what I made, they already owned it. A large bearded werewolf I didn't recognize hastened to assure me he was only visiting for the day from Denver and bought a ring. Then he wouldn't shut up for five solid minutes about how excellent the workmanship was and how he'd never seen the like, which almost made me want to take it back.

I like a compliment as much as the next fellow. But there's only so much a guy can take.

There were also a few more interesting cases. A slender woman wearing what looked like genuine—and well-used—hunting leathers whose magic smelled of gardenias traded an oddly shaped knife for a full bridal set in shadows. A human mage, whom I suspected was actually a Watcher out of uniform, bought one of the ice rings. He *also*, under cover of that transaction, purchased the envelope from Luna—which, I might add, I hadn't even opened. In exchange he gave me a long strip of leather which would cling to itself more tightly than any glue, which I was hoping to reverse engineer for my own use. A fiery-smelling man I thought might be a djinn took a bracelet of shadow and my last stored spell for sale, a glass marble that would release a sizable gale if shattered, in exchange for a jar full of some odd black sand that smelled like the same magic as he did and felt warm to the touch.

Like I said. *Interesting* is more valuable than diamonds. I know, because a while ago someone *paid* me in diamonds, and before the week was out I wound up trading them for a glass dagger, a pouch of seeds taken from Faerie grasses, a pair of ivory dice that could be convinced to roll any number on

command, a couple stored spells, a tortoise shell of the sort used in traditional Chinese fortunetelling, a deck of illuminated Tarot cards, and a few jars full of various exotic and possibly illegal substances.

It wasn't *just* a matter of amusing myself, though. I was trying to build a reputation as someone who could make things happen, and that meant dealing in things that nobody else could arrange. It might be years before I managed to sell any of that crap, but it would be worth it in the end.

After that was finished, Snowflake and I stood up to leave. We stretched, walked out the door into the cool autumn night, and traveled almost two blocks before someone tried to kill us.

As assassination attempts go, this one was pretty weak. An odd-looking fellow in a dark cloak, conspicuous because there was nobody else moving on this particular side street at this time of night, walked up and tried to tear my guts out. It has the advantage of simplicity, I suppose, and a generous enough person might call it elegant, but...sheesh. When you've had your life threatened by old gods and faerie queens, something like that's almost more an insult than a threat.

I saw it coming a mile away, of course. I mean, I size up everyone I see as a threat. It's such an ingrained habit it's practically instinctive. When that person is wearing a cloak, I pay attention—with the exception of anachronistic freaks such as myself, nobody wears a cloak these days, and that makes it suspicious. When they're in an otherwise silent part of town in the middle of the night, I automatically assume they're there to try and kill me, and act appropriately.

I would call it paranoia, except that I tend to be right.

The figure covered the last few feet in a blur, one hand coming up in a simple strike at gut-level. What looked like a curved knife gleamed in the light of a waning moon, just bright enough to be silver-plated rather than steel along the cutting edge. It was clearly relying on sheer speed to take me out, rather than any form of technique.

That was not so smart. I was accustomed to dealing with preternaturally fast things, and I was ready. Almost before it started moving, I was falling backward, and the blade passed through empty air over me without ever being a threat.

Snowflake, moving with the sort of coordinated precision that only comes from long practice together, surged over me as I fell. She took the assassin out at the feet before he had a chance to follow up on my vulnerable position. She also, as she blew by him, seized one leg and, with a quick snap-jerk, tore it off at the knee.

Snowflake's a lot stronger than she looks. Stronger than a husky has any right to be.

I, too, had a lot of practice with Snowflake, and excellent reflexes. So, before he could even tilt—before I'd even hit the ground—I forced power through the focus of my leather bracelet. The resulting

gust of wind was just strong enough to knock the thing off balance, which was strong enough for my needs.

Long story short, it happened as follows. A gust of wind strong enough and sudden enough to make a grown man stumble hit the thing sideways. As it was no longer capable of stumbling to that side, it fell, hitting the ground hard and rolling. A pair of sunglasses fell off in the tumble, and I got a glimpse of intensely yellow eyes.

Then, without so much as wincing in reaction to its unplanned amputation, it came up to a low crouch. I'd suspected it wasn't human, or anything like it, but that clinched it. No human spine or pelvis was *that* flexible. Then it threw itself at me with its three unwounded limbs.

All of this happened in the space of a second or two, before Snowflake could so much as turn around.

I've been in a lot of sticky situations, and I don't panic the way I probably should anymore. So I had the presence of mind to notice a number of things. First off, there wasn't any blood. The thing should have been bleeding like a fountain from the leg, and I would have smelled that. I didn't. Second, it wasn't a knife it had come at me with—it was a claw. The creature had three of them on each forelimb, and they were definitely edged with silver. Charged silver, too; I could smell it.

That told me a lot about what I was dealing with. It had been a long while since I'd seen a construct, but I have a pretty good memory for these things. I knew the signs to look for.

I rolled away as it pounced, and it hit pavement instead of me. Then, rather than get up and start fleeing the way it probably expected, I got one foot under me and threw myself back *towards* it. It wasn't prepared for that, and I managed to get a solid grip on the front of its cloak with both hands. Then I planted my feet again, arched my back, and threw it away with the strength of my whole body.

There is a certain amount of truth in the stories of a werewolf's supernatural strength, and that is one of the attributes I *do* share with a true werewolf. The thing flew almost ten feet and hit the ground hard.

Snowflake was waiting—and this thing was too stupid to take its attention off of me, its assigned target. When it hit the ground, she pounced. A moment later, her jaws snapped shut and jerked sideways again. A moment after that, the thing was in two pieces, one of which was a head.

When in doubt, you can't beat decapitation for killing something unnatural. The best part is that, even if your attacker actually *is* human, well, beheading works on them too.

It's convenient that way.

The three-limbed, headless figure staggered upright, and for a moment I thought it would come at me again. Apparently that was too much even for something as resilient as this, though, because a moment later it collapsed again. The disembodied head, lying on the ground a few feet away, continued

to stare hatefully at me out of urine-yellow eyes. The pupils were slitted, and the result looked more like a snake than anything.

Then the whole thing started melting.

I sighed and pushed myself to my feet. The whole thing had happened too fast for thought, and I was just now starting to feel the adrenaline rush. I mean, my hands weren't shaking or anything—I'm too well accustomed to violence for that—but I could feel that my heart and breathing rates were picking up, and my muscles were tight.

*Gott, dass schmeckt mir abgefickt beschissen*, Snowflake muttered in my head. *Construct, you think?*

I frowned and walked over to examine the body—well, what was left of it, anyway. It was rapidly turning into a puddle of some sort of thick, translucent fluid, which was in turn evaporating into the air. Matter from the Otherside is naturally inundated with magic, and without that power it can't maintain a physical structure. *Looks like*, I muttered grimly. We both stared as the construct finished melting and vanished.

All that was left behind was a long black cloak of some cheap fabric and a half-dozen claws, long curved pieces of steel with silver along the cutting edge. Those hadn't come from the Otherside, but rather been incorporated after the construct itself was made.

*Are you going to do something with those?* Snowflake asked me, keeping careful watch down the street. Sending an obvious assassin was an excellent way to hide the presence of another, subtler one while the target was still busy being relieved at surviving the first attack.

*I can't say I want to have them around.*

*You don't want the cops picking them up either, do you?*

I sighed. *Good point*. I picked up the cloak and started bundling the claws into it, being careful not to touch the silver with my bare skin. It still itched having so much charged silver around, but it wouldn't actually burn me unless I touched it. As I did, I thought about what had just happened.

The construct was quite similar to the ones I'd seen when I took down the loony witch called Jon. Actually, scratch that; it wasn't similar, it was the same, right down to the claws and the yellow eyes.

Lots of mages use constructs as cheap muscle. But there's a lot of *kinds* of construct, custom designed for specific purposes. Besides that, every mage had a unique style, and you could often tell who designed a thing just by the feel of it, the pattern of the magic that went into making it. The likelihood of an unrelated practitioner creating a fighter-construct exactly like Jon's style was beyond tiny.

Okay. So, I reminded myself, the first thing to do was go through the facts available to me, without making any conclusions at first.

Fact the first: I'd just been attacked by a construct clearly based on the same design Jon had used.

Fact the second: As Jon was entirely deceased, he could not have been the one to send it.

Fact the third: All of the Inquisition spent some time taking lessons from Jon before I met them.

Fact the fourth: The first time I encountered the Inquisition they were trying to kill me as part of their monster-slaughtering crusade. We'd since come to be a sort of allies, but they were still pursuing the same goals.

Fact the fifth: The ten minor mages making up the Inquisition were no longer a unified group. Even before Kris talked to me about it, I knew that the group was starting to fracture under the tension of Erica's death and a slowly growing divide in philosophy.

All of which led to an inescapable fact the sixth: Finding out what had happened to Brick had just gone from a favor for Kris to a high priority for myself. I could handle constructs like that one all day and part of the night, but...well...there were much worse things they could send at me next.

That struck me as a good reason to reorganize the to-do list.

Chapter Two

A reasonably short time later, I walked in the door to our...house, I suppose.

It's a big house. Too big, in some ways; there were times I felt like a pebble rattling around in a container meant for a boulder. The place was just so big, so expensive, so luxurious...it was too much of too much. Houses like that weren't made for the likes of me.

In spite of that, there was no difficulty guessing where Aiko was. I just had to follow the noise.

Currently, she was in the kitchen. The crashing of pots and pans didn't quite cover up the sound of a German children's song about a baby crocodile biting everything in sight, in infuriatingly high pitches and simple words.

I'm not sure which is worse—that Aiko *listens* to that, or that it was actually one of the top songs in Germany for a long while. And, for that matter, most of Europe. Including countries that don't even *speak* German.

Snowflake and I walked straight through the throne room that was also the domain's only hardwired connection to the outside world. Towards the back of the room, tucked unobtrusively away, was a simple door. It was made of walnut and covered in subtle, intricate carving, and the ornate handle was solid brass—but then, every door in this house looked more or less like that. It wasn't like it was especially fancy or anything.

I opened the door, causing the music to become significantly louder, and Snowflake and I slipped quietly inside. Aiko knew we were there, of course—the music might cover any sounds we made, but a kitsune would certainly smell us—but she didn't give any sign of recognition as we walked in and sat at the long hardwood table along the back wall. Well, I sat, anyway; Snowflake promptly flopped down across my feet. Urged on by her mental prodding, I leaned over and undid her collar, setting it and her eyepatch *du jour* on the table.

A moment later, "Das kleine Krokodil" segued into the next song. She must have been on something of a German kick, because it was a medieval-metal band—In Extremo, I thought, although it might have been Cultus Ferox, or maybe even Subway to Sally. I didn't know enough German to understand any of them, so I had a hard time telling them apart.

She placed what looked like a tray of brownies into the oven with, perhaps, a little more force than was strictly required, slammed the door shut, and turned to face us with a broad smile. I found that somewhat unsettling—Aiko smiling and food preparation are a potentially dangerous combination, after all—which was probably the point. "Hey," she said. "Anybody try to kill you?"

"Yeah, actually, but they did a piss-poor job. You poisoned those, didn't you?"

"Now, Winter," she said disingenuously. "Would *I* do a thing like *that* to *you*?"

I thought for a moment. "Yes," I concluded, "given that you've tried to poison or drug me fifteen times this month, I think you might."

She sniffed. "Please. You forgot the one with the sumac extract in your sock drawer."

"Oh, you're right. Sorry, sixteen times."

And that was Aiko in a nutshell.

I thought that I might want to be prepared for something bad to happen the next day.

I mean, gosh, right? What an incredible display of acumen and foresight.

I'd explained last night the situation as it stood, and Aiko wasn't surprised that my first stop the next morning was the armory. She *was* pissed as hell that she had to stay at home (she had some choice words about that the first time, in four languages and involving a number of obscene gestures as well), but she knew as well as anyone that leaving the Otherside was an exceedingly unwise thing for her to do.

Her fellow kitsune considered that a fairly lenient penalty for the time she gave me a hand with a dangerous situation she really shouldn't have. If she violated the terms of that pseudo-house arrest, they might not be so inclined to go easy on her. And, while I didn't know that much about how kitsune did it—Aiko never talked about her people, literally—most of the time justice in the supernatural world is both very quick and very final.

It was a shame, too, because I would have really liked to have her with me. She was young—less than sixty years old, which was barely adolescent for her kind—but she was also clever, dangerous, and easy to underestimate. I've gone into a number of scary places with her, and having seen her in action I would most definitely rather have her on my side than the other guy's. Aside from Snowflake there's no one I would rather have watching my back.

As that wasn't an option, I went with heavy armament instead. My shotgun and pistol both fit under the cloak without showing anything suspicious, while the pockets were filled with stored spells and a couple grenades, plus extra ammo. Tyring would come when I called, regardless of distance, but I went ahead and grabbed a few sharp implements, just in case. A smattering of things that might be useful in various magical endeavors—chalk and ink, sand and ash, string, a bag of salt and a bag of stones, a small vial of pure rainwater, that sort of thing—rounded out my personal arsenal.

Snowflake, who was planning on coming with me, was also armed to the teeth, although she didn't look it quite so obviously. Her gear was in the closet, too, rather than the armory. So mostly she just sat and watched while I grabbed all this stuff, and then glanced in the mirror to make sure nothing overtly illegal was showing.



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I forget, sometimes, just how frigging scary we look. I mean, I look like a juvenile delinquent at the best of times, but this was something else. The long grey-black coat was one thing, but you could clearly see a pair of very expensive black jeans under it, and my black leather boots were custom-tailored. Between that and the half-dozen rings, I looked a lot more wealthy than the average delinquent, and that wealth was a lot more understated. So the overall effect was probably more gangster.

The closets came full-packed when we got the house, of course. At least I wasn't wearing any silk or velvet.

In spite of that, Snowflake was a long ways my better. It's hard to look terrifying when you're a husky—the blue eyes, white-and-black fur, and general dogginess are a bit too cute—but she pulled it off. The eyepatch she'd chosen for the day was simple black leather marked with the fishhook-esque shape of an eihwaz rune—representative of a long e sound, or a yew tree. Given that yew was an excellent wood for weapons, and also somewhat poisonous, it was a...rather ominous emblem, to say the least.

Most people wouldn't recognize that, of course. But her ears were pierced in a dozen or so places, with metal rings or bits of wood, and a leather cord woven through several of the holes. Her collar was similarly imposing, a heavy band of leather set with a bunch of heavy spikes and bits of bone. It didn't take a genius to get the message there.

People get nervous when they see us coming, these days. Sometimes they even get scared. A number of people cross themselves at the sight of me, and even in Pryce's when I walk in some folks walk out.

That bothers me a little, some days. But, in all fairness, not having to deal with petty troublemakers is well worth it. Plus, nobody crowds us!

I sighed, gave up on cheering myself, and walked into the next room over.

The laboratory was, oddly, a less friendly and pleasant room than the armory. The armory was as much for show as use, and as a result was designed to look good. The weapon racks were all polished ebony, with bronze fittings. The knives nestled into thick green velvet, and there were a handful of actual glass display cases. The lighting, cast by some sort of enchanted ceiling panel, was a warm orange.

The lab wasn't nearly as welcoming. Rather than wood paneling, the room was essentially a marble cube, complete with drains in the floor. The lighting was classic fluorescent-blue, casting everything into sharp relief—no soft shadows here. The furniture, although also made of fine hardwood and marble, was much more angular, more functional. The armory was a place of comfort, but the lab was very much a place of function. It brooked no nonsense.

The effect was somewhat spoiled by the crepe paper and tinsel Aiko had draped around, trying to cheer the place up—but only somewhat. You really had to hand it to the lab—it takes a special sort of room to feel grim and brooding when it looks like Christmas came early.

Alexander's lab, although a little smaller, was still better stocked. But I'd gotten a fairly impressive stash of reagents and components together, enough to perform a really quite remarkable array of enchantments, rituals, and invocations. That was why I was here now.

I grabbed a few things off the shelves, while Snowflake sat and waited near the door. She doesn't much like ritual magic. I can't blame her, because I don't either—it's exacting, requiring intense concentration and extreme precision, and it also tends to be rather dangerous. Mess up while performing quick-and-dirty magic like I'd used on the construct, or even most enchantments, and the spell fizzles. Mess up a prolonged ritual and it *explodes*.

In all fairness, though, this was actually an extremely safe ritual to perform. I hesitate to call it a ritual at all, really; I used a ritual setup, because I wanted to be sure and this wasn't something I was very practiced at, but someone with a talent for this sort of magic could have achieved the same effect with little more than a word and a gesture.

I wasn't one of those people, though. So instead I took my double handful of components over to the summoning circle inlaid in the floor.

There are all kinds of summoning circle out there. Some people use a half-dozen layers of runes and sigils, each a perfect and concentric circle, complete with candles, incense, jewels—the works. Other people, who don't feel the need to show off or just don't have the cash, pour out some sand or salt in a vaguely circular way. For most purposes, it doesn't make nearly the difference newbies usually think it does.

Mine was on the simple end of things, a ring of pure steel perhaps eight or nine feet across—I did *not* feel any great desire to go summoning things that couldn't fit inside that circle. The space inside it was pristine white marble, unmarked in any way.

At the four points of the compass (there was no magnetic or geographic north in the Otherside, so I'd just settled on one of the walls of the laboratory as "north" and gone from there), I set out the foci I was using for this summoning. Inside of the circle I placed simple things with a clear association to the entity I was trying to call—a hawk's feather, a small windchime, a painted fan, and a bit of dandelion fluff. Outside, evenly spaced between those, I placed four small white candles, and lit them—with a match, rather than magic. I'm really not good at fire magic. Then I sat down a few feet away and started working.

The first step was pouring a small jar of sand out in a circle around myself, exerting a slight effort of will as I did to charge it with magic. This was a delicate task, at least for me, and I didn't want a stray current of energy interfering with what I was doing at a critical moment.

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Once that was done, and both circles were humming with just the littlest bit of magic, I got to the real work. I closed my eyes, sat very still, and started concentrating—not on words, or numbers, but on a certain *feeling*.

Imagine the delicate brush of a spring breeze through the branches. Picture, in exquisite detail, the rush of the wind through your fur. Visualize the patterns autumn leaves make blowing down the streets. Conceptualize the feeling of running free, all bonds broken and fetters burst. Wrap all those images up into a single whole, remove the words until all that's left is a feeling, and you will have started to touch on the shape of my summoning, the bare bones waiting for something to fill them.

There were no words. There couldn't be. The being I was trying to contact had no understanding, no concept of words. It had to be all feeling, instinct, impulse; logic, reason, those things would get in the way.

It was hard. I mean, as much as this might surprise some people, I tend to be a pretty careful guy, right? I might tend to the rash occasionally, or not reck as much as perhaps I should to danger, but I'm not careless or, typically, impulsive. This type of thinking was far out of my scope. Between that and my lack of skill with summoning in general, it probably took the better part of twenty minutes for me to shape the magic just right. I'm not quite sure, because any exercise in magic skews your perspective and dislocates your sense of time, but it was a while.

Finally, when I felt that I had the idea as close to perfect as I could, I let the circle around myself drop and let the magic out with a breath. No name—beings such as this don't understand even the basic idea of names—just my breath slipping out, brushing over the sand before passing out into the world.

Nine of my heartbeats later, there was a presence in the summoning circle—invisible, intangible, but definitely there all the same. I immediately pushed more power into the circle, making it into a barrier. It wouldn't stop the creature from escaping—very little could do that—but it would prevent it from doing so unconsciously. I reached out, crossing the circle easily, and gently touched the magic of the newcomer.

It smelled like early morning air and brushed across my skin like a gentle breeze fresh off the sea. It spoke, directly into my mind, saying recognition, greeting, acknowledgment, query.

There were no words. There couldn't be.

I replied in the same manner, all basic concepts, emotions and images. I concentrated on my image of Brick, much as I had on the air spirit itself, the look of him, the exact way his magic smelled. I enquired, very delicately, as to whether it might find him for me, and tell him that I wanted to talk. There was a moment of hesitation, then another burst of recognition, then agreement. Something that was just a little bit more than a passing breeze brushed against my cloak, having slipped through the circle without even realizing it was there, and then the lab was empty again.

It was even odds whether it would do so, of course. I was on good terms with the air spirits—mostly because I was on good terms with Aiko, and she makes a point of maintaining friendly relations

with them—but, well, they were still air spirits. That meant flighty, forgetful, inattentive, and careless. There was a very good possibility that it would forget where it was going. On the other hand, it could slip between the Otherside and the real world without any more thought than it had given to my circle, it could pass through practically any magical defenses, and there was no wall ever made that could keep out a determined air spirit.

As spies go, their poor memory and inattentiveness are too critical of weaknesses to be worth it. As messengers, well, I've seen worse.

I could have just called Jimmy, of course. But we've never gotten along all that great, because he's an arrogant asshole and a coward to boot, and I have a crippling inability to refrain from pointing it out when he acts like it. Brick and I weren't too great of friends either—he was too reserved, and I knew too much of his history—but I'd much, much rather get the story from him than Jimmy. Brick I might believe.

Even better, he just might tell me the truth.

I had other ways available to me of finding a person, ways which were more difficult to confound. But, by and large, they were difficult, expensive, or incredibly rude. I could progress to those if I had too, but I thought I'd give this a try first. If I didn't get a response of some sort, I could always move on to the harder-core efforts later.

It would probably take the air spirit at least a few hours to find Brick, though, and once it did it might take him a while to get back to me. So I figured I had plenty of time to go try other avenues of finding out just what the heck was up among the Inquisition. I hadn't forgotten the construct, and it didn't seem nearly as amusing now as it had last night. I mocked them, behind their backs, but the truth is that the Inquisition scared me a little. I mean, they were magic-wielding fanatics, most of whom had dark secrets, all of whom had abilities I couldn't readily counter. I'd have to be a moron *not* to be a little bit scared by that.

Especially now that, from everything I'd heard, the bonds holding them together were coming apart like old newspaper in a monsoon. Given how impressive I'd arranged for most of them to think I was, if they started going at each other both sides would make a priority of recruiting me, and a secondary objective of killing me so the other team *couldn't* recruit me.

I didn't think I had to worry about an attack at home, at least. I might not be comfortable living in an Otherside mansion granted by the Fenris Wolf, but it did have one upside over my old cabin—nobody who was less than a god was likely to be able to launch a serious offensive on it.

And if somebody tried, well....good luck. I take my paranoia seriously, and Aiko's sense of humor is somewhat sadistic. If you attack my house, the biggest problem the police are going to have will most likely be finding enough of you to identify the body.

I figured I'd better take advantage of that peace and quiet while I could, so I took my time cleaning up after the summoning ritual. One of the things Alexander had drilled into my head over and

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over and over again was that, no matter *how* busy you were, you kept the lab neat. When you're working with some of the stuff I kept in my lab, even a small mistake is lethal.

Besides. You never know when you're going to need a circle on short notice. I'd be a fool not to keep mine ready to go, and that meant keeping it clean.

Snowflake sat patiently by the door while I swept up the sand and threw it out, returning the various props I'd used to their various cabinets and cupboards. She continued to watch patiently while I made sure that everything was secure and not likely to come crashing down the moment I turned my back, went over the floor with a wet rag to make sure I hadn't missed any sand, and was finally forced to acknowledge that I was just delaying the moment I would have to leave my safe position.

Snowflake and I, in the five-months odd that we've been living in the Otherside, have worked out a certain morning routine. We wake up shortly before sunrise—earlier, today, to make time for the summoning—and slip out of bed without waking Aiko, who's much more of a night-owl type.

We get our gear together—not usually this much, but always some, because I'm paranoid—and go for a walk. While we're walking the sun comes up, because I like watching the sunrise almost as much as the sunset. Once that's done and we both feel awake enough to deal with the day, I check my phone for messages.

Once that little ritual is taken care of, we go out for breakfast. Because Aiko is almost as bad at cooking as I am, that usually entails bringing something back for her too—she can't, of course, come eat with us. After that the three of us can figure out what to do that day. Usually it involves a lot of reading and time in the laboratory. Not always, though, because Aiko's really bad at being a stay-at-home anything. Frequent excursions and getting into trouble are essential to her wellbeing, and she usually brings us along.

If nothing else, the extra muscle is not infrequently useful for getting out of a dangerous scene. Aiko takes her getting into trouble seriously. By which I mean that—just counting the ones I've personally participated in—she's started eighteen bar fights, four large-scale altercations between shopkeepers, two schisms within a major thieves' guild (that sort of thing still exists in the Otherside, apparently), a riot, and a religion (don't ask) in the time I've known her.

I strongly suspect that her idea of fun will be the death of all three of us, one of these days. Given how many people want me dead, though, I can't exactly point fingers on that particular topic.

Things started out pretty much the same today. We were just in time to catch the tail end of the sunrise. It was almost November, and that meant it was late enough that the streets were pretty busy. We passed a number of joggers and dog walkers once we'd left the cesspit of a neighborhood where Fenris's permanent connection to the Otherside opened. And then things became a lot less normal, when I started checking my messages.

Usually, that was boring, a ritual I conducted mostly out of habit. Oh, I might have missed a casual call from a friend, or various forms of advertisement, but nothing important. I seldom got more than one or two calls a day.

Today, I had a text message from Kris reiterating her request that I find out where Brick had gone. I had a text from Kyra saying hello, asking how I was doing, and inviting me to Wyoming for Thanksgiving. I had a voice message from Edward saying howdy, asking how things were going, and telling me I was welcome to come to Wyoming for Thanksgiving. I had a message from Sergeant Frishberg of the Colorado Springs police saying that somebody had died in a really bizarre way—a noteworthy statement, from the unofficial head of the freak squad—and she was willing to pay me to come have a look at it. And I had a message from my cousin Alexis saying she was in town and would like to see me.

That last one was, of course, the most worrying to me. I mean, murder, mayhem, generalized and massive chaos and destruction, check, right up my alley. Family? Not so much. Alexis was the oldest of my aunt Hilary's three children, but my mother had been a lot older than her sister. Even Alexis was about a decade younger than me, and between that and my own freakishness, inhumanity, and magic, there was always a sizeable gap between us.

In the dozen years I'd lived in Colorado, not one of my family had come to visit. Not my aunt. Not her husband, who traveled frequently for his work. Not any of my cousins. Not *once*. I got maybe half a dozen phone calls from them yearly, combined.

So why the hell was Alexis here now? I had a definite feeling I wasn't going to like the answer to *that* one.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to convince even myself that I would get to dodge the issue indefinitely. My life doesn't work like that. So, rather than struggle against it, I called her back first.

The ensuing conversation was awkward, stilted, and full of uncomfortable silences—par for the course, essentially. She didn't mention why she was in Colorado, and I didn't ask. I gave her directions to a pizza place, and arranged to meet her there for a lunch. I hung up and gave the phone the sort of look I normally reserve for venomous snakes.

I thought about going to breakfast. I really did. But I had a little time left before I could expect to hear from Brick, and I figured that as long as I was being responsible I might as well go all the way. So I called Frishberg back instead.

And that is how I became embroiled in the second hideously dangerous mess.

I'd never been to the morgue before.

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I found, to my total lack of surprise, that I hadn't been missing much. It was better than the hospital, at least. The patients here wouldn't recover, but that was more than eclipsed by the fact that they were beyond feeling pain.

Better than a hospital—but not by much.

Sergeant Frishberg, whose vaguely Hispanic features belied her Germanic name, met me at the door. She was mildly subdued, wearing formal clothing although not police uniform, and seemed more than a little glad to see me. I immediately discounted that. When I first met her I thought Frishberg was a little clumsy at faking reactions and blending in, but I was starting to suspect that it was all an act to cover the cunning, shrewd, and somewhat brutal mind behind it. I didn't for a moment believe that a few dead bodies would shake her composure.

"Winter," she said, nodding slightly. The gesture carried more than a touch of respect. I'd helped the freak squad deal with a couple of the freakier things they'd been called upon to do in the months since I'd met Frishberg, and she'd seen me in action. Apparently it left something of an impression.

I mean, not serious action or anything. But she saw me kill a few things. And this one time I kind of set a building on fire. And there was this one incident involving a rogue vampire and a lot of blueberries. But mostly nothing that serious.

"Sergeant," I replied, nodding back. "What new and exciting bundle of horrors do you have for me today?"

Her lips quirked slightly. "Nothing too exciting, actually. Right this way." She ushered me through the back halls of the morgue. Everything was very, very quiet, and the smell of disinfectant and embalming fluid was thick, but otherwise the place was unremarkable. It could have been an office, albeit one with a fondness for stark hallways and a real aversion to anything identifying them. The place was a maze.

Eventually she went through another door, into a room with an occupied autopsy table. It looked just like a medical table, except that the patient wasn't breathing, and no effort had been made to make it comfortable and homey.

I've seen a significant number of corpses, and made more than a handful. I have seen the effects of werewolf attacks, close-range shotgun blasts, explosions, serious fires, a couple different kinds of poison, and decapitation on a body. Thus, it is with a certain expertise that I say that this particular body was, bar none, the least offensive and disturbing I'd ever seen. It looked like the man—a middle-aged fellow with Asian features who was a touch overweight—had just gone to sleep for a while. Aside from the autopsy marks, there was nothing whatsoever wrong with him.

I examined the body for a while. "Okay," I said finally. "What killed him?"

"Well," she drawled, "that's sort of the problem. As far as they can tell, nothing did."

"Correct me if I'm wrong," I said dryly, "but he seems pretty dead from where I'm standing."

"Yep," she agreed. "Guy's in perfect health, though. Nothing wrong with him at all. No tissue damage, no poison, disease, nothing. Found him in his house like this."

I grunted. "How's that your problem?" I asked. "Chalk it up as one of life's little mysteries and move on."

"Normally, I'd agree with you. The problem is, he's the fourth one this week. Just poof, dead."

"Oh." I thought about it for a minute. "You know, on second thought, I can maybe see where that might upset some people. I take it they dumped this on you because it's weird and they can't actually call it homicide without a cause of death."

"That," Frishberg agreed, "and they're too busy." She frowned vaguely, not looking directly at either me or the corpse. "Things are bad out there, Winter. I've never seen it like this."

"Bad how? You mean like increased crime rates or something?"

"Through the roof," she said dryly. "We've had more than thirty murders in the past month. Almost two hundred assaults. A hundred and fifty reported arsons."

"I take it that's unusual?"

She eyed me flatly. "We normally see less than thirty murders a year."

"Oh. So pretty unusual, then."

The sergeant rolled her eyes. "Bite me. The department's working its ass off, which means fewer people get sent to the freaks, which means *I* have to do everything myself, *and* they dump a shitload more work on my head. And now this shit starts happening."

Something remarkable happened then. Frishberg shook her head once, briskly, reminding me of Snowflake shedding water, and all the anger and frustration that had built up around her over the past few sentences just...evaporated. A moment before she'd looked ready to bite someone's head off, and not too picky about whose it might be. Now, she had returned to the carefree, almost placid personality she'd shown up with.

*Now that*, Snowflake said, approaching awe, *is a nice trick. You should learn to do that.*

"So," the sergeant said, quite calmly. "What happened here, and how much will it cost me to find out?"

I grinned at her. "Oh, no charge for you, sergeant. I'm happy to help out my friendly neighborhood police force. Us freaks have to stick together, right?"



Frishberg looked at me in a gimlet manner. "You," she informed me sourly, "are not nearly as amusing as you think you are."

*True dat*, Snowflake sighed. *And you only have to listen to him occasionally.*

*Seems like a bit of a waste*, I told her, *given that she can't hear you*. Snowflake huffed and laughed at the same time, while I walked over to take a closer look at the mysterious dead guy. "You have any information on who these people were? Like, is there some kind of connection between them or something?"

"Maybe, but I want your take on it first."

I sighed. Of course she did. Up close, the body looked pretty much exactly like it had from farther away. There was something odd about the smell, though, something funny. Not physically—he smelled pretty much the way you would expect of a dead guy in a morgue, in that respect. No, this was a magic smell,

It took me several moments to place it, and when I did it was more confusing than anything. He smelled like a lacking, a void in the background. I'm not sure how to explain it, beyond that. Magic doesn't leave a trace of itself the way physical scents do, and it fades in hours, so I wouldn't have expected to smell anything meaningful on him. The problem was that this particular void didn't feel like the absence of smell. It was more like the smell of absence, like something that should have been present wasn't. I'd have never noticed it unless I was looking for it, but once I did it was hard *not* to smell it.

So. Assuming he hadn't just been a bizarre magical creature I hadn't previously encountered which smelled like a void—which, given how relatively little of the supernatural world I'd encountered, was entirely possible—it was safe to assume that whatever killed him also caused him to smell like this.

I supposed that something could have ripped his magic away, leaving a hole where it had been. That didn't fit, though, because every way I knew of to do that to a human being would have left some evidence on the body. Besides, I'd encountered something of the sort before. It didn't produce this sort of lacuna.

On the other hand, neither did anything else that I knew of. And it seemed logical that, in order to so profoundly alter a person's magical scent, you would have to alter their magic on an equally basic level. So. Maybe it was a way of taking magic that I *didn't* know about.

Working on that assumption, I asked whether it would be possible for me to look at the other bodies. It turned out that it was—I suspect it was illegal, but the freak squad was sorta supposed to do that sort of thing, as I understood it—and it was quickly arranged. All of them appeared more or less the same. I didn't pay too much attention to that, though, because the important trend was in the scent of their respective magics.

The most recent corpse was the one I'd already seen. The second newest smelled the same, but weaker—if I hadn't known exactly what to sniff for, I wouldn't have caught it. The third was so faint I couldn't be sure it wasn't my imagination. The fourth smelled perfectly normal.

That supported my guess that this was an effect of the method of killing. Finding one corpse smelling bizarre and unlike anything I'd ever encountered was one thing. Finding four identical ones, in one city, in one week, having all been killed in the same way, seemed...a bit far-fetched.

"All right," Frishberg said, glaring at me and Snowflake in turn. "What can you tell me?"

"Well," I said, "not a lot. Assuming I'm right, which I'm pretty sure I am, this is murder. It's murder with a really unconventional weapon, but still basically murder, which means you can investigate it like any other murder. There's a limited number of people who could pull this off, and I sorta think anyone who could do this could probably also cover their tracks pretty well, so you probably won't find them that way. But you can at least figure out the motive."

She smiled, thin and sharp as a well-honed knife, something of the hard, cold mind under the mask showing through. "Way ahead of you."

It was my turn to roll my eyes. "I should hope so. Are you ready to tell me what that connection is?"

She glanced first one way, then another, in an exaggerated display of caution, and leaned closer. "They don't actually exist."

"No, seriously."

"Well," she amended, "officially, at least. No ID. No records of who the bastards were. No fingerprints."

"You mean the prints aren't on file?"

"Right. Except for the second one; he actually doesn't have fingerprints. Never seen shit like it."

I paused. "Wait a second. I thought you said the last one was in his house. How does that happen without some sort of paper trail?"

She grimaced. "It was a rental. Apparently he paid cash up front, and the owner didn't ask too many questions."

"Cash he didn't have tax records for," I noted.

"Bingo."

"So," I said slowly. "You're telling me there are four unidentified people, dead of inexplicable causes, who were involved in shady financial dealings, within one week."

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"You're catching on. Although, technically, I don't think you can call it shady when you make a living dealing heroin."

I stared. "You're kidding me. How'd you find *that* out?"

"Corpse number one had a shitload of the stuff," she said dryly. "Apparently someone matching the description's wanted in two or three states out east. They were pretty upset when he turned up dead all the way out in Colorado, let me tell you."

I stared some more. I was starting to see why the freak squad wound up with this. The whole mess sounded too confused, tangled, and generally screwy for anyone to want to deal with it, and that meant it got shoveled to the freaks. "I don't know if I can help you with that," I said. "I mean, it sounds to me like some sort of vigilante, but beyond that I have no freaking clue what's going on."

"Wonderful," she said sourly. "Just wonderful. I don't have time for this."

"I'll keep an eye out, then. Somebody's running around doing this sort of thing, I'll probably be seeing them before too long."

She looked at me oddly. "You think they might try and take you out?"

"With my luck?" I sighed. "No might about it. Don't worry, though, I'll pass along your regards when they do."

"You do that," she said. Her eyes gleamed with some emotion I couldn't quite place, and her voice had steel in it. And then the moment passed, and once again the mask flowed over her features, hiding the real Frishberg behind a veil of incompetence and corruption.

She was, I reflected, one of the more interesting humans I'd met. One of these days I was going to have to find out what she was hiding behind that mask.

Back outside, I made it all of three steps before being interrupted. Again. Surprisingly, it *wasn't* an assassination attempt this time. I might have *preferred* an assassination attempt, but I didn't get one.

What I got instead was a phone call. From Anna Rossi, possibly the only true, not even slightly preternatural human friend I still had. I debated ignoring it, but eventually sighed and answered. I expected an outpouring of concern, as she'd been expressing on a regular basis ever since her brother killed himself because of me. Somehow, she got the idea that that was messing with my head a bit. I can't imagine how.

Instead, she said, "Hey, Winter. Whatcha doin'?" Her tone, terse and almost afraid, belied the casual words, and immediately made me tense up and start checking my weapons, more out of habit than anything. I mean, I didn't exactly need to worry that they'd gone missing.

"Not a whole lot," I said cautiously. "Why?"

"Well," she said, "there's a guy here asking about you. By name, I mean. He says he wants to talk to you, and it's really important." She paused. "He makes me a little nervous. I think he might be a werewolf."

"I'll be there in ten minutes," I said grimly, and hung up. I cursed under my breath as I stalked over to my car. Anna might not have realized it—or, judging from her tone, she might have—but this guy was threatening her. Or, more accurately, threatening me *with* her—saying, basically, that if I didn't come talk to him she'd suffer for it. It was a very veiled, polite threat, but definitely still there.

I don't take kindly to threats. I take less kindly to people threatening my friends as a way to get to me. Given that this werewolf had done both, I thought we might have a *very* interesting chat.

And *that* is how I became embroiled in hideously dangerous mess the third. God, I hate my life some days.

Chapter Three

As it turned out, road construction meant that I had to drive faster than was entirely safe on the latter half of the journey to get there on time. Snowflake, of course, loved it, hanging her head out the window and urging me to speed up.

But we made it without incident, and pulled into the parking lot with ninety-one seconds to spare. The restaurant, a fancy Italian place in the vicinity of the Broadmoor, was just opening for lunch, and the lot was almost empty. My car still stood out pretty starkly against the sports cars and luxury vehicles more common in the area. I only saw one automobile older than mine, and it was a beautiful vintage car from the 1950's.

I'm sure not all the people going to that restaurant drive nice cars—if nothing else, they had to have a dishwasher, and I doubt he made much more money than I used to as a woodworker. But he apparently had to park somewhere else.

I walked through the heavy double doors and was immediately enveloped by the smells of money, class, and olive oil. This wasn't exactly my normal sort of venue. The lighting was subdued, classical music played quietly in the background, and there were red tablecloths and napkins on all the tables.

Fabric tablecloths. For *lunch*. Sheesh.

The host, unless maybe I was supposed to call him a maitre d'—since, you know, classy and everything—took one look at my ensemble and looked like he couldn't decide whether I was allowed inside or not. I looked just suspicious enough that he wanted to throw me out on principle, but I was just ostentatious enough about my relative wealth that he wasn't sure he was allowed to.

Snowflake was waiting outside with the car. We weren't even going to try to convince them to let a dog in here.

I relied on my usual tactic for such things. I nodded at the host (because seriously, I couldn't say maitre d' without cracking up) politely and walked in like I owned the place. I've often been amazed at the places a confident stride can get you, and this was no exception. The man wilted in the face of my evident assurance and didn't challenge me, although his reservations with that were clearly apparent.

It wasn't hard to find the person Anna had called me about. It wasn't like the place was crowded. Plus he waved me over the second I hit the dining room. That helped a lot.

I made my cautious way over. His table was against the wall, and he was sitting alone with his back to the window. He couldn't see the door, either. That made him an arrogant and careless man.

Unless, of course, he was simply so powerful that he didn't have to worry about such things. I was afraid that might be the case.

The large empty space around his table might have been coincidence, I suppose. But I didn't think so. There was something about him, some indefinable quality, that made me want to stay away from him, and I suspected that everyone else felt the same thing. Oh, they wouldn't acknowledge it—in my experience, people are very good at coming up with excuses to cover the real reason for their behavior, when they don't want to face it. It would still influence their actions.

But the first rule of dealing with supernatural nasties is that you never, ever let them see you flinch. At best, it tells them that they can walk all over you. At worst, well, there's a certain amount of truth to what they say about predators smelling fear and attacking weakness. Telling a supernatural predator that you're weak and scared is tantamount to telling it you're delicious and nutritious, and that's a great way to wind up dead.

So I swaggered right over and sat down across from him. He didn't say anything for several moments, giving me plenty of time to examine him. It did very little to reassure me.

On the surface, there seemed little reason for the reaction he caused in people. He was impeccably dressed in an extremely expensive suit. The fur-lined coat seemed excessive for the weather, but not ridiculously so. Given that he looked so *very* Native American you would expect dark eyes to match the hair, but his were yellow.

I don't mean a sort of brown. I don't even mean amber, like my eyes, or gold, such as Fenris usually sported. His eyes were *yellow*, vivid yellow like no human eyes are supposed to be, making me think of a reptile. I expect most people thought they were contact lenses. I suspected otherwise.

You'd think that would spook me somewhat, and you would be right. But what *really* got me going was his scent. He smelled of magic, strong enough to make my nostrils burn and my throat itch, and he smelled *wrong*. His magic reeked of death and decay, rotting flesh and soured milk, like a charnel house or a landfill on a hot day.

People whose magic smells unpleasant to me tend to be dangerous, nasty, and just generally unpleasant people to be around. Given that this man—if it was a man; I got nothing of the usual, disinfectant-like tone of human magic—smelled worse than any magic I'd ever encountered before, and stronger than most, I didn't think I wanted anything to do with him.

I had no doubt, at this point, that people were avoiding him for a reason. That aura was so strong that *anyone*, even an ordinary human being that hadn't believed in magic for ninety years, would pick up on it, and so unpleasant that I couldn't imagine anyone wanting to be around it. The amazing thing wasn't that the tables around him were conspicuously empty. It was that there were still people in the same frigging *building*.

In the interest of getting away from this thing as fast as possible, I decided to speak first. "What do you want?" I said. Well. Growled, really, but the words were intelligible. That's what matters, right?

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

He leaned back and laughed. It didn't sound nearly as evil or cackle-like as it seemed like it ought to. He took a sip of water, which was the only thing on the table, shook his head, and laughed some more.

I waited for a moment. "Okay," I said finally. "Glad to have that over. Goodbye, don't call, don't visit." I started to stand.

He waved one hand, somehow conveying apology in the gesture. "My apologies," he said. His voice was surprisingly deep, and although it sounded perfectly normal there was still some quality about it that made me want to shudder. "It's only that, for a moment, you sounded very much like your mother."

Now I *did* shudder. "Oh great," I said. "Don't tell me how you knew her, I don't want to know. Please."

He chuckled again. "Don't worry," he said in what was probably meant to be a reassuring tone. Actually, it probably *was* a reassuring tone; it was just that my perception of his magic was twisting my opinion of him. Not that I had any intention of discounting that perception. "I've no desire to share that particular story with you. No, I simply thought that we should talk."

I glared at him, being careful not to meet those unwholesome yellow eyes—there are too many things that can do too much to you that way, given the chance. "Then talk. And make it fast; I've got things to do."

He smiled, showing very white and even teeth. "As you will. Have you considered leaving town for a time? Take a vacation, perhaps?"

"No," I said flatly.

"You should," he said earnestly.

"Why?"

"The war is heating up," he told me, sounding calm and sincere. "I expect that this will be a rather violent location for some while. It would be safer for you to relocate for a time."

"Wait, what war? What are you talking about?"

He made an impatient sound. "It isn't complicated, Wolf. Until recently the werewolves owned this territory. There were others here, but everyone knew that the wolves were dominant, the strongest force present. But now they're gone, and given that this is quite a desirable territory it will be no simple matter for another to establish himself in their place."

"You're saying there's a supernatural turf war going on in the city."

"Crude, but not without accuracy."

I thought for a moment. I didn't know a lot about the larger political scene, because mostly I try to keep out of politics. That's a good way to get killed posthaste. But what he said seemed reasonable, which immediately presented another question. "Why tell me about it?"

He shrugged. "Your mother impressed me somewhat, which is rare. It seemed no great difficulty. And I try to stay on the Khan's good side, in any case."

I'm not sure why, but it wasn't until he mentioned Conn that I realized what this man had to be. "Considering that you're a skinwalker," I murmured, "you'll have to forgive me if I have a certain amount of doubt regarding your goodwill and kindly nature."

He smiled broadly, and didn't deny it. "Think on what I've said, Mr. Wolf. That's all I ask." He stood up and left without another word.

A few moments after he left (I didn't hear a car start outside, which meant very little if I was right about what he was) Anna came out of the kitchen and sat down. She probably wasn't supposed to, but given that she was the head chef, or kitchenmeister, or whatever you're supposed to call it at a fancy restaurant, she could get away with a lot. She used a different chair than he had, but that one *might* have been coincidence. "Was it a werewolf?" she asked me, quietly enough not to be heard.

"No," I muttered back. "Something worse." I glowered vaguely at nothing in particular. "Much worse."

She nodded, as though unsurprised. "I kind of thought so. Werewolves don't put my back up like that. Do you want something to eat, since you're here anyway? My treat."

I glanced at the time and sighed. "I'd love to, but I can't. I have another meeting to get to." Hopefully this one would be more pleasant. Surely Alexis couldn't be worse than a skinwalker, right? Right? Anybody?

It is, perhaps, a sign of how distracted I was that it didn't occur to me until Snowflake and I were halfway to the next destination to wonder: since when had Anna spent enough time around enough werewolves to know what they felt like? The way she'd said it sure made it sound like she'd known more than just me and Enrico.

Another thing to look into when I had a moment. Considering how short the list was this time yesterday, it seemed entirely unfair that it was now enormous.

It was a near thing, but I managed to be early to lunch with Alexis. I ambled inside, once again leaving Snowflake at the door, and started looking for the ambush. It was already pretty crowded here, and you'd be insane to try something in such a public location, but people have done crazy things before. The fact that all sorts of people would come down hard on the assassin would be of little comfort to my corpse.



Fortunately for me, I'd chosen this venue with just that in mind. It was the sort of place where you ordered and paid when you walked in, chose a table, and picked up your own food when it was ready. There were always people moving around—going to get food, ordering drinks, hitting the salad bar—and when the lunch rush hit it was crowded enough that one guy could easily blend in.

It took me a few minutes, but I eventually found where she was sitting, a corner booth on the upper level. It had been five years since I'd seen my cousin last, but you don't necessarily look very much different from sixteen to twenty-one. Alexis didn't; I was easily able to recognize her long raven's-wing black hair, dark eyes, and serious expression. She was dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and jeans, both black. She used to have a fondness for cheap, dangly jewelry, but she wasn't wearing any now. No visible scars or tattoos, which wasn't saying much considering how little visible *skin* there was. She didn't seem to be carrying any weapons, and I didn't see any obvious thugs with her. That didn't mean much, of course; a decent professional killer can blend in better than I can, even without the aid of magic. But it was at least slightly reassuring.

I'm pretty sure she didn't notice me while I examined her. I was standing in a shadowy corner most of the way across the room, and my cloak is very good at blending into the shadows. It ought to be, considering they're what I made it out of. It wasn't invisibility, but it was pretty close.

Even after doing that, and making a fairly thorough sweep of the restaurant checking for obvious threats or strong magical signatures, I was only a minute or two late for lunch. Impolite, perhaps, but not unforgivably so. I slipped back to the entrance, pulled my hood back (I'm pretty sure nobody noticed that it melted back into the coat afterward), and walked back in.

I made a show of looking around even before I was in the right area, just in case Alexis had some way of keeping the restaurant under observation or somebody else was watching. Once I was closer, I waited for her to wave me over before sauntering in that direction. I sat down in the hard-backed chair across from her rather than in the booth, just in case I needed to move quickly, and conveyed to Snowflake where we were. A few moments later I saw a flash of white fur in the parking lot just outside the window I was looking out, and knew she was ready to back me up if necessary. I could bash the window out quite quickly, and once it was out of the way she could be inside in seconds. And yes, that meant she could jump through a second-story window from the ground. She's good like that.

"Hey, Winter," Alexis said, her voice surprisingly warm. "You look...good." By which, I suppose, she meant that I looked younger than her, and she wasn't sure how.

"Hello, Alexis," I replied. "What brings you to Colorado?"

She paused, apparently taken aback at how abrupt I was being. It probably would have been more polite to take some time for niceties and meaningless small talk, but I was busy. Besides, I've just never been that inclined to small talk. I mean, what's the point?

"Well," she said finally, "actually, I came to talk to you."

Of course she had.

"I sort of have a problem."

Of course she did. Because clearly I didn't have enough to do *already*.

"Why me?" I asked, making an effort not to sound accusatory or complaining. "Oregon to Colorado's a pretty long drive just to talk."

There was another long pause, and when Alexis did speak she sounded oddly hesitant, as though now that she were here she wasn't sure she should have come either. "I remember," she said slowly, "that mom always told us not to trust you—she said you were crazy, that you might believe what you were saying but it was all just craziness. But you never seemed that crazy to me. And some of the things I've seen you do...well, I can't explain it."

Realization dawned. "And you think there's something like that going on in your life? Something you can't explain?"

She opened her mouth as though to answer, then paused. "Let me go get drinks," she said instead, standing. "You still like iced tea, right?" I nodded, and she walked off.

A few minutes later she came back, carrying a tray with a sort of casual grace that made me think she might have spent some time doing it professionally. As she got closer I saw that there were actually three glasses on it—one of iced tea, one of soda (probably root beer, unless her tastes had changed dramatically), and one large glass full of crushed ice and nothing else.

"What's with the ice?" I asked, as she set the tea in front of me and took the other two. I took a sip—only a small one, in case it was poisoned. Werewolves are resistant enough to poison that if she wanted to kill me with that small of a drink she'd have to use enough to alter the taste, so I should be safe. If I didn't feel any different in a few minutes I could chance drinking some more.

Rather than answer me directly, she took a small drink of root beer (that *was* what it was, too, I could smell it). Then she shoved her hand into the other glass and withdrew a handful of ice. The cold didn't seem to bother her.

I don't mean that she was masking the discomfort. It quite simply didn't look uncomfortable. After a few moments, she opened her hand to show me the ice.

It wasn't melting. Not even a little.

Now, that was fairly unusual. If you grab a chunk of ice, the heat of your body is enough to start it melting. It was conceivable, I suppose, that the ice was simply so cold that it wouldn't—but not very likely, and if it were that cold you couldn't grab it like that without *some* discomfort.

It was at about that time I noticed something else. My nose, inundated as it was with the smells of Italian cooking, wasn't working at quite optimum levels—but, however I perceived it, detecting magic wasn't actually related to my sense of smell at all. As such, I could quite clearly smell the magic of

everyone nearby. Everyone in the restaurant had smelled to me of disinfectant, and not terribly strongly, which was what I associated with an entirely normal human being. Alexis was no exception.

Now that I thought to look for it, though, there was something else there. It was a delicate smell, soft and subtle as the sound of snowfall on cedars. It flickered and danced at the very edge of perception like windblown leaves tumbling down the road. It was cold and sharp and delicate, and while I realize that this isn't a very good description it is, nevertheless, the best I can do.

It's no wonder I didn't notice it before. This scent belonged to a magic of smooth snow and glittering ice. It wasn't meant to be noticeable.

It was also, if you were to squint your metaphorical eyes and look at it through a warped pane of glass upside-down, very familiar. It ought to be. It was the same as my magic smelled—and it was in no way human. Not at all.

Alexis dumped the ice back into the cup and looked at me expectantly. I inhaled sharply, and nodded as I let it out. "Yeah," I said. "I think I understand."

"So what now?"

"Now," I said, feeling rather tired although it was still fairly early in the day, "we get some food. I'm starving."

Several minutes later, a large bowl of salad and a very large pizza arranged on the table, the conversation resumed. "So do you know what's going on?" my cousin asked me, sounding eager. I couldn't really blame her; it tends to be rather upsetting when something you didn't think existed starts intruding on your life.

"Maybe," I said, "but I'm still struggling to wrap my head around it." I took a large bite of pepperoni-and-mushroom goodness and spent a moment chewing. "How long's this been going on?"

"Almost a year. At first I thought I was just imagining it, but, well." She shrugged eloquently. "What's it mean?"

I frowned. "I dunno. I'm pretty sure it means you inherited something weird."

"Do you know what?" she pressed.

My frown deepened. "I have a few guesses, but they're all based on my father being whom I got it from. If it actually came from my mother's side, that changes things.

"Wait, you mean you can do this?"

I snorted and dipped one finger into my tea. I reached for the part of my mind that I associated with that cold, quietly savage magic, and twisted a small amount of power into the appropriate shape as I dragged my finger across the table. It left a trail of frost behind it, where the water in the tea had frozen at my will.

"Oh."

"If you didn't know that," I asked, wiping away the frost, "why come here?"

She flushed—only slightly, but her skin was pale enough to show it all the same. "I always just assumed you were a werewolf." She paused. "Wait, this doesn't mean that I'm a werewolf, does it?"

I snorted again. "Yes, I am, and no, you're not." A werewolf's magic is very distinctive and very recognizable, and I have a *ton* of practice at recognizing it. Alexis definitely didn't have any tones of werewolf in her scent. "I'm not entirely sure what you are. But given that it would have to be at least two generations back for both of our mothers to get it, I'd wager you're three-quarters human."

"Oh." She thought about that for a moment. "What's it mean?"

I shrugged. "Dunno. I mean, I'm such a mongrel we can't really use me as a baseline." I frowned. "If I had to guess, I'd say it mostly means that you'll have an affinity for cold. It'll take a lot of it to hurt you. The area around you will probably get cold when you're stressed." I shrugged again. "It might also make you stronger, or let you live forever. I really don't know."

Realization dawned in her eyes. "That's why you look so young."

I cleared my throat. "Actually, that probably has more to do with the werewolf part."

"Oh. So...why doesn't my mother have any of this going on?"

"Dunno."

"You don't know much, do you?" she said sharply.

"And you do?"

"Fair point," she said after a moment.

"So what'll you do now?" I asked.

Alexis shrugged. "I'm not sure. This seems like something I ought to know more about."

"Probably," I agreed. "You might have a hard time finding things out, though. I'll be looking into it, and I'd be happy to share anything I happen to find with you."

There was a very long pause. I didn't object, because it gave me time to stuff my face. "This stuff," she said after a moment. "It's dangerous, isn't it?"

I didn't see much point in lying. "It could be. Your blood could make you some pretty scary enemies, especially now that you've started...I don't know, waking it up or whatever. Not to mention that there are people who'd be happy to kill you just because you're my cousin."

"Wait, what? Why would somebody kill me for being your cousin?"

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

I sighed. "Because I have a talent for stumbling into hornet nests and my sense of self-preservation is less functional than my appendix. I've pissed off a number of unpleasantly powerful people, and some of them would love to take a hit at someone because they know me. We've never been that close, Alexis, so it hasn't been worth their while, but if they think that's changing it could be pretty bad for you."

She laughed. "Oh, come on, Winter. You sound like the private eye in a bad gangster movie."

I frowned. "Actually, I'm on good terms with the only gangster I know. But other than that you're not all that far off, honestly. These things are cliché for a reason. And we're talking about, like, the original bad guys, here."

She was silent for a moment, studying my face. Apparently whatever she saw there convinced her that I was serious, because she went pale and looked away. "You mean people like us, don't you? People who are...." She trailed off, clearly not sure how to finish the thought.

"Supernatural?" I suggested. "Unnatural? Preternatural? Otherworldly? Spooky?"

"Let's stick with spooky," she said dryly.

I chuckled, as did Snowflake (absent doesn't have to mean ignorant, when you share a mental connection). "Fair enough. And yes, I am." I thought of Frishberg, who most definitely wasn't my friend however chummy she could act, and frowned. "Although, in all fairness, that sort of thing isn't below your standard-issue human either. There are all sorts of bad people out there."

There was another moment of quiet. "It seems to me," Alexis said, slowly and quietly, "that I don't have a lot of choice about belonging to that world."

I shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe not. Like I said, I don't really know what you—we—inherited along those lines. But yeah, if it's much like any of the other supernatural influences I've encountered it'll make it pretty hard for you to blend in with ordinary society. Most people with a weird ability like that wind up migrating to the community over time, if only so they have someone to talk to that doesn't think they're insane."

"What do you mean 'the community?'"

I shrugged. "It's...I don't know, the community. You get some loner werewolves, some mages. A handful of changelings, a few people like you with weird blood in their family tree. I once met a guy who's descended from Zeus, around fifty generations back. Then there are a couple people who're totally normal but happen to be involved for some reason." I shrugged again. "We aren't friends, generally speaking, but...well, we have to look out for each other, don't we? Nobody else will."

"Huh," she said thoughtfully. A moment later, "If I'm going to be involved in this stuff regardless, seems like I oughta know something about this. Like, know who I'm dealing with and stuff, right?"

"That's your choice," I said calmly. "But sure, sounds pretty reasonable. I can show you around some right now if you want, introduce you to a few people."

She opened her mouth, then paused and glanced around. When she did speak, her tone was almost embarrassed, and she was holding her shoulders stiffly, almost as though she were anticipating a blow. "I'm sorry, I can't. Maybe tomorrow?"

Nothing unusual in that request, particularly—but her posture made it suspicious. "What's so pressing?" I asked, voice carefully light and casual, as though I couldn't care less what the answer was. "You meeting your boyfriend for coffee or something?"

She flushed again, and refused to meet my eyes. "No, it's not that, it's just that I've...got something I have to do." She looked at her phone. "Oh, shit, I'm late. I shouldn't have stayed here so long. I'm sorry, Winter, I have to go." She stood up and all but bolted for the door.

Well, that was fun.

Chapter Four

*Wow, Snowflake said. That wasn't strange or suspicious at all. Really.*

*Wasn't exactly reassuring, I agreed.*

*You trust her?* she asked, sounding genuinely interested in the answer.

*Oh hell no, I replied immediately. Cousin or not, Alexis is a stranger. I never trust strangers. And the way she left was freaking weird. Besides, why is she so suddenly spooky, when a few years ago I'd have sworn up one side and down the other the whole family was as human as they come? No, there's definitely something she isn't telling us.*

*Good, Snowflake said, sounding relieved. I was scared, since she was your cousin and all, the abandonment issues would kick in and your brains would run out your ears.*

*Nah, I said confidently. I've never had that much difficulty with it. You and Aiko are family, then Edward, and Conn and his brood after that. Just because Alexis and I have some genes in common doesn't make her one of mine.* I stood up and left, although at a somewhat slower pace. *So where to now?*

*Well, she drawled, I reckon first of all we might oughta see what this here note under your windshield wiper says.*

*Did you see who left it? And why are you trying to sound like a hillbilly?*

There was the mental equivalent of a shrug. *It seemed like the right accent for it. And no, I didn't see who left it, because I was busy watching the window to assuage your ridiculously excessive, compulsive paranoia.*

*Right. Sorry.*

The note, which was written on standard nine-by-eleven paper, was neatly folded and tucked under the wiper. It didn't explode when I unfolded it, either, which was a great comfort; I wouldn't have been surprised if this were another in my ongoing string of assassination attempts.

The note itself was almost too simple to justify the name. The first mark was a simple, stylized snowflake,. Then, in simple block handwriting, the message *Dawn, the fire we started*. It concluded with a simple pictorial signature, just three rectangles. One of them was stacked atop the other two.

So. If you assumed the snowflake was an emblematic representation of my first name, and you assumed the second picture was a way to say Brick without saying as much, this was telling me where and when to go for a meeting. It was rather clever, really; even if it had fallen into the wrong hands, next to nobody would know who the sender and recipient were. Almost certainly no one else would be able to figure out where to go.

I'd helped the Inquisition out a few times, which necessarily involved working with Brick—he was, after all, by far the most experienced and knowledgeable of the lot, even if most of them didn't realize it. Surprisingly, though, we'd only started one serious fire, the very first time we worked together. It had actually been Loki's doing, although I didn't recognize that at the time, and it got to be a decently sized wildfire before they got it out. Brick knew I wasn't likely to forget something so significant as *that*, which meant it was somewhere we could both find. Moreover, it was a ways away from my usual stomping grounds and he'd had time to check it out, so I wouldn't have the advantage—but it was far enough out into the woods to be my sort of place, making it a stupid place to arrange a hit on me.

As meeting places go, this one was excellent.

Almost too much so, in fact. Anytime something seems as unlikely to be a setup as that, I immediately start wondering whether that's exactly what they *want* me to think. I mean, you know what they say about things too good to be true, right?

Snowflake says I'm excessively paranoid. I'd say she's right, except usually I turn out not to be entirely wrong, which means that I'm clearly not being excessive.

I shrugged, folded the note up, carefully ripped it to shreds, and threw it away. I hadn't smelled any magic on it, but that doesn't necessarily mean anything when you're dealing with somebody skilled. Besides which, while tracking spells and the like were far from a specialty of mine, I knew just enough about them to know that even something completely inert, magically speaking, could be used to target them. Whether or not Brick was actually the person who'd given me this note, I'd be an idiot not to take that possibility into account. It was hardly like I was going to forget what it said.

*Okay*, I said as Snowflake ambled over, slinking under and around various cars. *So now where to?*

*Well*, she said slowly, *Frishberg's corpses were probably some kind of magic, and they were almost certainly killed by magical means, right?*

*Right.*

*So they were more than likely killed as a part of this supernatural turf war, then. And it's possible that the split between Brick and Jimmy was the same thing.*

I nodded, getting in the car. *Sounds reasonable. So the first thing to do is find out more about what's going on there.*

Snowflake jumped in the passenger door, and I shut it after her. *Best thing I can think of to do.*

I frowned thoughtfully. There were a lot of sources I could conceivably consult for that information, but most of my usual contacts weren't very good for this sort of thing. Legion was, in his strange and alien way, quite brilliant, but his knowledge of politics was a few hundred years out of date. Things tend to change more slowly in the supernatural realms than for normal humans, but they *do*



change, and it was probable that his information would have some major gaps in it. Alexander was more up-to-date, but he was also utterly disinterested in political dealings of any stripe. He wouldn't be involved in anything of this sort, and he wouldn't take it well if I tried to involve him. Conn would probably know—given that he's pretty much the biggest, baddest, most influential werewolf in the world, there aren't many people *more* into politics than the Khan. But he had a protective streak a mile wide, and he'd probably want to come help me out. At the very least he'd want to send someone to do it for him.

On the surface that sounded like a good thing, but I was pretty sure it wasn't. Conn was big news—old, strong, enormously powerful. Conn was the sort of person who, if you were to ask him "you and what army?", could just lean back, grin, and point at himself. What was more, if you managed to overcome his one-man army—and that would take a lot of doing—he had another hundred thousand or so people backing him up, most of them werewolves. You crossed the Khan at your own extreme peril.

He was *too much* power, is what I'm getting at. Calling the Khan of werewolves into a local power struggle was the equivalent of using nuclear weapons in a minor border skirmish. It was excessive, stupid—and likely to make the other side break out their own persons of mass destruction. The resulting crossfire, aside from leveling the city and likely killing me, could conceivably kick off a round of violence that would make WWII look like a pillow fight.

Granted, that was an absolute worst-case scenario. It was a lot more likely that they would simply give up on the territory, or even that Conn would be satisfied just giving me the information I needed. But it wasn't something I wanted to risk lightly—especially when, given that there weren't any actual werewolves in the struggle, he didn't have an official stake in the matter. The same went for his family, although only Dolph was big enough into political scheming to help much. Conn and his children might seem omniscient at times, but they weren't. There wasn't a lot of reason for them to know the specifics of a territory struggle in a relatively insignificant city where none of them had a personal stake, or any minions to speak of. They were very much focused on their own people. No, it was better to find someone else.

I thought for a while. Then, grinning, I put the car into gear. I had a pretty good idea who I needed to talk to next.

I read the invitation, and the letter it had come with. Then I reread them. Then, just in case I'd gotten lucky and something was different, I reread them again. I did not get lucky.

I looked up at Aiko, who was currently drinking antifreeze—excuse me, I mean fruit soda—out of a bottle approximately as large as a five-gallon bucket and eating a plate of brownies. How she could stand to do those things at the same time (or drink the soda at all, but that's an entirely different mystery) was beyond me, but she seemed to enjoy it, and had yet to show signs of illness as a result, suggesting that she had a metabolism in approximately the same range as the average hummingbird. Assuming the average hummingbird was on speed. "So these things just showed up?" I asked.

Aiko shrugged. "Beats me. I walked into the bedroom a few hours ago and bam, there they were."

"God damn it," I muttered, going back to glaring at the paper. "Why is it that *everybody* can just waltz in and out of this house? I thought this place was supposed to be secure." Snowflake and Aiko both snorted. I read the invitation again. It stubbornly persisted on saying:

*You are invited  
To a Gathering and  
Masquerade of the  
Seelie and Unseelie Courts  
of the Sidhe  
To be held Tomorrow, All Hallows' Eve,  
From Dusk until Dawn,  
In the Palace of  
Utgard  
And to bring with you  
One Escort of your choice.*

The invitation looked, all things considered, almost exactly like the last one I'd received, except that some of the wording was different, and the watermark was a pine tree rather than a dragon. That would have been more reassuring, except that the last invitation I'd received had actually been a forgery, courtesy of Loki and his ceaseless quest to frustrate, irritate, and generally screw with me.

There was, in all fairness, also one other, critical difference. Namely, this invitation was signed. I couldn't hope to read it—the rest of the card was in impeccable, almost disturbingly perfect handwriting, but the signature stood out so greatly it was obvious it hadn't been written by the same person. It wasn't a question of puzzling out the name. Hell, if I hadn't seen the context, it would have taken a while to guess that it was supposed to be *language*.

The accompanying letter was, in some respects, almost worse. The paper was of a slightly lower quality—which still made it the most expensive I'd seen in weeks. It opened with *Master Winter* and retained the same bizarre medley of casual and formal throughout, which was a little off-putting.

*Master Winter,*

*It has occurred to me that, as you have been sadly unable to participate in such events for the span of some years, it might interest you to learn that the Sidhe will be hosting another party not entirely*

*unlike the one at which we met. Naturally, recalling as I do the unfortunate circumstances surrounding that particular event, I am aware that one might expect for you to regard this invitation to attend such a gathering in a somewhat suspect light. As such, I felt that you might prefer a certain guarantee as to the genuineness of this offer. With that in mind, I have taken the liberty of approaching our host regarding this matter; he looks forward to making your acquaintance with great excitement, and has personally affirmed that you are, indeed, permitted to attend. This is, as I believe the invitation mentions, a masquerade ball; however, as you do not hail from the Courts, you needn't bother going to any great lengths regarding costume, as you will not be expected to compete in such matters.*

*As always, I remain your friend and great admirer; Sincerely,*

*Blaise*

*Pstscript.*

*Please be so kind as to bring the esteemed Mistress Miyake Aiko with you, if you should come. Circumstances tragically interrupted before we were able to speak, on your last visit to our realm, and I greatly desire that I should be able to converse with her, as I must imagine does our host, who has always held both your works and hers in the highest esteem.*

Great. Just fucking *great*. The letter could only be from one person, a Twilight Prince I'd had dealings with on my last, ill-fated venture into the world of high Sidhe society. He'd called himself Blaze—or, as it turned out, Blaise; I hadn't seen it in writing or anything like that, after all—but I'd heard him called a few other things, too. Apparently his moniker within the Twilight Court was the Son of Wolves, and he was one of the scariest people in the Courts. I hadn't been able to find much info on him in the years since, because nobody but nobody wanted to talk about him. About all that I'd learned was that he was creepy, powerful, and associated in some nebulous way with the werewolves, all of which I could have guessed from our brief interaction anyway. The only really valuable thing that I'd learned was that, while he was Sidhe through and through, he disdained the intrigues and machinations of the Daylight and Midnight Courts, holding himself as a neutral party for the most part.

There are very few Sidhe strong enough to make a statement like that and make it stick. *Very few.*

At the time, I'd thought I'd gotten a lucky deal, trading useless trivia for a very prompt location on somebody I'd badly needed to talk with. Shortly afterwards, I'd realized that he had as much of a stake in my success as I did, if not more, and as a result he actually got both a bit of knowledge and some cheap muscle for very little work. Since then, I've come to the conclusion that the reality was that he was moving me around like a pawn on the chessboard, and doing it so smoothly that it took me months to recognize it. He got influence and recognition among his fellows in the Twilight out of the deal. I mostly got hurt, and the events surrounding that bargain led, circuitously but surely, to Enrico's suicide.

I was not feeling particularly eager to make another deal with the Sidhe. Considering how badly I got burned the last time, I wasn't eager at all to attend another of their parties. I explained this to Aiko, possibly using slightly stronger language.

She rolled her eyes at me. "Oh, come on. It wasn't *that* bad."

"It was *exactly* that bad."

She paused. "Well, okay, it was," she admitted. "But you gotta admit, the food was top-notch."

I stared at her. "There's some sort of schism within the ranks of the Inquisition, who are psycho vigilante mages with a collective hard-on for killing monsters—a group which they could easily include all three of us in," I said, ticking it off on my finger. "Someone, almost certainly one of those mages, sent a construct to kill me the other night. A serious turf war is about to break out over this city. I agreed to help the local freak squad figure out how a number of bizarre murders, which may have been part of that same turf war, were committed. A skinwalker just told me to get the hell out of Dodge, and threatened to kill me if I didn't. My cousin, who appears to be involved in some sort of shady dealing or other, is in town and apparently developing some portion of the same bizarre heritage I have, which is going to take a lot of thought to get used to." I was on to my second hand by now, and that was counting pretty conservatively. "Don't you think my plate sounds full enough already?"

*It sounds like you could use a break*, Snowflake told me—she was currently half-asleep and hadn't been participating in the conversation, but that didn't mean she wasn't listening. *Maybe you should take a day off, go to a party or something.*

I switched my glare from the kitsune to the husky. "Yeah, like this party's going to be very restful. Right."

Aiko sighed. "Look, Winter. I know how you feel, but you can't seriously imagine that you're going to ignore this one. We're talking about a personal invitation from a Twilight fucking Prince, and that isn't something you turn down. Not to mention whoever owns this Utgard place." She paused. "Actually, who *does* own this Utgard place?"

I grunted. "Beats me, but that's jotun country. Deep in Jotunheim."

"You sure?"

I nodded grimly. "Absolutely. It's a named location in the Poetic Edda. Apparently Thor and Loki took a trip to the area and got utterly duped by the guy that owned it back then. Given how seldom people that powerful die, odds are good he's still the boss."

Aiko was quiet for a moment as she took that in. "Damn. You think it's an accurate story?"

I shrugged. "Who could say? I've never had a chat with the Æsir to fact-check it, and with luck I never will. But Loki implied that the Edda isn't entirely full of shit, so it's probably safe to assume that at least the essentials are decently grounded."

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

"Well then," she said brightly. "Looks like we'll get to meet some giants. Should be a good time."

I tried to maintain my glower, and for a few seconds thought I was going to pull it off. Then I cracked, and settled for a rueful chuckle instead. "Yeah, looks like." I shook my head. "A Hallowe'en masquerade with the Sidhe. *That* oughta be good."

"Yeah," she said, sounding almost wistful. "I did a few masquerade balls with the Courts when I was younger. They can put on a show, I'll give 'em that." She ate the last few crumbs, drained the bottle of soda, and tossed the detritus over her shoulder into the trash. "You got any ideas for your costume?"

"Nah, I'll think about that later. For now, I was wondering whether you feel up for a trip to Italy."

Aiko yawned and wandered over toward Snowflake. "Sure, why not. You wanna talk to Jacques or something?"

"No," I said sourly. "I want few things less than anything to do with that foul, perpetually inebriated pile of refuse trying and failing to pass for a human being. But an information broker ought to know something about the upcoming internecine violence, and he still owes me a favor."

*Not bad, Snowflake acknowledged, standing up and shaking herself awake. But I don't think most people will know what "perpetually inebriated pile of refuse" is referring to. And how many people know what internecine means? Really?*

Our trip through the Otherside was, thankfully, uneventful. Granted it was still marked by several intervals of violent illness, complete with vomiting and miserable inarticulate noises, but that was more or less par for the course. There're reasons I don't travel by Otherside unless I'm going at least a few thousand miles, and while most of them involve the technical difficulties and risks associated, the sheer *unpleasantness* of it isn't a minor factor, either.

Snowflake and I left Aiko at the last portal—she still wasn't allowed out of the Otherside, even briefly. Thanks to the challenges intrinsic to coordinating timing between the "real" world and the Otherside, Aiko wasn't going to be picking us up—in fact, she should already be gone, en route home. It was risky to travel the Otherside alone, but she was a native, and I was entirely aware that she could take care of herself. Besides, I knew that she would be sticking to the safer areas, given that she didn't have her thugs along for this trip.

So the pang of worry I felt at leaving her alone there was mostly unjustified.

Snowflake and I, once we'd gotten over the moment of shared misery, took off down the Milanese alley where Aiko had dropped us off. We'd lost around three hours in transit, mostly to an Otherside domain where time passed at a slightly wonky rate relative to what I was accustomed to, and between that and the fact that Italy is in a slightly different time zone than Colorado it was now the

middle of the night. From my perspective it hadn't been an hour since we'd left, which had been early afternoon, but you get used to that kind of thing.

It's amazing, actually, the kinds of thing you can get used to, if you pummel your brain hard enough. When you're dealing with things freakish and terrifying and powerful beyond mortal ken on a daily basis, it doesn't take all that long before you find yourself joking around next to something that would make a normal person run away gibbering. It's almost scary when you look around and realize how casually you're treating something like that. As any good demolitions person knows, the easiest way to get yourself killed by dynamite is to go treating it lightly.

But, even if I *could* do something about it, and even if I *should* do something about it—neither of which was certain—this *was* certainly not the time. So I shook off such thoughts, and focused on what to do in the here and now.

I knew a few curses in Italian, but that was about it. Snowflake knew a little more, but she obviously couldn't actually speak it. I suppose that she could have prompted me with what to say, but that's a surefire bet to make people think you're the Terminator, which would be a bit awkward.

So, no taking a cab for us. Not a problem. I'd spent enough years walking everywhere I went in the city not to worry overmuch about a little more. Snowflake and I walked along, in that infamous wolfish lope that eats miles almost as fast as jogging, but which looks much more deceptively relaxed, and which you can keep up for hours and hours if you're fit.

We were fit—more so, in fact, than any normal human could aspire to. I'm not as strong as some werewolves, thanks to a quirk of the magic, but I'm pretty quick when I need to be, and when it comes to endurance I'm pretty superb. And Snowflake was, well, a husky. If there's an animal more perfectly designed for running, and running, and running, for hours on end, than a Siberian husky, I don't know what it is. It wouldn't take that long to get where we were going.

I'd only been to Jacques's apartment once before, on our only other trip to Milan, but I have a pretty good sense of direction most of the time. On the two occasions I *did* take a wrong turn Snowflake was more than happy to correct me, while also informing me that I was a *Dummkopf*, *Blotkopf*, and *Mistkopf*, as well as various other amusing German imprecations. It only took us around forty minutes to travel a few miles, find the right building, and bypass the security. It was pretty decent—this was an expensive apartment building, unless they were actually condos—but it had been designed with certain things in mind. Given how far I was outside that intent, I don't think they're really to blame for my getting in. It wasn't their fault that I had abilities they thought were impossible, and as such could walk through their security measures like they weren't even there.

Jacques's place was on the fifteenth floor, which bothered me a little. I don't mind heights, but I get twitchy when a quick, subtle exit is difficult. I could probably get Snowflake and myself safely to the ground if we had to jump—I can't fly, but I *can* prevent the splattery sort of landing when I fall. But there were enough things that could go wrong with that plan to make it not my first choice, and there weren't any other options for a quick getaway.

I'd thought I might have a bit of trouble finding the right apartment. I didn't. While it was true that I didn't remember which one was his, I didn't need to. All I had to do was follow my nose. When I got to the door that smelled absolutely rancid, I knew I was in the right place.

*Suddenly, Snowflake said, I remember why we don't come here more often. Was für einen verdammten ätzenden Scheißdreck.*

*I know*, I sighed in response to her singularly suitable complaint, and rapped on the door. I was trying to be quiet about it, but there wasn't any response, and I wound up having to pound fit to wake the dead before Jacques stirred from his alcohol-induced stupor. In the stillness of the sleeping building (thankfully, he'd woken up before the neighbors; I hadn't been sure which way it would go), I could clearly hear him shamble over to the door. I could also hear him undoing seven locks and three door chains before opening it.

Jacques looked worse than the last time I'd seen him, which I would have sworn was impossible. His beady eyes were so bloodshot they looked more red than pink, and it went downhill from there. He was barefoot and wearing nothing but a stained, filthy bathrobe, exposing a lack of grooming that would embarrass a komodo dragon. He glared at me, swaying slightly on his feet. "You know what time it is?" he demanded belligerently.

"No rest for the wicked," I chirped, causing Snowflake to chuckle appreciatively. "Come on, I'm not going to talk business in the hallway." I pushed past him, Snowflake tight on my heels and practically mincing, she was trying so hard to avoid contact with the floor. In all fairness, I would not want to contact Jacques's floor with my bare skin, either. Heck, even wearing boots I didn't want to know what I was stepping in. Especially not the squishy bits.

Jacques took his time locking up, fastening the door securely before he came to join us in his pigsty of a living room. He'd at least taken the time to turn on a lamp, allowing us to pick our way through the piles of dirty laundry, old food, empty bottles of booze, and similar refuse which took up the majority of his floor space.

All things considered, I'm not entirely sure I wouldn't prefer the dark.

I didn't sit on the couch, because it looked like I really wanted a Hazmat suit before I got within five feet of the thing. I don't even want to think about some of the things that had accumulated in the depths of that couch. The last time we were here, Jacques had literally pulled a sizable handgun out of it, and it looked like there was enough room for another dozen where it had come from.

Of course, you'd have to disinfect thoroughly after you fired one, even if you survived long enough to *find* it.

Jacques wandered past, grabbing a glass jug seemingly at random off of one of the piles and shaking it. It sloshed. He opened it and poured some down his throat. I winced, and so did Snowflake. He sat down on the couch, which both creaked and squelched, and glowered at me. "What do you want, Shrike?" he asked, drinking some more.

Jacques knew who I was, of course. It was quite simply not possible that he didn't. He was primarily an information broker, making it quite literally his business to know everything and everybody. I was becoming moderately infamous, and had been entirely too high on entirely too many radars recently. Given my distinctive appearance and the fact that Snowflake was following me around, I'd be shocked if he didn't know me on sight. But he'd never use any name except the pseudonym Aiko had stuck me with the first time I came here. It wouldn't be professional.

"Information," I said crisply. As far as I was concerned, the sooner I got to leave this place the better. "I've been informed that a supernatural territory war is about to take off in Colorado Springs. I want to know everything you've got on it."

"Expensive," he noted, taking another drink. The bottle came up empty this time, and he tossed it aside to shatter on the ground (fortunately, it landed in a pile of filthy clothing), fumbling blindly after another in the heap of rubbish next to the couch.

"You owe me," I reminded him. "Speaking of which...this time? Don't tell anyone I was here. I mean it."

He treated me to a ninety-proof snort and a fetid chuckle. "Don't you worry, Shrike. Your secret's safe with me. So whaddaya know already?"

"I know it's going on. I know it's about to pick up, a lot. I'm pretty sure it doesn't involve a werewolf pack."

"Well shit, man," Jacques said, sniggering slightly. "You don't fucking know much, do you?"

*I'm going to need a long bath after this, Snowflake informed me. I mean, for a second there I was agreeing with this sleazebag. I feel dirty.*

"Well, then," I said, ignoring Snowflake's comment (I'm pretty good at that, by now). "Maybe you better start talking. Who's playing?"

He shrugged, picked something out of his nasty teeth with an even nastier fingernail, and spat on the floor. On *his own* floor, I might note. "Dunno," he said. "My stuff's a little old for that one. But I know there's a few factions. Council's got a vamp there, but I think there's some rakshasas or some shit like that trying to move in too. Rumor says there's a mage clan might want a piece of the action, but that shit's just gossip, don't know how serious you want to treat it. Daylight elves are making moves in the area, but I can't say whether they're for real or just want to fuck with people's heads. Elves are big on that shit, right? Then there's a bunch of yokai that want to take over the joint, too."

I frowned. "Yokai as in kitsune?"

"Yeah, a few of those," Jacques said, grinning knowingly. "But mostly I hear it's the tengu want your mountain, think you're mistreating its holy places or some such shit, crazy birdbrains. There's a few kappa and tanuki with 'em, too, and where those four go the little yokai follow, right?"



"Wonderful," I groaned. "Heard anything about a skinwalker in the mix?"

Jacques frowned slightly and drank some more. "Skinwalker? No, haven't heard a thing. He can't have Pack approval, or I'd have heard about it. That'll change the betting."

"Who's your money on?" I asked curiously.

The black marketeer smiled the sort of thin, sharp smile baby crocodiles aspire to have when they grow up. "I am not a gambling man, Shrike. Was there anything else?"

"Yeah," I said. "Who's running operations for these people? Where can I find them?"

He shrugged. "I've no idea. That's the sort of thing they'll be keeping under tight wraps. Otherwise people will start thinking of assassination and suchlike. Obviously. Try talking to people on the scene locally be my suggestion."

"Great," I muttered, turning to leave. "Thanks, Jacques. That'll come in handy."

"Oh, naturally, Shrike," he murmured, just on the threshold of werewolf hearing—it would have been inaudible to a normal human. "I always fill the order."

By the time we got back out to the street, the sky—what little of it was visible between the buildings, at any rate—was starting to brighten with the promise of dawn. Traffic was starting to pick up a little in anticipation of rush hour, and we even passed a few people out jogging, most of whom were careful not to attract our attention. A handful nodded and said incomprehensible things presumably meant as pleasant greetings, to which I nodded and remained silent. I felt no particular desire to expose my lack of fluency in the local vernacular.

*God, I hate that man,* Snowflake muttered, pacing along at my side. She was looking around tensely, hackles raised, almost growling. *I keep thinking he's going to send assassins after us or something.*

*Maybe he did,* I replied lightly. *Do you smell anything odd?*

*Not yet,* she grumbled. *But let's get the hell out of Italy before he can.*

*No argument. That alley up there looks like it should work.* Snowflake assented, not bothering with such niceties as language, and we ducked into it as we passed. It was an unassuming sort of alley, far enough from the nice neighborhood around Jacques's place that it smelled of garbage and urine, but not enough that there were bums sleeping in it. Or maybe they'd just gotten up already, who knows.

I stood facing the back door of a sporting goods store not yet open for the day's business, my back to an old department store, while Snowflake kept watch. I took a deep breath and flexed my fingers, preparing for the effort I was about to lay out, and then started gathering power.

It was hard, this far into the depths of the city. I am not made for urban environments. That's a big part of why I wound up in Colorado Springs, actually; it has enough population to blend into easily, but if you stick to the edges you don't run into the densely populated, metropolitan areas that make up so much of the bigger cities, and you don't have to travel very far to get to relative wilderness. This was *exactly* that sort of place that I try to avoid, where the earth is walled away by concrete and plastic, where the rhythms of nature have been all but entirely subsumed into those of the city, where even the *foxes* are half-domesticated. It was punishingly difficult to gather a substantial amount of magic to myself in such a place.

I managed, eventually—or perhaps it would be fairer to say that, eventually, I gave up on the task. It would have to be enough. I let out the breath I'd been unconsciously holding and began to spin it out into a careful, precisely ordered shape.

It was hard. This was a high level magic, after all, and I was far from the expert Aiko was at this sort of thing. She was a native, raised on magic; she'd taken in the mysteries of the Otherside with her mother's milk, and that power was as much a part of her as blood and bone. I, on the other hand, had been able to safely work this particular magic for slightly less than four months. It was *far* from my comfort zone. Even under ideal circumstances, manipulating pure energy in this way wasn't exactly my forte.

We were lucky that it was so early in the morning. It took me almost twenty minutes of snarling and muttering to myself before I had the shape of the spell outlined, during which time Snowflake had to warn away several people.

They went. Posthaste. I've found that when Snowflake warns a person away, they usually don't argue very much.

Once I had the outline finished, I let out a sudden rush of power, filling the structure I'd outlined, putting flesh onto the metaphorical bones of the spell. I called out to Snowflake mentally and opened my eyes, blinking a little at the light after so long with my eyes closed.

The air in front of me, just over the door, was filled with blackness. Actually, no; that isn't an accurate description. Blackness implies color—a color defined by the absence of light, but still a color, still something you can see. This was more like a void, a gap in the world where my eyes simply refused to focus. It wasn't as neat as Aiko could make; where her portals were perfect, smoothly edged circles, this was more like a wavery and elongated oval. It was almost seven feet tall, barely three feet wide, and the borders of the gate were uncertain, flickering back and forth unsteadily. Snowflake, fearless as ever, leapt through the hole in reality almost before it finished forming, and was gone. I followed her, albeit at a somewhat lesser pace.

It was hard. Imagine dedicating one portion of your mind to holding, at one time, the entirety of the *Iliad* in a language you don't know, while simultaneously performing a gymnastic routine and playing a game of chess against yourself, with both sides earnestly trying to win. That's probably harder than

what I was doing—I don't really know, given that I've never actually tried it—but it's a decent starting point.

But I *had* been practicing. So, while I staggered a bit, and the bounds of my gate maybe wavered a little more once I started moving, I *did* move. And, while I all but fell through the portal itself, I *did* get through.

Gates to the Otherside (or, if you want to get technical, the kind of gate that the likes of Aiko and I could make; the major players do it very differently) are never pleasant. I had been somewhat astonished to discover that it's actually a great deal worse to use your own gate than someone else's. Not because it's logically inconsistent—it makes perfect sense. I just hadn't realized it could *get* a great deal worse.

There're actually a great many factors determining just how horrific any given gate is, though. It gets worse the more "distance," measured in a few different ways, there is between your entrance and exit terminals. It gets worse the less stable the gate itself is. It gets worse the more involvement you have with the magic.

It should thus be unsurprising that, even relative to other cheap-and-dirty portals, this one sucked. A lot. There was a moment, between stepping in and falling out, in which everything felt bizarrely both stretched and compacted. It wasn't even a matter of pain—pain and I were practically old buddies, and it takes a heck of a lot of it to really upset me very much. It was more the way I imagined it felt for a fish on dry land—not the suffocation, but the feeling of utter and overwhelming *wrongness*. It felt like I was intruding somewhere I was not welcome, in a place which was not only inhospitable for but outright inimical to my kind. It didn't even feel hostile. It was quite simply that I had come to an alien place, a place so foreign to my experience and to my natural habitat that it couldn't even be accurately described as "place." It transcended such base notions as space and time.

It was only natural that it was an unpleasant experience. It is also only natural that the description of it is beyond the task of simple words. If it had fit into the boundaries of human thought, it wouldn't have been half so bad.

It lasted only an instant, an interval of time almost too small to define—but during that instant time itself seemed to contract to a single point, losing all meaning, until afterward it seemed both to have passed too swiftly to take in and to have taken several eternities.

There're reasons I don't travel by Otherside without a good reason.

As always, I lost time on the other end of the portal. The experience of traveling is simply so horrid, so mind-numbingly *wrong* that my brain has to shut down and reboot afterward. The next thing I knew, I was lying on the ground, moaning incoherently to myself with my eyes tightly shut, while next to me Snowflake vomited noisily and whimpered in my head.

*I hate that*, she muttered a few moments later, once she'd got her head together enough to string words end to end. *I don't suppose I could convince you to shoot me now and get this over with?*

*Sorry*, I said. *I'm trying to avoid moving that much. Ask me again in a few minutes, I might feel better.* I became aware that I was panting, making little pained sounds on every exhale. The thought had no particular emotional context; it was simply an observation, no more personally important than recognizing that a stranger looked tired. It was, without a doubt, the lingering effect of the magic I'd done to get here. Magic taking more than a second or two of concentration always messed with my head, altering my perception of time and disrupting my emotional reactions.

After a couple minutes of pure misery, I felt well enough to open my eyes tentatively. Squinting against the light, I glanced around and saw a few trees and a patch of sky, which was a blue so intense it was almost painful to look upon.

I sighed and shoved myself upright. The motion triggered a wave of nausea severe enough that I thought I would join Snowflake in the puking, but I choked it back down after a moment. *How do you feel?* I asked, standing up. I only swayed on my feet for a few moments.

*Like shit, but I don't want you to shoot me. Glass half-full, right?*

*Right*, I said firmly, taking advantage of my newly ambulatory position to look around more thoroughly. It was a beautiful day as usual, here in the land of Faerie, and as usual it was subtly, unsettlingly *off*. Faerie isn't utterly inhospitable to humans, the way some Otherside domains are—it's entirely possible to live there for years on end, although there are relatively few people capable of doing so without getting themselves killed horribly, and I don't think anyone could do it without going utterly batshit insane. It generally obeys the same basic laws as my world, which made it a potentially deadly surprise when it decides not to.

I don't like Faerie. I don't like anything in the Otherside, but I *really* don't like Faerie. It makes me twitchy.

Unfortunately for me, it was also huge. Dedicated explorers who spent their whole lives trying to chart it only ever encountered the tiniest fraction. I've read a lot of contradictory information about the subject, but the general consensus is that the portion of Faerie known to have been encountered by human mages—and we don't know what proportion has been kept hidden from us, either—is about as large as the Earth. And yes, I mean the *entire* Earth.

Now remind yourself that, while Faerie is a serious contender for the Largest Otherside Domain title, it's not alone in that competition. Then remind yourself that it's one of a literally innumerable quantity of domains—thousands, at the least, but there were likely millions more that were known only to a handful of people, such as the one that held my mansion.

That might give you some idea of how big the Otherside is.

Anyway, the salient thing here is that Faerie is huge, and relatively "close" to mundane reality, making it easy to get to and from. Because of those reasons, and because it's relatively harmless, it always tops the list of domains used for traveling. Aiko once took me somewhere that got so many

people passing through that it looked like an airport, with people bustling every which way as they hurried by on their way to somewhere else for something which was doubtless terribly important.

I didn't enjoy that field trip, so I went for something a bit more secluded. The particular spot I'd chosen as my connection point was a tiny clearing, well-screened from prying eyes, so far from the beaten path that you'd have to commute to get to the middle of nowhere. I'd never yet run into someone else there.

I stretched and looked at Snowflake, who was standing up and shaking herself. *You about ready to move on?* I asked.

She shook herself one more time and then trotted a few feet to my side. *Yeah. Where next?*

I frowned. *Well, would you rather do one really miserable trip or two slightly easier ones?*

*One*, she said firmly. *Let's get this over with quickly.*

*Agreed*, I replied, turning to the border between trees and grass. The magic of opening a door from Here to There is easier, for complicated reasons as much to do with psychology and mental perceptions as actual magic, in liminal areas, places where one thing becomes another. I took a deep breath and started gathering power to myself again. It was a lot easier here. It was more my sort of place, for one thing, as far from metropolitan as a place can be. It was always daybreak here, for another, and I'm stronger in times of dawn and dusk—like many predators, werewolves are crepuscular by preference, although they're mostly too integrated with modern society to act on that preference.

And it was the Otherside. Magic is always easier there.

Of course, that didn't make the working itself any less demanding. So, while I didn't have to work as hard, it still took another fifteen or so minutes to get the shape just right—it wasn't the kind of thing you wanted to cut corners on. Eventually I managed it, and another oval of nothingness manifested itself in the air in front of me, as I tore a hole in the fabric of reality. This one led to an alley not far from Val's shop—a rather different location from where we were leaving, which would make this gate almost as unpleasant as the last one.

There was nothing for it but to get it done quickly, though. So we stepped through quickly, endured the momentary hammer blow of existential horror, and started the recovery process. This time it was my turn to hurl. I wasn't conscious for most of it, at least; that was something. Snowflake, who recovered more quickly than me this time around, stood guard while I got myself together, and then we took off down the street together. We'd taken long enough traveling that it was now verging on sunset. I was starting to feel pretty exhausted, and I was really looking forward to a hot shower and a good night's rest before my early-morning meeting with Brick.

We went a little out of our way to pick up some Chinese takeout and a take-and-bake pizza, because I really didn't feel like cooking and it seemed unfair to ask Aiko to, given that she'd opened

more portals than I had today. It smelled pretty good for instant food, and my mouth was watering pretty well by the time we made it to the front door.

Which is why it is entirely natural that my cell phone rang just as I started to turn the doorknob.

I really, really wanted to ignore it. I was tired, hungry, and really wanted to call it a day. But that is not a responsible attitude, and while I might be irresponsible by preference, at the moment there were more lives depending on my actions than just mine. So I sighed in a long-suffering manner and answered the thing. "Hello?"

"Winter," Alexis said, an unmistakable note of relief in her voice. "Where are you?"

"What's up?" I asked, not answering her question.

She didn't seem to notice. "I just saw...well, I know this sounds crazy, but I think somebody's trying to kill me."

Chapter Five

*You know, I said to Snowflake, all I'm asking is that one time, just one freaking time, I have one of these paranoid thoughts and be wrong. Just once. Is that too much to ask?*

*Well, she said thoughtfully, she hasn't tried to kill you. That counts for something, right?*

*I think you mean to say she hasn't tried to kill me yet. That counts for rather less.*

"Winter? Are you there?" Alexis was starting to sound slightly desperate.

"Yeah, sorry. Look, where are you?"

"In my motel room." She rattled off an address downtown.

"Okay. Stay there, stay inside. Lock the doors, close the curtains, and don't let anyone in. I'll be there as soon as I can."

"Should I call the police?"

"Depends. When you say someone's trying to kill you, do you mean like a thug? Or is it something spooky?"

"Definitely spooky."

"Then no. Just hold tight, I'll be there soon."

"Thanks, Winter. Please hurry."

I hung up and continued inside. *Think it's a setup?* Snowflake asked lightly.

*Oh, definitely. The only question is who's doing the setting—Alexis, or the person after her? This could just be someone attacking her to draw us out.*

*Good point. That hadn't occurred to me.*

I dumped the food in the kitchen and went back down to the armory, explaining what was going on to Aiko on the way. She, needless to say, thought it was hilarious, and promptly went back up to get some food.

I wasn't ignoring Alexis. It was just that one of the things I've learned, from experience, is that it's much better to react intelligently than quickly. Assuming she was actually in danger, it wouldn't do any good to go rushing out there and get myself killed before I could help her.

And, of course, if she *was* lying then hurrying into an ambush wasn't the ideal response.

One of the other things I've learned, also from experience, is that it's much better to be embarrassed at how overdressed you are for a fight than dead because you didn't take it seriously enough. So far, I'd been satisfied that the various tricks and toys I was carrying, coupled with my magical foci and the concealment offered by my cloak, were protection enough.

But that was just routine wear, suitable for everyday activity. For travel, it was adequate. But at this point, it looked like I was walking straight into a fight, regardless of which possibility turned out to be right, and for that I wanted a little something extra.

Fortunately for me, I had just the thing.

Aiko doesn't talk much about herself. She refuses to talk about her past—she occasionally tells an amusing story, or relates the odd anecdote, or casually mentions taking part in certain events, but she never provides context, explains how she got from one part of the story to the next. She flat-out refuses to be drawn into any discussion involving religion, politics, or philosophy in general—a large part of the reason we got together is that I never ask such questions, because I don't want to know. Above all else, Aiko doesn't bring up her family. Going from the one and only conversation we've had on the subject, I don't have much doubt about why. Her family life made mine look like a self-help book. And, well, if she wants nothing to do with the lot, in most cases the feeling seems distinctly mutual.

One of the few exceptions was a rich, eccentric, and reclusive cousin. I didn't know a lot about him, but apparently he was a rare kind of crazy, even by kitsune standards. His favorite meal was escargot-and-bumbleberry pizza, he refused to answer to anything but a nickname which changed on a weekly basis, and his idea of an April Fools' prank was to fill the sugar bowl with salt...and then rig it to a Goldbergian deathtrap.

Needless to say, he and Aiko got along just fine.

Anyway, one of his pet projects was armor. More specifically, he made custom sets of armor—mostly for kitsune, I gathered, but Aiko had arranged one for me as a birthday gift, some time ago. It was made out of a special iron alloy that he'd developed himself, which was lighter than it had any right to be, and lined with a bunch of Kevlar for less medieval foes.

I'd walked into more than one battle wearing that armor, since then. More than once, it's been the only reason I walked back out again. If this was going to be a similar event, the idea of putting a layer of steel between me and the world at large sounded wonderful. With that in mind, I pulled the armor off its wooden stand and buckled it on. The sleeved breastplate went on over my head, followed by ridged pauldrons and gorget. Tassets and greaves came next, then armored gauntlets and sleek leather boots. Everything fit like it was tailored, probably because it was.

Last of all I pulled on the helmet and mask. I didn't usually wear them, because it's harder to conceal a helmet than body armor. Much of the time the real benefit of wearing armor under my cloak is that people think I'm more vulnerable than I am, and once they see the helmet it's a whole lot harder to maintain that illusion.



At the moment, that didn't concern me. So I jammed it onto my head, checked all the buckles and such one more time, and swept my cloak over my shoulders again. I twisted the almost-substance of it into a true cloak, floor length and hooded. Then I brought the hood up over my head and pulled it down to touch the chest in front, where it promptly flowed back into itself. From my side the effect was like pulling on a pair of sunglasses, making things slightly dimmer but not really impairing vision. From the outside, it would be functionally impossible to see through. It wasn't ideal—anyone who looked closely would quickly realize I didn't have a face—but hopefully at a glance it would look like I was just wearing a cloak and the hood was casting shadow across my features. Still weird, in this era, but not enough so to make people call the cops on sight. Or an exorcist, for that matter.

Good enough, especially as the sun was going down. I raced up the stairs and out the front door, Snowflake at my side, and then we tore off down the street. My cloak didn't flap along behind me, but only because I'd sealed it all down the front to prevent anyone getting a glimpse of my armor. It wouldn't slow down access to any of my weapons; it was, after all, made of shadows, and it's only thanks to my magic it had a physical shape at all. My hand would pass through it like air; the only parts that were thicker were those currently forming pockets.

I'm pretty proud of my cloak, all things considered.

My car was still parked at Pryce's, too far in the wrong direction to be worth getting. Besides, Snowflake and I are pretty decent at running, more so than nearly any real human, and we knew all manner of side streets and shortcuts. If we were willing to work a little, and maybe break a few laws regarding property rights and right-of-way, we could get there probably as fast as a car could drive.

So we ran, she and I, down the sidewalk as the last light of the sun faded behind the mountains. I clanked a little as I ran, but not all that much, and the armor didn't slow me. People shouted at us, and drivers slammed on the brakes and horn alike as we cut them off at intersections, but we didn't slow, didn't care. We were by them before they could really process what they'd seen, anyway; we had to be doing around twenty-five miles per hour, on the level of a decent sprinter. That was faster than we usually moved unless there was a crisis, and I had to work for it. I fed a bit of magic to the werewolf in me, and my breathing evened out, my strides became long and even once again. We sped up a little bit.

The whole time, I couldn't stop thinking about what might be happening to Alexis. Was she in danger? Hell, she could have been killed in the time I took to get my armor. We weren't close, and I doubt I'd have felt more than a passing sorrow if I read her obit in the paper, but that was different. If she died now, it would be my fault, my failure. I would have let her down, after she looked to me for help.

I hate it when people who're depending on me for help die. It never gets to be any less painful.

I'd made the right choice, the smart choice. Given the chance, I wouldn't do anything differently. You couldn't survive in this world if you let them direct your choices, manipulate you as easily as that. That didn't make it any easier to cope with.

Sometimes, I reflected, it really sucks being the guy who has to make the smart choice.

It didn't take us but a few minutes to get to the right area. The motel was a little further from the downtown area than I'd thought, not that it mattered a great deal. We slowed down as we got to the right area. Snowflake was panting a little, quietly, and her presence in the back of my head felt tense, excited.

Alexis's motel was, surprisingly enough, not a national chain. It was a little on the small side, one long building facing the parking lot. There were three floors, and Alexis's room was on the highest. The doors opened onto a long walkway of sorts which ran the length of the building. I could see stairs at either end, and an elevator just around the corner, where the walkway continued along the shorter side of the building. I dismissed the last immediately, of course; I don't like elevators.

For the first few moments, I thought everything seemed quiet enough. Then I recognized what that meant: Things were literally too quiet. (I was, of course, not stupid enough to say *that* out loud.) There were only a handful of cars in the lot, and nobody at them. There was no one on the walkway. I could clearly see traffic on the highway, only a little ways off, but there were no cars driving past the motel itself.

Now, granted it was well past business hours—but still. The place shouldn't have looked like *this*.

I caught a sudden whiff of something, something odd. I'd ducked into the shadow of a parked van, dragging Snowflake with me, almost before I consciously recognized it.

It was very clearly magic, tinted with the odor of disinfectant. Human magic, the signature was unmistakable. A moment later, I saw a cloaked figure slip by, walking past me to the hotel. Whoever it was, they apparently didn't see us. Alexis's attacker, presumably. I slipped my hand into my cloak for a knife—

And hesitated. Did I really want to kill this person without more reason than *that*? I mean, sure, a mage skulking around after dark in a frigging cloak probably wasn't up to anything good, but I could hardly throw stones in that regard. Maybe they just got lost on the way to the Ren Fair.

What? It could happen.

The first figure was ten feet away before I saw another, sliding through the shadows with eerie grace, its movements almost quadrupedal. Its front limbs were tipped with foot-long steel claws, and I caught a glimpse of lemony yellow eyes in the shadow of its cloak.

That settled it. I edged forward slightly, Snowflake pressed tight against my legs. She growled slightly as I showed her what I'd just seen, and I felt her tension fade a little, her excitement grow. We hadn't been in a good fight for a while, and she was looking forward to the thrill, the adrenaline, the bloodshed. Snowflake's a great person, but only a fool could deny that she's a little sociopathic in that regard.

I would like to say I didn't feel a little excitement myself. But that would be a lie.

Suddenly, the cloaked figures froze stock still. So did we, waiting to see what would happen next.

As it happened, what happened next was reinforcements. I counted twenty-four cloaked figures, all told, all of them with claws, all of them smelling of magic and moving in ways that suggested that the things wearing the cloaks weren't human, not even a little bit. They were accompanied by three hard-looking men carrying rifles. All three of them were wearing what looked like modern body armor, and they had an intimidating array of guns, knives, and grenades between them. Professionals, they had to be, not mere street toughs.

Holy shit. Two dozen war-constructs and three hardcore mercenaries was so far beyond overkill for taking Alexis as to be hilarious, if only they hadn't looked so very serious. Taking out a pair of constructs was one thing, but I wasn't at all confident that Snowflake and I could handle this many. Skill and magic and experience were fine things to have on your side, but when push comes to shove anyone can be brought down by enough bodies. There were two of us, and a small army of them. It didn't take a genius to see that in a fair fight, we were dead meat.

Fortunately for me, I've never really seen the attraction of a fair fight. And they were still too focused to see us through our veil of shadow, even though one of the constructs had passed within five feet of our position.

*What do you think, I asked Snowflake, are you an ambush predator today?*

*You know it!* she said excitedly. *We haven't gotten to do this routine in ages.* The husky examined them, her one eye cold and rational in spite of her bloodlust. Especially since she lost the eye, Snowflake's never been one to let emotion get in the way of careful thought. *They'll split up, block both staircases,* she said. *See, they're already splitting into groups. A dozen constructs and one human to each side, with the last guy waiting at the bottom.*

*Yeah,* I said. *He's the one giving the orders, so we'll want to take him out first. Take out the other humans fast if we can, too; constructs are great at following orders, but there's only so smart you can make them. The mercenaries are running command and control on this job.* Indeed, they were clearly hanging back, letting the constructs lead the way. For coping with a counterattack by the target, an excellent tactical choice. Against us...well. The meat shields don't do you much good when you're between them and the enemy.

They must have had some way to track Alexis, or else already knew where she was, because they didn't bother checking any of the lower floors. They trooped right up the stairs, leaving one construct at the base of each staircase to guard it. Snowflake and I slipped slowly closer as they did, until we were only twenty or so feet from the boss, who stood dead center between the two staircases.

Nobody saw us. They were far too focused on the action upstairs for that. Sloppy, really; if you're keeping watch, you should bloody well *watch*, and trust the strike team to do their jobs. The

constructs at least could be forgiven on the basis of not actually having brains, but the mercenary should have been paying more attention. Sloppy work, and it was about to earn him exactly the reward carelessness on a dangerous job deserves.

*You go right*, I murmured to Snowflake, palming a bit of quartz from my cloak. *Take out the human, cripple or destroy any constructs you can safely, and lead the rest away if possible. I'll kill the guy on watch and head up the left, get Alexis and run for it. Meet up back at the house.*

*Got it*, she said tersely, her hackles up, growling softly, almost gently. *Ready?*

*Wait for it*, I said, my fingers tightening on the quartz. The leading constructs emerged onto the top level of the walkway, and I snapped my arm out, tossing the crystal away. *Now!*

And that's when things started happening really, really fast. Snowflake was away, moving faster than any human could hope to match now, hardly more than a white-and-black blur in the dark. At the same instant, the piece of quartz hit the railing of the third-level walkway and bounced away. Before it could fall more than a couple inches, I hit it with a spike of power, triggering the much greater magic bound into its matrix.

Almost instantaneously, fog and mist seemed to boil up out of nowhere, an almost solid bank of cloud stretching from the roof of the motel to the ground, from one side to the other. It was thickest around the third-floor walkway, where it was too dense for you to see your hand in front of your face, fading out at the edges. By the time it reached the ground it was thin enough to see the footing easily, which let me see that it was also too dark, too full of shadows to be natural.

It took me almost seven hours to put that spell together. Just now, I was thinking it was worth every second.

Screams broke out in the fog, over to the right. They were hideous, pathetic, agonized sounds, and a moment later they cut off with terrible finality. The man on watch, who was already shouting orders that I didn't bother listening to, instantly snapped his head around to look, and took one step that way.

And that's when I made my move.

I rose from my crouch, abandoning any notion of stealth, and started running towards him. I had to cross twenty feet of open ground and kill him before they realized what was coming for them, or my chances would become very, very slim.

He heard me coming almost immediately. At thirteen feet, he had his weapon in line with me. This close, I could see his face. It was flat, controlled, almost calm, and showed no trace of either fear or anger. The first round missed, flying just under my arm. The second hit my left calf and failed to penetrate the steel, let alone the Kevlar underneath—he was presumably using a light round, which fit with the relatively quiet sound of the gunshots. Someone wanted this done quietly. The third buzzed

past my right ear, making me feel pretty good about wearing the helmet. There wasn't enough time for him to get off a fourth.

At five feet, I drew my heavy Bowie knife from its belt sheath. I didn't summon Tyrfin; there was no point. In quarters this close, its greater length would only be an inconvenience. No, this was knife work if I'd ever seen it.

The mercenary's face had gone pale, as he realized that shooting me hadn't done anything. I took a moment to think of what this must look like from his perspective—a cloud bank had come out of nowhere, without warning, one of his men had died horribly in the fog, and then an animate shadow that bounced bullets came running at him with a knife.

It must have been terrible, for him. I pitied the man, who had probably just taken the wrong job, not having any grudge against me and mine.

I shoved that thought out of my mind. Later, perhaps, I could afford to feel terrible about the things I'd done. For now I was committed, and there was no time for regrets.

He fell back, a step, dropping his assault rifle in favor of a heavy knife in an upside-down chest sheath. His mouth was open to scream a warning, but he never got a chance, as I lunged forward and punched him in the face. He staggered, bleeding from a shattered nose, and then I slammed my knife into his abdomen with more-than-human strength. I jerked the knife back out, slashed once across his throat, and I was moving on. He dropped to the ground like a discarded toy, his lifeblood spilling out onto the asphalt.

He died fast, and relatively painlessly, and without ever understanding what had happened. It wasn't much of a mercy, but it was pretty much all I could offer. As for me, I swept right by him, not pausing to watch him die.

The first construct, the one watching the stairs, had charged me instantly, thoughtlessly, the second shots had been fired. By the time I finished the human it was almost on top of me. Rather than fight it, I threw a stiff wind at what passed for its ankles. Rather than trip and fall the way a human would have, it threw its forelimbs out and caught itself, swinging its legs back down to the ground a moment later.

Of course, to do that, it had to bring its massive claws out of position for a moment. So I stepped right into its charge, while it was bent over, and slammed the knife home dead center in the back of its head. It collapsed, already beginning to dissolve. I kicked the thing out of my way and stepped past, its yellow eyes glaring at me balefully as I went. I broke into a run towards the stairs—I had to get this over fast, before they could regroup, before the fog cleared. My armor had protected me thus far, but I couldn't count on continuing to get lucky—and, in any case, if they broke out heavier weapons it wasn't going to do shit to stop them. Light arms and knives are one thing; grenades and armor-piercing rounds are another.

I sprinted up the stairs, taking them two and three at a time, throwing myself around corners with reckless abandon. I wasn't watching where I was going very closely, and as a result barreled into the mercenary on that side before I saw him. I'm not sure which of us was more surprised.

I overbore him and carried him to the ground on pure momentum. He'd started to turn towards the noise before I hit him, and as a result we hit the deck chest-to-chest. The knife skittered away from my hand as I hit, leaving me essentially unarmed for the moment. He, on the other hand, reached for a knife immediately, his face set into an almost animal snarl.

I heard a noise from above us, and reacted without thinking, rolling over so that he was on top. Just in time; an instant later, the construct on the step above us drove those massive steel claws straight through him. It must have been terrifyingly strong, probably stronger than I could be even if I were feeding all the magic I could to the wolf; it stabbed through his body armor, then through his whole torso, then his armor again, and *still* hit me hard enough to knock me down a couple stairs.

It was a sobering experience. If I hadn't rolled exactly when I did, it would have hit me rather than him, and a blow of that force would quite likely have gone right through the armor. I *might* be able to heal that kind of damage, but I rather doubted they would have given me the chance.

Of course, I didn't have enough time to be scared either. So I reached out, still running more on instinct than rational thought, and hooked one arm around its leg. It stumbled when I tugged, and like its fellow before it, it bent over as though to walk on all four legs. I grabbed a forelimb, just above the claw, with my other arm, and rolled backward to pitch it over the railing.

It was stronger than a human, but that was a function of magic, rather than muscle. It didn't weigh much more than a hundred pounds, and I was throwing it with the strength of my entire body with good leverage. It went soaring out over the parking lot, and fell probably thirty feet onto pavement.

it wouldn't kill the thing. I was just hoping it would slow it down enough for me to deal with the rest. With that in mind, I scrambled back to my feet, drawing another knife. This one was a dagger, around eight inches long with two sharp edges, made of steel, handle and all. Blade and sheath both were covered in Roman motifs, but I was pretty sure it was a replica. I held the dagger close by my side as I continued up the stairs. Another pair of constructs attacked me within a few steps, with a bizarre mix of inhuman grace and stiff, stupid clumsiness. When I ducked the first one's sideswipe, it stuck its claws firmly into the other's chest. Neither one seemed to react to it, except for trying to tug them free. I stabbed them both while they were entangled and stepped on past. One tried to cut my ankles as I passed, but its strength was already ebbing away. Between that and its poor position, it failed to penetrate the armor.

I was now halfway up the stairs between the second and third levels. I darted up the rest of the way before any more constructs could attack; if one of them jumped me on the stairs, where it had the advantage of height, I couldn't expect another lucky break. By now I was in the thick of the fog, which was only now starting to dissipate. I could hardly see the stairs, and was maneuvering more based on hearing and my sense of the air currents than vision.

I couldn't see, and it was hard to judge precisely what was going on. I'd ended three constructs on my side, and removed another from the action. It was impossible to say how many Snowflake had destroyed, injured, or distracted, but I could feel air moving in a lot of places. If I had to guess, I'd say that there were eleven of the things on the walkway, stirring things around. Several of them were clustered around a single door, and I didn't have to wonder whether it was Alexis's room.

As I watched, one of them bashed the door in. The time gained by my fog bank had just officially run out.

I threw myself forward, and they never saw me coming. How could they? These constructs were oriented primarily around some sort of vision, and they didn't have the brains to realize that they were under attack. Without a human to shout orders at them, and without a visual cue of danger, they went back to their basic directive, which was clearly to kill or capture Alexis.

I did not intend to allow them the opportunity.

Two of them, either slower than the rest or holding a rearguard position out of whatever dim intelligence they might have had, were standing near to me. I charged them, just a flickering shadow in a fogbank full of them, and I took them utterly by surprise. I stabbed the first one in the back, jerked the knife back out, and kicked it hard. It was already standing against the railing, and it must have been pretty cheaply built because my kick drove it completely through the rail and out into empty air. It glared at me as it fell, cloak whipping about it. Between the wound and the fall, that one should be finished.

Its compatriot, moving almost faster than could be believed, spun and whipped one of those wickedly sharp claws in an upward stroke meant to split me from crotch to throat and toss me over the edge. Fortunately, I wasn't entirely unaccustomed to fighting unbelievably fast things—and it was still reacting on the instincts and reflexes that had been built into it by a mage, rather than with intelligence. I stepped back, letting the steel pass within a few inches of me, and threw a blast of wind at it.

I didn't try and stop it. It's *hard* to move around a whole lot of air really quickly, especially when you only have a minor talent in that direction, and trying to stop it or batter it into nonfunctioning was probably more than I could manage on short notice. Besides, even if I could, why do things the hard way when you don't have to?

I didn't try and stop it. I *helped* it.

It wasn't ready for the sudden, massive tailwind, and its motion was ridiculously exaggerated from what it had intended. It came up on one foot, following the rising momentum of its claw, and tumbled over the railing. It managed to wedge one claw in the handrail as it fell, and immediately began climbing back up.

I promptly slammed it with another blast of wind, just as it dropped all its weight onto the wedged limb. Its equivalent of a shoulder joint ripped with an ugly, wet noise, and it fell away into the

fog, vanishing from sight. Apparently it had wedged itself in there more strongly than it meant to, because it left one arm hanging from the walkway like a grisly flag.

Two down, nine to go.

I felt the fog stir, up ahead, as some of the constructs turned towards me, leaving a few to continue working on the door. Apparently they'd encountered some sort of obstacle in getting inside, giving me another precious few moments to work with.

Another pair came within my visual range, moving with an oddly stiff, almost insectile gait. I gave a little ground before them, and thought furiously. It was clear I no longer had the advantage of surprise, and equally clear that I needed a game changer. I'd thinned the ranks considerably, but they still outnumbered me nine to one, and that was probably at least four or five more than I could handle at once, even using Tyrfing. Besides that, whatever Alexis had done to the door, it wouldn't take them long to get through it. I had to shake things up, and fast.

The good news is, I actually got what I asked for for once. The bad news is, I forgot to specify whose side the game changer should be *on*.

I'd completely forgotten about the construct I flung into the parking lot, but didn't actually damage. And I'd been too focused on keeping track of all the things in front of me to spread any feelers through the air to my rear. Thus, unsurprisingly, it caught me completely by surprise when something suddenly slammed into my back.

I hit the deck, hard, knocking the wind out of me. A moment later the construct, which hadn't been anything but pissed off by its thirty-foot fall, shoved those enormous claws through me. Two of them slipped aside on my armor, but the third slipped between two scales, and then through me. A sudden spike of pure agony sparked to life in my abdomen as it rammed the blade home. It entered my right flank, shattering one of my floating ribs in the process, and passed cleanly through me to emerge next to my navel. It failed to penetrate the armor in front, which was some bright side—if it had managed that and stuck the blade in the concrete I'd have been stuck like a butterfly on a pin, and it would slaughter me easily while I couldn't fight back.

As it was, I felt a momentary tension as it started to yank the claw back out of me for another go. Then it suddenly wrenched sideways, which made my vision go white with pain for a second, and when I could think again the weight of the construct was gone. The blade was still stuck through me, which was probably a good thing; it would minimize the bleeding.

*I can't take my eye off you for a minute, Snowflake said, sounding amused. Now get up, would you? These two are starting to adjust to fighting me instead of you, and I could use a hand with 'em.*

Moving hurt. It really, really hurt, and depending on where exactly that claw was embedded in my back I might be doing myself serious harm just standing up. On the other hand, staying where I was would definitely be seriously harmful for all three of us, so I pushed myself to my feet, staggering slightly



and trying to ignore the screaming fire in my guts. *I thought I told you to run*, I said, turning to face the constructs.

*Come on, Winter*, Snowflake said, sounding amused. *You should have known better than to think I'd stay out of the action*. She faded into view like a ghost out of the mist, until she could press up against my legs. The two constructs delaying us for the others appeared just behind her. The fog must have been fading, or I wouldn't have been able to see them from so far off. *Are you okay?*

*No, I don't believe so*. I glared at the constructs. *I think it's about time to finish these clowns. You game?*

*Let's do it*, she said joyously, growling again. I called to Tyrfing, and a moment later the ancient, cursed sword was in my hand. It seemed to whisper a calm, deadly promise as I flicked the scabbard aside to fall into the mist. The constructs froze for a moment—it seemed that the appearance of Tyrfing on the battlefield was a significant enough event to strike fear even into their nonexistent hearts—and then charged.

Snowflake met their rush with her own. She took the leading construct out at the knees, with surprising strength considering her relative size, and effortlessly dodged its claws on the way down. Two quick snaps of her jaws later, it was missing both forelimbs above the claw. When it tried to rise, she ducked around it, seizing its leg in her jaws. Even without the claws it had to weigh close to what she did—Siberian huskies aren't exactly mastiffs, after all—but she tossed her head and sent it flying anyway, where it vanished into the fog below us. The whole thing took her no more than a second or two, and she made it look effortless.

Snowflake's kinda scary, when she wants to be.

Of course, while she dealt with that construct, the other slipped by her. It got to fight me instead, lucky bastard. Tyrfing sliced through its steel claws like cloth when I parried, and treated its flesh similarly on the return stroke. It felt like my guts were on fire, and swinging the sword was a special sort of hell, but it fell to the ground and did not rise again.

Snowflake and I kept walking forward. We'd hardly even broken stride. Another construct broke from the remaining cluster of seven and charged us. Snowflake, who was in front by reason of my not being nearly as fast at the moment as I should be, encountered it first. She slipped away from its strangely graceful, clumsy attacks, often leaving no more than an inch's space between her fur and the blades, and made it look like a dance as she returned to where I was making my slow way forward. It overextended in its zeal to kill her, and I took its forelimb at the elbow. Snowflake instantly reversed her motion, shredding one of its legs beyond usability and dropping it hard on its back. I ran it through on the ground as we walked past, leaving a neat hole in the concrete, and then there were six.

In front of us, the construct trying to get into Alexis's room threw what looked like the pieces of a cheap dresser out into the fog. She'd clearly made a barricade of furniture inside of the door—surprisingly quick thinking under pressure, for a civilian—and, judging by the way the lead construct was

stepping inside, it was just as clearly dismantled now. There was no way I could get there in time, and for a second I thought it was all going to be for nothing.

Then, just as it crossed the threshold, there was a loud *crack* of gunfire. It paused. Whoever was using the gun shot twice more. The construct staggered back, gaping bloodless holes through its head and chest, and fell backward over the railing to splatter on the asphalt below.

And then there were five.

Any human force, any *sentient* force, would have broken by now. Attacked from every side, in the middle of an unnatural fogbank, reduced to a fifth of their original number, faced with resistance even from what *should* have been a helpless target, even blood-mad werewolves would have fled. But constructs, having no concept of self, also didn't understand the concept of self-preservation, and they were literally incapable of feeling fear. They would never run.

Three of the five threw themselves at Snowflake and me, and wound up in pieces on the ground far below. Snowflake, recognizing that I really wasn't feeling very well, was conscientious enough to do most of the work herself, and just let me act as bait and deliver the occasional devastating cut with Tyrfig. Either that, or she was just excited to get to kill and destroy and generally commit acts of mayhem without needing to feel even the slightest pang of guilt.

Yeah, probably that second one.

The other two went for Alexis. Fortunately, the doorway forced them to go single file. Coming in one at a time like that, silhouetted against the reflected light of the fog, they made a dandy target for even an amateur marksman. One of them staggered back to follow its comrade to the pavement three stories down; the other dropped where it stood.

We stood there for a moment, panting, and looked around at the devastation. The fog was starting to clear, and I could see the detritus of a dozen confrontations from where I stood. The not-corpses of the constructs were, for the most part, already gone, but they left cloaks and claws behind when they faded. I waited, all available senses straining, but I didn't hear any more constructs, or feel them stirring up the air, or smell magic. It seemed we were in the clear, for the moment.

"Alexis?" I called. My voice sounded a little thin, and strained, but I was actually surprised at how little evidence there was in it of the foot of steel currently stuck through me. I walked slowly forward, being careful not to pass directly in front of the doorway.

There was a startled pause. "Winter?" she said, sounding scared and a little numb, as though in shock. "Is that you?"

"Yeah."

Alexis went up another point in my estimation right then. Rather than come out, she said, "Get where I can see you. And no sudden moves, either."

I walked slowly forward, limping a little on the right side. You wouldn't think a wound to the back and side would interfere with walking, but trust me, it does. If you seriously damage the muscles of your torso, it screws up pretty much everything you do. *Wait here*, I said to Snowflake—Alexis hadn't met her yet, and I figured it was best not to introduce any more unpredictable elements to this situation than necessary. Besides, if it turned out that this whole thing *was* a setup, Snowflake could inflict a lot more damage if she had the advantage of surprise. Or she could just disappear; she's really good at hiding and sneaking around, and if Alexis didn't know she was there she'd probably never even bother looking.

Snowflake whined a little—in the mental register only, of course—but did as I asked. She knew what I was thinking, and she could acknowledge the reasoning, even if she didn't like it.

My cousin was sitting on the bed inside of the tiny room, pointing her gun at the door. It was a pretty light weapon, a pistol that looked like a relatively small caliber—.32, perhaps, although I was hardly the best judge of such matters. Almost certainly not a heavy enough round to penetrate the armor, although it's best not to be too confident about that sort of thing. That's what armor-piercing ammo's for, after all.

Alexis glared in my direction. "Take off the helmet," she snapped, not moving the gun. I did as she asked, still being careful to move slowly and steadily, keeping Tyrting low at my side. The second she saw my face, she relaxed suddenly, her pistol dropping to point at the floor. "Winter," she said, her voice rough with the release of pent-up emotion. "Thank God you came when you did." She sounded like she meant it, too.

"Best you don't," I said seriously. "He might answer. Now come on, we need to get out of here. The cops will show up soon." I supposed it was *possible* that no one had reported the gunshots, but I didn't think it terribly likely. I mean, I'm just not all that lucky a guy, and even by those standards this didn't seem to be my lucky day. I turned to leave, and tensed slightly as I did. If Alexis was going to betray me, it would be now, with my back turned. Hell, I'd even taken off my helmet for her. Itty-bitty gun or not, if she shot me a few times in the head with it I'd be down for the count.

What I got instead was a startled exclamation, as Alexis saw the spike sticking out of me for the first time. "Good Lord! What happened to you? Are you all right?"

"All right?" I said, feeling pretty amused. I made sure the two constructs she'd shot wouldn't be getting back up again before sheathing Tyrting. It made a low, satisfied sound as I did, and didn't try to stop me letting go of it—it had enjoyed the violence, even if it only got to participate in the tail end. "No, I don't think I am. How 'bout you?"

"Y-yeah," she said, her voice starting to shake a little. "Yeah, none of them got through. Should I, like, pull that thing out of your back or something?"

"No," I said bluntly, limping along toward the stairs. Snowflake had made herself scarce for the moment, presumably still waiting for the betrayal. "I'm not entirely sure what all it went through.

Depending on where it is, it might be the only thing stopping me from bleeding all over the place, in which case I'd rather be somewhere we can deal with that before we pull it out."

"Oh," she said, still sounding somewhat numb. "So...we're going to the hospital, then?"

*She's a bit stupid, isn't she?* Snowflake commented, sounding like she wasn't sure whether to go with amusement or contempt.

*She's inexperienced,* I corrected. *You were a puppy once too, remember? By the way, where are the constructs you drew off?*

*Chasing their own tails a few blocks away,* she said smugly. *Of course, there's no telling how long that's going to last, so we might want to get out of here.*

*Couldn't agree more,* I muttered. To Alexis, I said, "Whoever sent these people just spent a lot of resources on them, which means they wanted you pretty bad. Here shortly they'll know this group failed, and somehow I don't think they'll just give up. Do you really want to be at a hospital when the next shoe drops?" I shook my head. "My house isn't too far. It's one of the better-defended places in town, and I've got medical supplies if we need them."

She flushed, and looked away. When next she spoke, it was in a subdued voice. "What were those things?"

"Constructs," I said. "They're like robots, basically."

Around that time, the last of the fog blew away. Alexis took a good look around, and saw all the cloaks and claws scattered around. "How many of them were there?" she asked as we started down the stairs I'd just fought my way up.

"Two dozen," I said, feeling rather tired. I realized I was still carrying Tyrfing, safely strapped into its sheath again, and set it down. I wasn't worried about it; the sword had always found its way home before, often from worse places than this. Besides, Tyrfing isn't really the sort of weapon which bad things happen to. Rather the other way round, if anything. We reached the dead mercenary, and I bent over—ow—crouched down to look for the knife I'd lost.

Alexis stared at the dead man. "That's a *person*, Winter."

"I had noticed, yes, thank you."

"You killed him," she said accusingly.

"Actually, technically one of the constructs killed him. Although I did kill the one at the bottom of the stairs, and my partner did for a third." I found the knife—luckily, it hadn't gone quite far enough to slide over the edge—and tucked it into its sheath before I stood. When I did, I saw that Alexis was looking at me with an expression verging on horror. "What?"

"Winter," she said slowly, "they weren't robots or whatever. They were *people*. And you *murdered* them."

I sighed, and kept walking. "They came here with those constructs to kill you, or worse. It was them or you—them or me, too, once the fighting started. I didn't have any other way to get rid of them quickly."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Okay?" I thought for a moment. "No," I said finally. "I'm really, really not. But I've done worse things than that, to people who deserved it less." I smiled sadly, not looking back at her. "They say it never gets easier, but the sorry truth is that it does. There's only so many times you can get worked up about something before it...just doesn't seem worth the bother anymore."

Alexis looked stricken, but she didn't say anything. "Is your car parked nearby?" I asked briskly, changing the subject before it got any more awkward.

"Yeah," she said hesitantly. "Right over there."

"Wonderful. Snowflake!" I called, raising my voice. I could have called her mentally, of course, but I would rather my cousin not learn about that particular ability just yet. It might come in handy.

She just freaking *appeared*, out of what I would have sworn was thin air, under the car right in front of us. She trotted right out, her white fur almost startlingly bright under the streetlights, and butted her head against my thigh. Alexis flinched back visibly.

"Alexis," I said, "this is Snowflake. She's a very good friend. She's also the partner I mentioned, so I think you owe her a thank-you at the least."

Alexis absorbed that for a moment. Then, somewhat awkwardly, she turned to face her and said, "Thank you, Snowflake." Snowflake, for her part, just stared at her. She made no particular effort to look friendly—and, as you might imagine, an unfriendly stare from Snowflake has been known to unnerve individuals with a heck of a lot more spine than Alexis; there's something about it that really spooks people. They see something, in her one icy blue eye, with which they aren't comfortable, something that makes them flinch and look away.

That's what they tell me, anyway. I've never experienced it, myself. Snowflake doesn't look at me that way. I don't know what they see there, nor do I want to. I suspect it to be a shadow of the other being in her, the old post-dead wolf that shares her mind, or possibly her soul. It can't be just him, though, because some of those people wouldn't be bothered by that, in the slightest. The most common description I've heard is that it feels like she's looking...not *through*, but *into* you. Like that eye sees all the way to your marrow, like she sees everything you are and isn't impressed. I've mentioned it to her a couple times, casual-like, but she just laughs and changes the subject, and I haven't pressed. She is one of the extremely few people I trust implicitly.

Alexis, needless to say, flinched under that cyclopean gaze, and continued leading the way to her car. It hadn't been sabotaged, astonishingly, nor did it blow up when she started it (Snowflake and I were standing a safe distance away, just in case). I climbed stiffly in back, where I could arrange myself so that the claw still in my back didn't jostle on anything, and draped my cloak over myself so that no one would see me. Snowflake jumped in after me, being careful to leave the injury alone, and immediately sprawled across my calves.

"Where are we going?" Alexis asked, glancing nervously about. Smart enough to be scared, at least. That was good.

I groaned, rested my head against the seat, and did my utmost best to ignore how I felt. "Snowflake can give you directions," I said. I ignored the tangible silence that followed that statement, too, and after that I sort of tuned out for a little while.

I must have actually fallen asleep there for a bit, because the next thing I was aware of was Snowflake licking my face. I groaned and forced myself to a seated position, looking around.

"Is this the right place?" Alexis said, looking back at us. "Your dog seemed to think so, but it looks a little...sketchy."

I snorted and got out. My legs were a little stiff, but not terrible. "That's how you know it's the right place." I walked over to the door, where I slowly and laboriously disabled the layers of wards around it. I didn't actually live *in* this squalid building anymore, exactly, but I didn't know the details of how the mansion Fenris had built connected to this location in the "real" world. It wasn't impossible that someone sufficiently skilled at such magics might find a way to get there using this door. So, naturally, I kept it warded heavily enough to kill a dozen charging gorillas, and the whole building was still under the misdirection spell a fae mercenary had slapped on it before I inherited the place.

Nobody's ever broken into that building, not while I've had it. One local thug did try, early on. That particular incident did a lot to cement my reputation as a badass in the area. He wasn't dead—this was before I upgraded to lethal wards, when it became clear just how many people wanted my hide for a rug, not necessarily in the figurative sense—but he *does* make sure to look really, really nonthreatening whenever he sees me on the street ever since, and he won't come within fifty feet of the building itself.

I was a little tired, and it took me longer than it should have to get the wards down. Two, maybe three minutes later I undid the lock with one of my keys, then I undid the deadbolt with another key, then I opened the door.

Alexis squinted inside—she had to squint, because the interior of the building was dim, and dilapidated, and it hadn't been cleaned for several months now. "That looks sorta dingy," she said doubtfully. "Is it even safe to leave the car here?"

I snorted. "No. But the car thieves should be smart enough by now to avoid anything parked out front of this building." I grabbed her arm and stepped inside—because I hadn't keyed Fenris's magic to her, the portal built into the door wouldn't recognize her unless we were in physical contact. Snowflake, of course, didn't have that concern. She'd been the first person I keyed into it.

I've been using that door several times daily for several months now. Still, every time I go in, it remains shocking. From the outside: squalid little house, all but falling down, and out several years or even decades of repair. From the inside: mansion. Just the entry hall/throne room was bigger than most houses, and filled with the sort of furnishings that would make the average millionaire a bit envious.

Alexis looked back and forth a few times, apparently speechless, as Snowflake followed us in and I closed and locked the door. From this side, it looked like a ten-foot-tall set of double doors, huge slabs of ebony worth several thousand dollars themselves. The locks were large, and iron, and the average battering ram probably wouldn't even leave a dent.

I've never quite gotten clear on how it is that Fenris arranged for closing and locking the doors on the Otherside to have the same effect on the door in Colorado Springs. There's a lot I don't understand about how the mansion works. Thus far I haven't really looked into it. I'm scared of what I might find out.

"What the hell, Winter?" Alexis asked, sounding rather subdued. "What is this place?"

"Um. Complicated answer," I said. "The short version is, we aren't actually in the house you saw. I'll explain later, I promise. For now, just know that I live here, and you should be safe. Probably." I led her into the throne room, moving pretty slowly. Now that the adrenaline had faded, I felt like I was about to fall over.

"That's reassuring," she said sarcastically. "Wait a second, you have a throne? *Nice.*" Grinning, she moved to sit in the massive ebony seat, richly upholstered in emerald velvet.

I reached out and caught her by the arm before she could. "Don't," I said warningly.

She glared at me, and jerked her arm roughly away. "Only you get to sit there, I take it?"

"No, actually, I never sit there. It's just that there's a landmine right underneath rigged to a pressure trigger. Put any weight on the cushions, and kablowie."

"Not to mention the dart trap," Aiko called, ambling down one of the marble spiral staircases. "Or the anvil rigged to fall on it."

I glanced up and, sure enough, there was a sizeable hunk of steel just visible in the rafters. "You seriously set up a falling anvil?"

"Yep, put it in last week."

I peered up into the shadows. "That cable looks a little thin. You sure it'll hold?"

"Well, I wouldn't stand right underneath, if that's what you mean," she said cheerfully.

I gulped and, very carefully, stepped back down from the dais. Alexis had already put a significant distance between herself and the throne. Snowflake, who had a surprising amount of survival instinct considering the company she kept, had wisely not gone anywhere near it in the first place.

"You're the cousin, I take it?" Aiko asked brightly, walking over toward Alexis.

"Right, sorry," I said hurriedly. "Alexis, this is my girlfriend, Aiko Miyake. Aiko, this is Alexis Hamilton." They shook hands. Alexis promptly jumped, snatched her hand back, and glared at Aiko, who grinned smugly and put the joy buzzer back into her pocket.

Snowflake laughed, at least.

"So," Aiko said, "is that a new piece of jewelry, or did you just get stabbed?"

I grimaced. "Definitely the latter. I don't suppose you could...?"

"Sure, no problem," she said briskly, brushing her hands off. She didn't bother washing them; infection really isn't a problem for werewolves, except under very specific and unlikely circumstances. "Lie down," she told me, nodding at a wooden bench along the wall. It was intricately carved with patterns from a half-dozen cultures, but it was flat and even, which was all that mattered at the moment. I draped my cloak over the back and, with only minor difficulty, laid face down on the bench.

Aiko, as might be predicted, had some fairly straightforward attitudes about medicine, which didn't have room for such sissy concepts as "anesthetic." She braced one foot on my back, grabbed the claw sticking out of my back, and ripped it out in one motion.

"Ow!" I shouted, flinching hard. I almost dislodged her foot, and she glared at me.

"Stop squirming, wimp," she said, bending over to inspect the wound. She poked and prodded a bit, and slid her fingers inside so she could hold it open and get a closer look at the interior, which wasn't very much fun. I endeavored not to make too much noise while she did that, and tried not to move. I met with reasonable success, which I felt was really as much as you could ask under the circumstances.

Eventually, after an eon which may or may not have only lasted a few minutes, she let me sit back up. "You'll be fine," she said dismissively. "It's only a flesh wound. When did you get to be such a wussy, anyway? Anyone'd think you were about to kick it."

"Bite me," I muttered, peeling off my armor. "You try being stabbed, we'll see how *your* stiff upper lip holds up."

"Aren't you going to, like, do something about that?" Alexis asked. She sounded more than a little queasy.

"He doesn't need anything," Aiko said dismissively.



"Doesn't need anything?" my cousin exclaimed incredulously. "There's a hole through him!"

"Yes," Aiko said patiently. "There is. But the blade entered at an oblique angle, which means most of that hole is very close to the surface. It pretty much just cut through muscle and fat. There's a thin slice in the abdominal wall, nothing more. It should heal within a day." She shrugged. "I could give you a bandage, I suppose."

"I've got it," I said wearily, wrapping my cloak around my midsection. I hadn't actually been bleeding all that much, at least not by my depressingly low standards, but it would make Alexis feel better. "You'd better have saved some of that food I brought."

Aiko snorted. "How like a werewolf. I swear, if you woke up during your own autopsy the first thing you'd do is ask the coroner for his lunch. Don't worry, I saved the pizza for you."

A short time later, the four of us were arranged around one end of the massive oak table in the dining room. I had a plate of pepperoni, Italian sausage, ground beef, and onion pizza, along with a couple of egg rolls and a little shrimp lo mein. I'd offered the same to Alexis, but she stuck to rice. Aiko, having already eaten dinner, was munching on the last of the brownies and a bottle of mango soda. Snowflake, being a dog, was eating a raw T-bone steak rubbed in garlic and pepper.

"This is horrible for you, you know," Alexis said, prodding the sausage on my pizza suspiciously with her fork. "There's enough cholesterol and saturated fat in this to make your arteries want to curl up and die."

I stared. "Are you seriously trying to convert me to vegetarianism?" I asked incredulously.

"I'm just saying," she said defensively. "And with all the preservatives and nitrates and nitrites and stuff in it, you're basically stuffing your body full of chemicals with fifteen-syllable names. Not to mention that you're doing seriously nasty things to your blood pressure with all that caffeine." She looked pointedly at my iced tea.

*Wow, Snowflake said, sounding awed. Are you sure she's inexperienced, not stupid? 'Cause that sounded pretty stupid to me. Did it sound that stupid to you?*

Aiko muffled a snort of laughter—badly. "That is so adorable," she said through a mouthful of brownie. "It's like having a hyperactive puppy around."

"That's not really a problem for me," I said hastily, as Alexis started to glare at Aiko. "Werewolves don't have to worry about their cholesterol much."

"What do you mean?" my cousin asked, still looking daggers at Aiko. For her part, the kitsune looked utterly untroubled, and was currently chugging Mexican soda. She'd faced down much, much worse things than Alexis, and a hard look from her was hardly going to ruffle Aiko's feathers.

"Look at me," I sighed. "I turned thirty-one last month, and I look younger than most twenty-year-olds. Aiko's in her fifties and she can pass for sixteen without even trying." I took another bite of pizza. "I'm not going to die from a heart attack."

Alexis broke off her one-sided stare down to look at me. "Are you saying you'll...?"

"Live forever?" I shrugged. "Pretty much, assuming nobody kills me—which isn't very likely, by the way. But yeah, I've known werewolves at least a thousand years old or so, and some of them look younger than I do." I drank some more iced tea. "Actually, for that matter, you probably don't need to worry about cholesterol either. Even quarter-breed supernatural folk tend to live for a long time."

Alexis didn't say much for the rest of the meal. She didn't eat any of the meat, either.

After dinner, we moved to the sitting room on the second floor of the house. It was furnished in more or less the same way as the rest of the house, with lots of dark wood and green fabric. The armchairs were really comfy, though, and the fireplace never seemed to die down, although I could clearly smell that it was a genuine wood fire.

"Okay," I said, kicking back next to the fire. Snowflake was sprawled across my lap, her head, feet, and tail hanging off the edges. "You ready to answer a few questions?"

Alexis shrugged uncomfortably. "I guess, sure."

"Great! So how the heck did you know those guys were coming in time to call me?"

"I saw them out the window."

I raised one eyebrow. "From that far away?" I asked, not making an effort to keep the disbelief out of my voice.

"Well, I didn't see *them*," she amended. "But I saw *around* them. They look sort of stained."

I paused. Something had occurred to me, a thought I really didn't care for much. "Stained," I said. "What do you mean by that?"

She shrugged again. "I don't know. Things just looked stained. Like everything was covered in a layer of muck. Nasty." She shuddered slightly. "I didn't realize what it was coming from until I saw those...things. They looked worse."

"I see," I said carefully. "Alexis? What do I look like?"

She examined me closely. "White, mostly. A little bit of blue. It makes me think of snow. And your eyes are glowing." She shivered again. "That looks a little creepy, by the way."

"And Aiko?"

"Red," she said promptly, looking at Aiko now. "Bits of black. And...." My cousin frowned. "What's wrong with her teeth? They look sharp."

I let out my breath in a rush. "Alexis? This is very important." She turned back towards me, and something in my voice must have convinced her I was serious, because her expression was very sober. "Think about all the weird things you've noticed. Not the stuff we talked about at lunch, with the ice and such, but everything else. There's probably something specific, some single thing that stood out. It might be some kind of sensory input, or maybe something that happens around you. It's probably something small—even if anyone else noticed it, they would have put it down to coincidence. Can you think of anything like that?"

She frowned. "Well," she said slowly, "I guess there is, yeah. Static electricity builds up around me more than other people. Like, a *lot* more."

"Is that all?"

"No. I always know when a storm's coming." Her frown deepened. "And our house was struck by lightning eleven times last year."

I grinned. I *love* being right. Except when I'm being paranoid and scared; then I hate it. But the rest of the time, there's no thrill quite like taking a wild guess and hitting the bull's-eye first try. "Lightning, eh? That could be a hell of a power."

Aiko glanced at me. "You think she's....?" she trailed off suggestively.

"Explains a lot, doesn't it? I mean, I knew some of what I got was human, so it must have come through my mother's side." I frowned. "Actually, that might explain some of the things she did, too. I always wondered how she managed—"

"Excuse me," Alexis interrupted, sounding like she'd gotten over the shock of the night enough to feel pretty annoyed, "but what the hell are you people talking about?"

"Long story," I told her, "but the gist is that you might be a little less normal than I'd thought." I frowned. "What time is it?"

"Quarter to eleven," Aiko supplied.

"Shit. Look, I need to get some sleep. I promise I'll tell you more tomorrow, okay?"

"I guess so," she said, frowning. "I don't suppose I could stay here tonight?"

"I was about to suggest just that. Come on, I'll show you the guest bedroom." One of several, actually; there were enough guest rooms in that house to sleep most sports teams. I led her to the blue-and-amethyst themed room in the opposite wing, the one over the lab side of the house (and *that* is how you know your house is absurdly large: when you can divide it into separate wings—better, when

you actually *have* to do so to keep things straight). That was partially because I seemed to remember that she liked those colors, and partially because it was one of the less booby-trapped ones.

They were all at least a little trapped, of course. We turned every room we didn't use into a deathtrap. But that particular room was far enough from the main, well-traveled areas of the mansion that any invader was unlikely to spend much time there, and as a result it was relatively safe.

"Will this do?" I asked, opening the door and preceding her into the room.

Alexis looked around with an expression of envy she didn't bother trying to disguise. This was one of the few rooms in the building that went with pale woods—birch, ash, and maple, primarily, with accents of yellowheart and jelutong. To make sure nobody thought it was inexpensive, I guess. Yellowheart was nowhere near as spendy as ebony or rosewood, but that much of the stuff would still cost several hundred, easily.

"Damn," Alexis said, looking at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall. It was, needless to say, mounted in a finely crafted, intricately carved birch frame. Someone had also taken advantage of the pale wood's high contrast to burn an incredibly detailed floral pattern into it. "Never mind where we are, how can you *afford* this?"

"That's another long story," I said wryly. I gestured at the sturdy oak door. "Bathroom's through there. Don't use the dental floss, it's coated with a contact poison. Don't use the deadbolt, either; once you lock it, it's a hell of a trick to unlock without setting off a landmine in the hallway."

"Are you serious?"

"Absolutely," I said, walking out of the room. "Oh, I'll probably be gone before you wake up. Don't touch any of the plants in the garden, don't go into the basement, don't go to the third floor. And it's probably best if you don't leave the house tomorrow, okay? You should be safe here, but there's no telling whether somebody'll try to attack you again if you go outside—and you won't be able to get back in without me. There are books in the library if you get bored. Don't touch the locked cases."

"Okay," Alexis said, sounding a little overwhelmed. "Good night, Winter."

"Good night, Alexis." I pointedly closed the door behind myself and went to get some sleep.

It wasn't actually that simple, of course. It's *never* that simple. I'd already ditched the armor, and been smart enough to put it away before dinner, but I still had to deal with the clothes. Flesh wound or not, it wasn't much fun twisting around, and I wound up just cutting off the shirt, since it was going to get cut up for rags anyway. Call me crazy, but I don't like wearing a shirt with two stab holes and a whole bunch of bloodstains. Even if it didn't attract the wrong sort of attention, it always seems rather macabre.

Once that was done, I figured I'd better go ahead and shower before I went to bed. The master bathroom on the third floor was incredible, of course. Every bathroom in the house was marble, or something so close to it as to be indistinguishable to my untrained eye, but most of them were in stark black and white. This was a vivid green like nothing I'd seen elsewhere, accented with black. The sunken bathtub was a circle fifteen feet in diameter, the shower was its own room with more than a dozen showerheads in the marble walls, and the sink could have doubled as a birdbath for an entire flock of starlings at once.

The absurdly excessive luxury didn't make washing the wound out much more entertaining. But hey, look on the bright side and all that. At least I had as much hot water as I could possibly want. (Literally, I mean. Not long after we moved in, Aiko decided to find out how big the water heater was. Given that we couldn't find it anywhere, she just turned on every tap in the house as hot as possible. Three hours later, when we still hadn't lost either temperature or pressure to any noticeable degree, we had to admit it was pretty much infinite. It says a lot about us that neither of us thought to look, until that point, and see that there wasn't any actual plumbing connected to the taps anyway.)

Aiko hadn't been far wrong in her estimate, though. It wasn't a serious injury. The bleeding had already stopped, and I could feel that it had already started healing. I didn't bother with a bandage. Once again I'd gotten lucky.

I dried myself off with a plush green towel thicker than some mattresses, never mind mere carpet, and put on a silk jacket and pants. They were forest green in color, needless to say (Fenris sort of has a single-track mind when it comes to decor, which would bother me a lot more if green wasn't my favorite color), although the jacket had a stylized wolf's head on the back in silver.

I can't make up my mind whether it's hilarious, disgusting, pathetic, or all three at once. That outfit, made out of genuine silk as it was, would cost more than a lot of business suits. And it's just one of a full dozen outfits just of *pajamas*.

I never even used to *have* pajamas. Good grief.

I padded back out into the bedroom, making no more noise than a cat. That's not difficult, when you sink an inch into the carpet on every step. Snowflake was already sleeping on the bed, a massive four-poster with green velvet curtains. It wasn't a king-size bed. It wasn't even a double king. It was, without exaggerating, twenty feet on a side, perfectly capable of sleeping ten without crowding. You could use it as a dance floor without much difficulty. Fenris must have arranged the bedding special, because I'm pretty sure only royalty uses beds that size, and not many of them. Snowflake and Aiko and I all sleep in one corner most nights, because the concept of using that entire bed was just too ridiculous to entertain.

I slid beneath the covers, wincing only very slightly, and grabbed one of the dozen or so down pillows. Snowflake made a sort of gentle whining sound, apparently without waking, and rolled over so that she was lying across my feet. I flicked the lights off, leaving the room in perfect darkness unspoiled

by even the smallest glimmer of illumination (there are no windows, and none of the three of us was the sort to need any form of nightlight).

Aiko came in around five minutes later. She wasn't loud about it—she's too preternaturally graceful to ever really make much noise moving—but she didn't try to hide her presence either. Probably worried I'd hear her sneaking around and overreact before I'd quite woken up, and reasonably so given how paranoid I'd become in recent years.

"So," she murmured as she slipped into bed next to me. "How much does that actually hurt? A lot? Or just enough that you'll be sore afterward?"

"You do realize Alexis is probably still awake, right?"

"Duh. I also realize that this room is soundproof. Besides," and I could hear her grin even if it was too dark to see it, "I saw that you put her on the far side of the house from us." The master bedroom took up the entire third floor, but a lot of that was the bathroom, or closet space. There were a few chairs, a couple of small bookshelves, and a significant amount of open floor. Now that I thought about it, it was true that Alexis's room was under Snowflake's closet, and about as far from us as it was possible to get on the second floor—although I was sure that hadn't influenced my decision. Not consciously, at any rate.

Snowflake proved that her evident slumber had been an act by picking that moment to stand up, yawn hugely, and stalk a dozen feet away from us on the bed before laying back down. *I can see where this is going*, she muttered without any particular heat. *Wake me when you two are finished, would you?*

Chapter Six

Sunrise was at around seven thirty at this time of year. I'd need somewhere around an hour and a half to drive to where I was supposed to meet Brick, though, which put me leaving pretty early in the morning. Tack on time to get dressed and kitted out for a small war, walk to where I'd left the car, get lost on the maze of back roads I'd have to take, and show up a few minutes early, and I had to wake up at around five in the morning. Between that and the, ah, nocturnal activities of the previous evening, I got less than five hours of sleep. As you might imagine, I was less than thrilled by that condition.

I brushed my teeth and threw on clothes more or less at random from my closet, inevitably stubbing my toe on a chair in the dark. Snarling under my breath, I stalked back to the bed, grabbed Snowflake, and unceremoniously dumped her on the ground.

*Who's a grumpy werewolf in the morning?* she said in the affectionate tones ordinarily reserved for favorite pets, standing right back up. She hadn't been asleep, of course; Snowflake sleeps often but lightly, and she *never* sleeps through me getting up. She was, in that respect, quite unlike Aiko, who was currently sprawled across an improbable amount of bed and snoring. Loudly.

I did consider waking her up, just to share the misery, but eventually deemed it unworthy even of my pettiness. At five in the morning with my side still smarting, that was not an insignificant statement.

My armor had a barely visible hole in it where the construct's claw had slid between two of the scales, but nothing really problematic. The odds of an attack hitting at exactly that point were pretty minimal, maybe a thousand-to-one odds. Naturally, that made me utterly certain it would happen, and at the worst possible time to boot. There wasn't much I could do about that in any case, though, so I just threw it on and hoped that for once Murphy would turn out to be wrong.

I checked that everything had made it back into my cloak after it was press-ganged into service as a bandage (it had—I'm always careful to keep my cloak loaded with everything I might need, in case I need it *really fast* when I wake up) and buckled Snowflake into her collar. I went ahead and put a leash on her, too, although it made me rather uncomfortable—she didn't care a bit, but I always felt there was something intrinsically *wrong* with putting a leash on another thinking being. Granted, it was a thin leather leash that wouldn't hold up to one stiff pull from her, and she could bite through it in one go, but it was the principle of the thing.

I was, for entirely obvious reasons, very careful about opening the front door, but I actually didn't eat a sniper round right away. I clomped grumpily outside and, astonishingly enough, continued not dying for several minutes. Nobody attacked me, nobody called me, nobody tried to convert me to a new religion or sell me stale cookies using guilt-tripping tactics sophisticated enough to qualify as psychological warfare. It was strange, wonderful, and—naturally—couldn't last.

Less than five minutes out on the delightfully empty road, my phone started ringing. I glared at it balefully, muttered a few dire imprecations at anyone who called people at five-thirty in the morning, and answered it with a grunt that might generously have been called monosyllabic.

"Hello, Winter," said a female voice I recognized, but couldn't quite place. "How are you this fine morning?"

My niceties take a little while longer to wake up than most of the rest of me, especially after too little sleep. So, rather than exchange polite nothings, I said, "Who is this?"

Snowflake rolled her eyes at me.

"Katrin."

That placed it. "Oh, right. The vampire." I'd only spoken with her once, and briefly, when our interests happened to overlap. She wanted a powerful, rather loopy witch dead because he dared to openly challenge her authority; I wanted him dead because he was mad as a hatter and dangerous with it. I wound up doing the deed, with assistance from Aiko, Snowflake, and the Inquisition, and proceeded to never talk to Katrin again. I don't like vampires.

I could practically hear her roll her eyes. "Yes, yes, I'm a vampire, you're a werewolf, we're both monsters, we've both got enough blood on our hands that we don't deserve to throw stones. Now that we've got that conversation out of the way, could we please move on to meaningful discussion?"

"You'd better. Because, if you haven't said something worth my while in thirty seconds, I'm hanging up on you.

"I want a favor."

"See, that's not advancing your cause any. Why the hell would *I* want to do *you* any favors?"

"You think I'm bad? You don't know *anything*. There are things that go bump in the night that would make your hair curl."

"And let me guess," I said dryly. "One of them's in town and you want me to whack 'em for you."

"Essentially, yes."

I snorted. "I repeat, why the hell would I want to do you any favors? Maybe I wasn't clear enough last time, but I think you're a parasite. You and your kind are a blight on humanity. I have no intention of picking a fight with you, but if you think I want to *help* you you've lost it."

"Because I would owe you one," she said easily, not taking offense that I could tell. "And because, trust me, you won't object to this particular favor. You think I'm a parasite, and in all fairness you have a point, but there are things out there that not even vampires put up with."



## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

I sighed. "All right, fine. I'll hear you out. But I'm sort of busy right now—I have a meeting to go to, and it'll be daylight by the time I'm done with that."

"Dusk tonight, then?"

I grimaced. "Sorry. There's an event I have to attend," and just *saying* that made me feel like I'd eaten a lemon wedge. Covered in vinegar. After it was left out in the sun to rot for a few weeks. "How about around dusk tomorrow? Same place as last time?"

Katrin made an irritated sound. "Fine. But this had better be a damned important meeting, Wolf."

"Don't worry," I said. "If I had the choice, I'd rather come chat with you." I hung up on her without another word.

The hell of it was, I was telling the truth. When the interview with a vampire is the *least* unpleasant event on your social calendar, you know your life's taken a turn for the worse.

Naturally, I did indeed get lost. Jon's house had been in a forested subdivision way the hell and gone, several miles out of Cripple Creek, which was itself a tiny town an hour from anywhere. The only way to get there is by following looping dirt roads up into the hills. Before the fire, the neighbors were the better part of a mile away. After our little house-burning adventure got a bit out of hand and took out a decent section of forest, along with a number of expensive houses, it was closer to two.

Between the seclusion, the driveways—which had to be downright hellish in winter, when the snowplow wasn't likely to get out here for months at a time—and the risk of wildfire, I really don't know why you'd want to live there. It has a decent view, I suppose. And all the privacy you could ask for—hell, you could walk out on your back porch in the middle of the day and fire off a few rounds, and nobody would comment. If they even heard it; the trees provided enough insulation that I didn't think it particularly likely.

Not the most comfortable thoughts to have on your way to a rendezvous with a possibly-antagonistic person.

I'd also forgotten just how far into the hills it was. Depending on how you defined sunrise, I might or might not have been running late. I wasn't early by any definition. By the time I pulled into the barren, recently-burned space where Jon's house once was, I was growling under my breath again, and feeling, if such a thing were possible, even grouchier than when I'd woken up.

I was almost hoping whoever showed up here tried to kill me. In my current mood, a bout of savage and destructive violence sounded wonderfully relaxing. Cathartic, even. I could work out my bad temper, go back home, and get a few more hours of sleep.

Naturally, the one time I was *hoping* for a vicious and treacherous ambush, I didn't get one. Brick was sitting on a small boulder, watching the road and the sunrise at the same time, and apparently chewing gum. "Morning, Winter, Snowflake," he said as we got out of the car. "I didn't think you were coming."

"I seriously considered it," I admitted. "But I really needed to talk to you."

He grunted. I couldn't tell quite what it was meant to convey, but it was really a very good grunt. "Come on, then," he said, standing up. "Best we get out of the open first."

I made a show of glancing around. "You got some invisible house out here or something?" Hell, I'd heard stranger things.

Brick snorted. "Not exactly," he said, turning to face the boulder he'd just been sitting on. His fingers began moving at his sides, a gesture a little like he was plucking the strings of some musical instrument. I smelled his magic, a heady aroma of loam and freshly broken stone, with a peculiarly transient tone to it that told me what he was doing.

I sighed. "Oh, come on. You can't seriously expect me to follow you into the Otherside."

He glanced back at me and shrugged indifferently. "I'm going. If you want to talk, you'll come with me, because I'm not staying here. I give you my word that no harm will come to you by my action, or by my inaction if I could have prevented it, while you are in my home, unless you should first move to harm me or mine." He turned back to his work.

Huh. Interesting. Young people, and I had reason to believe Brick was less than twenty-eight years old, don't normally talk like that. In fact, people younger than a century or two don't often talk like that. I do, occasionally, but only because of Conn's influence, and his family's. Given that the *youngest* of them is around two and a half centuries old, I don't think it's particularly surprising that spending a few years with them would make me sound a bit archaic sometimes.

Brick took around eight or nine minutes to get his gate up and running—a lot faster than me, but not nearly as much so as some of the people I'd seen do it. There were a couple of people on the Conclave who could do it faster than blinking, and with less apparent effort. Caller, in particular, had opened a portal with a flick of his fingers, and only the smallest trace of magic to show it. Brick wasn't on that level, or anywhere close to it, but he was still an order of magnitude beyond the next-best of the Inquisition. He was almost certainly stronger, more experienced, and better educated in the exercise of magic than I was.

I would be a fool to forget that. I could crush him like a bug in physical combat—a human seldom stands a chance against any sort of werewolf, much less one reasonably skilled at hand-to-hand wielding Tyrfing—but unless I got very, very lucky or had absolutely the right set of circumstances, I would never get to that point. He would squash me from a hundred yards away and walk away laughing.

Eventually it was open, a tidy little gap cut in the world just above the rock. He turned towards me inquisitively, pun intended. I sighed, set my shoulders, and walked forward.

*Are you sure this is a good idea?* Snowflake asked me, trotting along at the end of her leash. Brick was aware that she was a bit tougher than the average dog, and better behaved, but he couldn't know exactly how extraordinary she was. We wanted to keep it that way, which meant making her look as much like an *entirely* ordinary canine as possible.

*Of course not. This is a terrible idea,* I said to her, not stopping. *But it's also the only way I can think of to learn what's going on with these nutters quickly. I could leave you here if you want....*

Snowflake huffed, and glared at me a little bit, but otherwise didn't respond. A moment later we stepped into the void, and she *couldn't* respond. Somewhat to my surprise, this transition wasn't nearly as bad as I'd expected. Oh, it was still a horrific, nightmarish, nausea-inducing experience of the sort that I could quite happily have gone my whole life without experiencing. It's just that I didn't actually throw up on anything, and even Snowflake stayed standing.

Of course, that relative pleasantness was quickly mitigated by the fact that we were standing in total darkness on the other end. I could smell the same sort of smell I associated with Brick's magic, the damp stone of tunnels deep underground, and from the way the air moved the ceiling had to be less than eighteen inches over my head, though the cave stretched out in every other direction as far as I could sense.

I have issues with enclosed spaces. Oh, nothing horrible, not like I couldn't stand to be indoors or anything. I'd just spent enough time locked up, often in pretty terrible circumstances, not to like feeling trapped. Between that, the complete lack of visibility, the fact that any air magic I could work would be of limited strength underground, and—oh yeah—the way that this felt *exactly* like a trap, I wasn't very happy. If it had gone on for longer than a few seconds, I might have started hyperventilating.

Fortunate for me, then, that only a second or two later I heard a sudden *click* behind me. A moment later I could smell Brick—not a terribly strong scent or anything, but his leather jacket wasn't too far removed from its tanning, and I could smell *that* from across the room. "Okay," he said, sounding only slightly rough from the travel, and unaffected by the dark and the closeness. He was accustomed to such things, presumably. "I'm about to touch your shoulder, so don't jump." It was a good thing he said so, too, or I would probably have panicked and done something all three of us would regret.

He moved forward to stand just in front of us. "The next portal will open just in front of me," he said in a whisper. "Try not to move around when you get to the other side, there's not a lot of room."

I nodded tensely, not trusting my voice to be entirely steady. It's very important to keep things like that in mind if you want to keep up a reputation as a badass. Presumably he had some way of telling my motion despite the darkness, because a moment later he began the magics to open another gate.

Objectively speaking, it probably took him the same amount of time as the last one. Heck, it was probably less—he was opening a portal to his inner sanctum, after all, to the place where he felt safe

despite whoever or whatever was after him. He would be *intimately* familiar with such a place, and that always makes it easier and simpler to go there.

Subjectively, of course, it took rather a lot longer than that. The darkness was absolute, so thick and oppressive as to be nearly a physical object. As a werewolf, I'm not used to being blind—even in human form, my eyesight adapts more quickly and more thoroughly to the gloom than a real human. The wolf's eyes are even more suited to nocturnal activity (not that vision is nearly as overwhelmingly important in that shape), and even starlight is quite adequate for most purposes.

But down here, there *was* no light. None. Nada. Zip. None whatsoever. If you've never been underground—*deep* underground—you really can't grasp what it's like. It's so dark that your eyes start playing tricks on you, shapes and colors crawling around at the edge of your vision. The air is thick with the smell of rock, of moisture, of air that hasn't known a breath of wind in thousands of years. Sometimes you can hear the *drip, drip, drip* of water somewhere off in the dark, but often the silence is as flat and overbearing as the dark, and that's how it was here. It seems that you can *feel*, with some atavistic sense long since forgotten by your conscious mind, the thousands and thousands and thousands of tons of rock hanging over your head.

I knew, of course, that this wasn't really some primeval cavern or abandoned mine. Even if Brick hadn't just made a portal here from my world, the air was suffused with the indescribable intensity of the Otherside. This wasn't the real world, it was someone's creation.

But they'd created pretty damn well. To all my senses, including the magical ones, it seemed I was surrounded by nothing but stone and blackness. I stretched myself out through the air around us, as far as I could, but to the limits of my range there was no difference. In fact, as near as I could tell, this short, open chamber extended for over a hundred feet in all directions. There were no walls, no changes in height, not even the smallest projection from floor or ceiling.

I knew it wasn't real, at least not according to my usual conception of reality. It just didn't matter. It was the equivalent of making an unbelievably realistic fake snake, right down to the movements and the sounds and the venom dripping off of its inch-long fangs, and trying to tell an ophidiophobe not to panic, because it's not *really* scary.

It didn't help that I was inexplicably certain that there was something, or somethings, out there in the darkness, something unseen and dangerous and entirely inhospitable to me. I would have dismissed it as a reaction to being enclosed in the dark, except for two things. The first was the utter, perfect regularity of this cave. There's no such thing as a natural cavern without even the slightest imperfection or roughness. Granted, it was possible that whoever had made this domain simply designed it that way, but I didn't think so. There was something about it, some indefinable quality that was more felt than sensed, which suggested that it was the product of constant maintenance and upkeep. If so—and I was more inclined to pay heed to my instincts than to my rational mind, on the Otherside—then logically something had to be keeping things neat.

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

The second reason was that Brick had whispered his instructions to me. Now, there are a lot of kinds of whisper out there. Sometimes you whisper because it's appropriate to the sentiment being conveyed, or because you're in a hallowed place where a raised voice feels wrong, or simply because it isn't necessary to speak any more loudly. This wasn't any of those kinds of whisper. It was almost like the whisper you use around a sleeping person so as not to wake them, but not quite, not entirely. It was more like there was a sleeping tiger right next to you, and it hadn't done anything to you yet—but you really, really didn't want to do anything that might change its mind on that subject.

Whatever was out there, Brick was afraid of it. Between that and my own instinctive impression of whatever it was, I thought it would be wise to treat it with respect.

I wasn't shaking in my boots by the time Brick had his portal finished—but only by a serious effort of will.

When I felt the portal solidify and open in front of me, I didn't wait for Brick to give the signal. I stepped forward, making sure that Snowflake was with me, and switched from *here* to *there*.

*There*, as it turned out, wasn't all that different. It smelled the same, it looked the same, and it irritated me to about the same degree. It wasn't the Otherside, and I didn't feel any strange and malevolent presences sharing the darkness with me, but that was about made up for by the fact that my first experience in the new cave was bouncing my nose off of a rock wall. My second was falling on my ass and cracking my head on the stone (I'd worn the armor under my cloak, but left the helmet at home. For politeness's sake, more than anything; I was pretty sure Brick would be able to feel the metal regardless). My third was Brick stepping on my crotch as he exited the gate.

I was wearing armor, sure, but it actually doesn't incorporate a lot of protection at the joints. It was designed on a feudal Japanese style, putting a lot of emphasis on mobility and relatively little on standing there and taking all the punishment they could dish out. The chest, and back—pretty much any large expanse, actually, including most of the limbs—were covered by metal plates, or else scale armor. But at the joints, including the crotch, it was just a layer of mail over the Kevlar. For stopping sharp cutting edges, or bullets I suppose, that isn't bad. When it comes to muting blunt physical trauma, it's...less than ideal.

Oh yeah, and Brick was wearing cowboy boots. Fun times all around, really.

A moment later, a light of some sort kindled above me. It wasn't very bright, just enough to illuminate a bubble around us, but to my dark-adjusted eyes it was painfully intense. Brick spent a few seconds looking around, head ducked to keep from hitting it on the ceiling—thankfully, I was too short to have that particular problem. After a couple seconds of that, he happened to glance downward, and did a movie-quality double take when he saw me lying on the ground. It would have been hilarious, under slightly different circumstances.

"Winter?" he asked in the tone of voice usually reserved for potentially dangerous lunatics—which, hey, I qualify! "What are you doing down there?"

I muttered a few imprecations under my breath and stood up. "Oh, nothing. There's no blood on my face, right? I don't *think* I broke my nose on your wall, but it's kinda hard to tell sometimes."

He winced slightly. "Sorry. I did try to tell you."

*You have no idea*, Snowflake said from where she was sitting on the floor waiting for me to get my act together, *how funny that was. You should see your face, man.*

I muttered something that might generously have been taken for an apology, and looked around. Brick's light, which appeared to be a small battery-operated lamp, didn't stretch more than a few feet in any direction. We were standing in a tunnel, rough-cut through what looked like granite, barely tall enough for me to stand up in. Brick was hunched over with his head and neck pressed against the ceiling, and he could have stretched out his arms and touched both sidewalls at the same time without any particular difficulty. It wasn't a lot like the last place, despite the surface similarities. I could easily see tool marks on the walls, and signs of blasting. This place hadn't been shaped by magic, but by backbreaking labor and the liberal application of explosives. There was a certain amount of timbering holding things up, but it looked to have seen better decades. It was completely rotted away in places, and I wouldn't have relied even on the better parts to hold my weight.

"Isn't this a bit dangerous?" I asked, prodding one of the timbers hesitantly.

"No," Brick said dismissively. "This is hard rock. It's stable. The timbers are only still here because I haven't felt like going to the effort of taking them out. I really don't know why they bothered putting them in." He set off, evidently at random, down the tunnel, moving at a pretty brisk pace. He had a lot longer legs than me; I had to hurry a bit to keep up.

"Where are we?" I asked, glancing around a bit nervously. It wasn't nearly as unpleasant as the Otherside domain had been, especially with a light, but I still don't care for being underground. If there were a collapse or something—and, considering Brick's mastery of earth magic, a collapse would be a trivial thing for him to arrange—I wasn't at all certain that I could get out before Snowflake and I suffocated.

"You ever been to Victor?" Brick asked me.

I shrugged. "Briefly. Never saw the point in going back. Victor's the geographical equivalent of Al Bundy."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. It won a game of high school football a hundred years ago, and hasn't shut up about it since." Snowflake laughed, although where she ever saw that show I haven't the faintest idea. Brick didn't, but then he never did strike me as having a terribly healthy sense of humor.

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

Once upon a time, Victor really was The World's Greatest Gold Camp. An almost obscene number of people had come to Pikes Peak to tear the shiny metal from the ground. The Peak itself didn't turn out to be worthwhile, but—by some truly bizarre coincidence—nearby Cripple Creek was absolutely loaded with the stuff. Gold rushes were the day's equivalent of the lottery, attracting the desperate and the foolish and the adventurous and everything in between. People flocked there in droves, and at its heyday there were dozens of towns in the area.

These days there's two: Cripple Creek, and Victor. Cripple Creek was a city of perhaps a thousand people, stumbling along on the tourist trade and a handful of casinos. Victor was even worse, an almost literal ghost town. The one time I was there, walking down the dirt roads past crumbling buildings and overgrown lots, I was reminded forcibly of the pictures I've seen of Giza. Here, it seemed to say, was something which had once been great—the World's Greatest, even.

Once. But not for a very long time. Victor's glory days were long behind it, and it could never get them back.

And that was *before* the pit mine razed whatever was left of its rich history and cultural heritage.

"Just as well," Brick said, oblivious to my reminiscences. "You wouldn't be welcome here, not for any length of time. The Ellers own the whole district. They aren't fond of visitors."

"Ellers?"

"Eller clan," he clarified. "They're on the small side for a mage clan, just over a hundred members, but they're decently powerful on their home ground."

That's what I love about dealing with supernatural thingies all the time. Power comparisons are just absurd. A hundred mages, for example, could squash me and all my friends without even trying—but they were *still* so weak as to be utterly inconsequential in the greater scheme of things.

"I didn't realize you were a clan mage," I said casually.

Brick snorted. "I'm not one of them. But we have a deal worked out. They let me live down here in the old mine tunnels. I keep all the nasty things that don't like the sunlight out, and don't cause trouble. They get cheap muscle to deal with the trolls and vampires and such. I get cheap lodging in a really defensible place." He shrugged. "It works pretty well."

*Defensible* was an understatement, I was pretty sure. Hell, being killed while attacking a sorcerer with a specialty in earth and rock while in an old gold mine was one of those things that's legally classed as suicide. Or should be, anyway. It really doesn't matter how badass you are, unless you're freaking godly you die when a thousand tons of granite land on your head. It was a sobering thought. Right now, we were utterly within Brick's power. If he decided not to let us walk back out, there wasn't a whole lot we could do to argue the point.

We walked down narrow, lightless corridors in silence for a while. I didn't even bother trying to remember all of the turns we took. No one had ever mapped these mines. On the surface the gallas frames and shafts and adits marked out property and territory, but underground it was a different story. These miners had followed the twists and turns of ore veins, and the miles and miles of tunnels they'd laid out—in three dimensions, which—didn't necessarily follow property lines and such. It was anyone's guess how much of the old mines survived, but I was guessing that you could still walk the seven or so miles from Victor to Cripple Creek without ever once setting foot above ground. Never mind all the passages Brick might have made himself.

There quite simply wasn't a point to keeping track of where we went. Even if I'd had any idea where we came in, there was no way I would be able to find my way out of here without help from someone who knew these tunnels—and, from what Brick said, I was pretty sure he was the only person alive who really *knew* their current shapes. If he decided to abandon us here, the only way we were getting out was via the Otherside. Even that would be iffy, because there was an enormous physical and spiritual difference between this place and any of the connection points I'd branded into my memory, most of which were in forested areas. With my relative lack of skill, trying to bridge such a huge gap would be exhausting. It was quite possible that I would slip up somewhere, in which case...well, nobody's quite sure what happens to you in that case, because nobody's ever come back from a botched portal to complain about the food, if you get my drift.

Finally, just when I'd started to wonder whether Brick was leading us in circles, he took a sharp right turn out of the old mine tunnels. This part was clearly his own addition; the stone was smooth and almost polished, carved out of the earth with magic rather than mundane techniques. A few feet ahead of us, the tunnel opened into a room.

At the edge of the room, a thick band of carving was incised into the stone. The basic shape appeared to be Celtic-style knotwork, with harsh, angular lines reminiscent of Norse runes interspersed here and there. As art goes, it wasn't great. The lines were of inconstant thickness, and almost clumsy in their placement, their edges rough—they'd been cut into the stone with a chisel, not Brick's magic. But I could smell the magic in them, a scent much like the rock around us but more sharply edged.

"Nice wards," I said, examining them more closely. "Is it supposed to trigger a cave-in if crossed?"

He smiled sharply. "Among other things. Excuse me." He stepped forward and placed one hand on the carving, and the smell of magic surged forth from him. It flickered and changed, ever so subtly, several times in a few seconds, before he dropped his hand and stepped across, gesturing to us to follow.

Interesting. From the way the wards' magic had interacted with his, I was betting they were designed like a combination lock. Expose them to that specific sequence of energies, and they drop for a few seconds. Mess it up, even slightly, and they go off in your face. Given how difficult it was to mimic another person's magical signature—even just *one* signature—it would be a very, very difficult code to crack. Certainly much more so than my defenses, which just required that the patterns of magic making



up the wards be manipulated in a certain way. Theoretically, anyone could hack that if they knew the right things to do, or maybe even just figure it out by examining the structure of the wards themselves. This was less like a password, more like a biometric—I'd just seen Brick take them down, and I still didn't have the first idea how to go about mimicking it.

It took a lot less time, too, which could be very useful under some circumstances. I was definitely going to have to look into duplicating that trick.

He hung his electric lamp on a hook near the entrance, where it cast decent light, and then went around and lit a bunch of oil lamps, a couple candles. I'm pretty sure he wanted me to think he was doing it with magic, but I could smell the match, which made that a rather pointless effort. Once that was done he turned the electric light back off, leaving the room bathed in a cheery, old-fashioned glow.

Brick's hidden sanctum was...pretty cozy, actually. It was fairly large, bigger than most apartments, although I guess space was one of the few resources he had a surplus of down here. He had an old couch there, and a double bed, though I've no idea how the heck he got them down there. The huge desk was formed by an outfolding of the cavern wall, but the office chair was leather, and looked relatively expensive. There were several notebooks on the desk, and a pen cup made from what looked like an enormous drill bit. There was also an expensive-looking laptop, currently powered down; presumably he took it back to the surface when he needed to charge it.

Brick walked over to the chair and sat on it with a sigh. It was sort of funny, actually; the whole way there he'd looked confident and calm, but the second he sat down it was like watching somebody put down a ridiculously heavy load they'd been carrying way, way too long. He just slumped back against it, almost like he'd forgotten what it was like *not* to have that weight on his back. "Please, sit down," he said. "Can I get you something to drink? I don't have a lot to offer, but I have soda, or water if you'd rather."

"No, thank you," I said, sitting down on the couch. It was surprisingly comfortable. Snowflake, of course, immediately found a position laying across my feet.

He shrugged, reaching under the desk. "Suit yourself," he said, pulling out a can of cola. He opened the can, drained it, and tossed it into a corner of the room.

"So," I said as nonchalantly as I could manage, which wasn't especially. "I hear you and Jimmy had something of a falling out."

"So *that's* what you're here about," Brick said. "I was wondering." He sighed. "Jimmy's a good kid, but he's more balls than brains, you know?"

Privately, I had my doubts. Not that my opinion of Jimmy's intelligence was particularly high; I just happened to know that the man was a coward and a hypocrite. He was incredibly arrogant, much of the time, but lacked both the courage and the skill to back it up.

"Kris mentioned that he was getting on her case about working with Val," I mentioned.

"Is he really?" Brick sighed again, shaking his head. "Damn fool. Kovac's harmless. Hell, I'd trust him further than most humans."

"So would I," I agreed. "Not to mention that he could kick all our asses together, and make it look easy."

"True."

"So," I said lightly, "what stupid thing did Jimmy do to set you off?"

"It was the other way round, actually. He keeps talking about how we should take advantage of this territory war to claim it for ourselves, says we could keep the whole city under our protection." Brick sighed. "I try to tell him that it'd never work—we couldn't compete on that level of fighting, and even if we somehow came out on top nobody would respect our authority. But he wouldn't listen, of course."

That fit pretty well with what I knew of the man. "Let me guess," I said dryly. "A few days ago you were talking with Jimmy about this. Things got a bit heated, and he decided to slap you around a bit to put you in your place. Except you handed him his ass on a platter, at which point he realized you were sharking him this whole time and you're way better than he thought. He lost the fight, at which point you bugged out and hid out here."

"Not bad," Brick said, laughing a little. "I'd ask how you knew, except it's so damned predictable." He shook his head slowly. "What about you? What's your stake in this?"

"Well," I said, "it started out as just a favor to Kris. But I and my associates were targeted by constructs starting right after I heard about it, which makes it a bit personal for me. I don't take kindly to that."

I'm not sure what I was expecting at that point. Expressions of surprise, perhaps, or meaningless declarations of sympathy and condolence.

I most definitely did not expect what I got, which was for Brick to jump up and exclaim, "Dammit, you too? *Damn*. That changes things." He shook his head slowly. "They've been taking swings at me whenever I go outside for the last two weeks."

"Really?" I said, surprised. "That *does* change things." There was a sullen pause as we both integrated this into what we already knew. "It's the same model as Jon used," I said after a moment.

Brick shook his head. "Doesn't mean anything. Jon didn't make those, he bought them. Some mage mass-produces the things for sale—they're pretty common cheap muscle, actually. I remember my old boss had swarms of the bloody things."

I frowned and thought. "These were a little different than I remember his being, though," I said slowly. "Slower, a bit stupider. Much more fragile. Almost quadrupedal."

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

"I guess someone could have adapted the design," Brick said after a moment's pause. "I don't suppose you have any idea who sent them?"

I shrugged. "Honestly, my best guess was you. I mean, no offense, but you've gotta admit your fellow vigilantes aren't exactly the sort to do that quality of work, are they?"

"Hm. No, not really." Brick frowned. "I don't know that any of them can make any sort of construct, let alone a combat-capable one. You think it's one of them behind it?"

"Don't have a better idea," I said honestly. "Besides, they've got the motive. I've never got along too well with some of them, and I know there's a couple that blame me for Erica dying. And it sounds like you really pissed Jimmy off." He wasn't the sort to take being shown up in stride. I frowned. "I suppose the rest of them are following him to their glorious deaths?"

"Some of them," Brick said reluctantly. "I've tried to tell them it's smarter, safer, and more effective in the long run to stick to small stuff. Keep everything low-level, don't do anything that could attract the wrong sort of attention. Some of them listened. Mac and Chuck have stopped helping out entirely, and Kris isn't far behind, but until then she's with me on this one. So is Doug, and Matthew."

"Matthew? Really?" I said, surprised. "I'd have thought he'd be all for Jimmy's plan."

"The man's insane," Brick said wryly. "Not suicidal. Say what you will about him, he isn't stupid. He knows as well as you do how to run away and live to fight another day." Brick sighed heavily, and the humor faded from his eyes. "But yeah, the rest of them are with Jimmy. They're so proud of their successes, they refuse to listen when I tell them those were the bottom dwellers of the supernatural crowd, the ones too weak or stupid to not get caught."

I winced. It sounded like most of the more moderate of them were opting out of this conflict, leaving the Inquisitors I thought of as being more overzealous, self-righteous, and generally extremist. Without more level-headed voices to balance them out, that could get ugly, fast. I knew, too, that what Brick was saying was true. The Inquisition wasn't half bad at what they did, but they were nowhere near the level they'd have to be to play this game. I knew that, because I operated on a higher level than them and I was scared shitless at the prospect of interfering in it.

They wouldn't stand a chance.

"Are you getting involved?" Brick asked me, his voice guarded. I couldn't tell what emotion he was masking, if indeed he felt anything about the prospect at all. I hadn't spent enough time around the man to know him all that well. In fact, this was probably the longest I'd ever spoken with him.

I sighed. "Dunno," I said, feeling very tired. "Can't say I want to, but it's starting to look like I don't have a choice." Not if I wanted to be able to live with myself, at any rate.

Brick nodded, not looking particularly surprised. "Be careful, Winter. These are deep waters. They could swallow you whole and not even know it."

I couldn't argue with that. "Maybe you could answer a question for me," I said, leaning back against the couch. "If you don't mind."

"You can ask whatever you like," he said dryly. "The answer is another story entirely."

I snorted. "What's with this?" I asked, reaching down to rub Snowflake's ears. "The territory war, I mean. I know that werewolves have territorial instincts, so it's no surprise they'd claim land, and they need a large population base to blend into. But what's with the fighting over it? It isn't *that* valuable."

"Part of it's just that it's a desirable city," he explained, shrugging. "Lots of people, lots of money. It's common sense that any herd can only support so many predators, right? Well, the same goes for cities."

"I just don't buy it," I said. "It can't be worth that much. Besides, why the heck would there be a mage clan in Victor? That's about as far from a big, prosperous city as they come." I shook my head. "No, there's got to be something else to this."

"Well, of course there is. Alexander never told you about it?" Brick asked. I was somehow unsurprised that he knew who I'd learned the finer points of magic from.

"Nope."

Brick grunted. "Weird. I always figured that was why you came to Colorado Springs in the first place."

I snorted. "I just came here to go to school. I stayed because, well, where else was I gonna go? Not like I had a lot waiting for me."

"Let me guess, though. It was the Khan that suggested you come here, right?"

I paused. "Yeah, actually."

Brick nodded. "Figured so. He might not be a mage, but he knows the shape of things—not that I've ever met the man, or wanted to. He's got a scary reputation." He shuddered dramatically, the motion absurdly exaggerated on his long, lean frame. "It isn't the city they want, Winter, or at least not entirely. It's the mountain."

I blinked. "You mean Pikes Peak?"

He nodded.

"But that's ridiculous. What the hell would a vampire want with a *mountain*?"

"Did you know that it's the second-most-visited mountain in the world?" Brick asked me. I shook my head. "It's true. Only Fuji gets more people, and it's right next to Tokyo, not to mention that the place is all kinds of holy. You ever wonder about that?"

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

I frowned. "I always figured it was just that the Peak is so close to the city. There aren't many mountains that size so close to the beaten path."

"True enough," Brick allowed. "But then you have to ask yourself, why is it so close to the path in the first place? Winter, people have been coming to this mountain for a *long* time. They made pilgrimages here before Europeans ever came to this continent."

"Why?" I asked, genuinely baffled. I mean, Pikes Peak is a wonderful mountain and all that, but it's nothing *that* special.

Brick shrugged. "I don't really know the specifics. It's just...a special place. I know some high-level mages swear magic works better in certain places. Things near the Otherside have a tendency to show up more often around them. People congregate there, for no real reason." He grinned suddenly. "But the city is a big part of it, trust me. It's not as easy to find a decent urban area to claim for yourself as you might think."

*Well, Snowflake said. How nonspecific and vague. It's almost frustratingly uninformative.*

*You're telling me?* I said, irritated—not at Snowflake, really, just generalized irritation. To Brick, I said, "Thanks for the help. I'll let you know if I find anything out about who might have sent those constructs."

"I'll do the same," he said, nodding. "You two leaving, then?"

"Yep. Got a lot of things to do today."

"I'm sure," he said, still grinning. "Let me show you out."

Chapter Seven

By the time I made it back home, it was around nine. I'd only had to open one portal this time, as Brick did the first one for me. I left him in his strange underground home, after first promising again to watch each other's backs. I made a few calls on the way, less satisfactorily than I might have hoped. I told Kris that Brick was all right, and generally what had happened to him. She wasn't particularly surprised, which made me wonder whether she'd actually pointed me at him as a roundabout way of getting me involved in this mess. I couldn't help but think that, considering how much difficulty someone of Kris's relatively minor talents would have getting the job done herself, tangling me up in the middle of a horribly tangled mess in a free-fire zone was a damned good way to assassinate me. Nobody would even suspect her.

I didn't think that particularly likely. We'd always gotten along pretty well, and in any case she'd always struck me as the sort who dealt with her problems directly—but, then, that was exactly what she would *want* me to think, if she really was out to get me, wasn't it?

I never used to think things like that about my friends. I sometimes think that's the worst part about getting involved in the political scene, even slightly. You have to be paranoid of everyone, and assume that every single person you meet is lying to you in order to set up a hit of some sort, just to survive.

I hate that.

But, of course, that didn't change a damned thing.

Other than that, I made brief calls to Mike and Katie trying to talk them out of helping Jimmy with his insane behavior. I made no progress whatsoever—they were both too stubborn, too dedicated. No surprise, really; of all the Inquisition, it was those two who had started doing what they did out of a sense of moral obligation, rather than any personal motive. A zealot, I reflected, was always the worst sort of person to try and talk out of something. Once they get the wind in their sails, nothing will sway them.

On the other hand, I did confirm more or less what Brick had told me about the split in the group. Mac and Chuck had both quit going on monster-killing trips several weeks back, although Mac was still healing them after they won the fights. The rest—Brick, Doug, Kris, and Matthew—were still willing to help, but felt that they should sit this round out. Some of the things Katie said made me suspect that she had taken their reluctance to undertake a suicide mission as a personal affront, a suggestion that they weren't as dedicated to the Great Cause as they should be.

That scared me, a little. I mean, it wouldn't be the first time an extremist group schismatized and then executed a purge on its less extreme members. And Katie, although a nice enough person and truly dedicated to Doing the Right Thing, could be very, very scary in how far she was willing to go to do so. More so than the rest of them, even, and that was saying something.

That could get ugly, fast.

There also wasn't anything I could do about it, at least not right now. So I put it on the back burner and went home to have a nice chat with my cousin about the nature of life, the universe, and everything, with maybe a side conversation on the topic of magic and the fallible nature of any human's perception of reality. If I got really lucky, she might even tell me the truth about what she was doing here this time.

"Do you have any idea how awesome this is?" Alexis asked me, gesturing grandiosely. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes were bright, and she generally had the look of some excited almost to the point of autourination.

I looked around the kitchen. "Not really, no. How awesome is it?"

"I've known professional chefs that would have *killed* for a setup like this," she said exuberantly. "How much did this *cost*?"

"Um. Actually, I really don't have any idea. I don't really spend all that much time here. I'm a pretty bad cook, you know."

I really don't think that Alexis could have looked more shocked if I'd run naked down the street while loudly proclaiming myself the king of the muskrats. And spitting fire. And maybe even piloting one of those Chinese paper dragon thingies they break out for New Year's. It looked like she was about to have a fit, although whether it would be outrage at my lack of culinary skill or ecstasy over my kitchen seemed to be still up for debate. Seriously, she looked like she was about to start humping the food processor or something.

I decided to move the conversation to another location, and topic, before I could find out whether that was a more literal statement than I thought it was. I had seen and heard—and, depending of course on your definitions, probably done—stranger and more unsettling things, but still. You shouldn't get that excited over a kitchen. It's just not natural.

"How'd things go this morning?" I asked, sitting on one of the couches in the throne room. There were more comfortable places—actually, in that house, the throne room was probably the *least* comfortable place—but this was closer. Besides, I wasn't anticipating staying long.

"Not bad," she said, sounding a little calmer now that she wasn't surrounded by high-quality cookware. "I only woke up a few hours ago."

"Is Aiko awake?" That wasn't at all certain; she tends not to be an early to bed, early to rise type. She *usually* woke up before noon, but by no means always.

Alexis snorted. "Yeah. She spent most of the past two hours trying to convince me to break all the rules you told me last night."

"Did you?"

She treated me to the look normally reserved for the cripplingly mentally impaired—which, again, probably justified. "I've read Bluebeard, Winter. Of course I didn't."

I chuckled. "Good job not being a complete moron, then."

"Thanks. Anyway, a little while ago she gave up on that. She said she was going to go take out the traps on my bedroom."

I grinned. "Don't believe it. She won't do anything that might seriously hurt you, but there's no way she won't take the opportunity to prank you."

"Thanks," she said dubiously. "So what are you doing now?"

"I'm starving," I said. "How do you feel about going out for a bite to eat?"

She frowned. "Are you sure? I mean, there's a ton of food here. I could cook something. It wouldn't be a problem."

I sighed. "I know that, Alexis. What I meant was, how do you feel about going out for a bite to eat, where I can talk to some people, maybe introduce you to some of them worth knowing, maybe run a few errands. All of which, you may notice, are things I can't do here."

She flushed. "Oh. Right." She hesitated for a second. "Isn't that dangerous, though? I mean, I thought you said I shouldn't leave the house...."

I shrugged. "It's possible. You'll have Snowflake and me with you, so it should be relatively safe. After we wiped out their last strike force they'll probably be a little more hesitant to hit you directly while you're with us. But yeah, it's possible that something bad will happen, and I can't guarantee your safety." I shrugged again. "End of the day, it's up to you. If you want to avoid anything that might be dangerous, you'll never leave this building—and even that, by the way, isn't perfect. This house is a hell of a tough nut to crack, so you're safer here than most places, but nowhere's totally secure."

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Right. I know that," she said firmly. "So where are we going?"

"One second," I said, and went upstairs to say goodbye to Aiko. Well, actually it was mostly to tell her that Brick hadn't done anything overtly dastardly to me; she has a tendency to overreact rather extremely to people she finds threatening, and she has a hair trigger when it comes to the people she cares about. You'd never guess it from casual interaction, but she's actually rather protective.

I also helped her prop a bucket of maple syrup (don't ask me where she got it, because I have no freaking idea) over Alexis's door. And coat several doorknobs and handles with bear fat (likewise of mysterious origin). Because really, some things are just too funny not to do. And I'd already warned Alexis, anyway. If she really wanted to get into my world, she had to develop a proper sense of paranoia,



and there was no time like the present to start building it. Better by far that she start out with harmless pranks. It would be good practice for when people started seriously trying to kill her.

"So," Alexis said as we walked down the street. She'd offered to drive, but it was a lovely fall morning, and those don't come along often enough to disregard them. Besides, we weren't traveling all that far. "I think you owe me a conversation."

"Yep," I agreed cheerfully. "It's a lot of explaining, but we can start with something fairly simple. Do you believe in magic?"

"What do you mean by magic?" she asked guardedly.

"That's actually a sort of difficult question," I said. "But, again, we can start simple. Magic itself is, essentially, a force. It doesn't register to scientific instruments, because it isn't entirely physical in nature. Someone with the right set of talents can manipulate that force, make it do things which *are* detectable physically. Sometimes those things don't make a lot of sense, from a scientific perspective, and as a result most people dismiss them as impossible." I shrugged. "There's a lot more, and depending on who you ask you can get all kinds of philosophy and metaphysical bullshit mixed in with it, but that's the basics."

"Magic," she said, sounding a little numb.

"Yep. Do you believe that?"

"I guess so," she said, although she didn't sound particularly happy about it.

"Good," I said. "Because it's real. It doesn't work much like you might expect, but it *does* exist, and it's responsible for basically all the weirdness you've been noticing."

Alexis was silent for a while, absorbing that. "Why were you surprised by the lightning?" she asked at last.

"Well," I said, "that brings us to the next point. I mentioned the other day that you're not entirely human, right?" She nodded. "Well, that's still true. And most of the things that can do magic *aren't* human, not even a little bit. But some magic is human in origin, right? I've got some ability for that, and given that it's human it must have come from my mother—that sort of thing doesn't have to be inherited, but more often than not there's some sort of blood connection. Your mom doesn't have any magic that I've noticed, and I have looked, but I'm guessing it runs in the family. Probably just skipped a generation."

She nodded thoughtfully. "So the ice and stuff...?"

"Doesn't have any connection to the lightning," I confirmed. "Totally unrelated traits. I could make a spark of static electricity, but I'd have to work for it. Theoretically I might be able to induce a

lightning strike, but it would take several hours of effort, and the end result is as much luck as anything. I sure couldn't do it reliably."

Alexis blinked. "Why not?"

"How many languages do you know?"

"Um. Just the one," she said, clearly confused by the non sequitur.

"Me too," I said, nodding. "I know a handful of phrases in Spanish, and I can curse in most of the languages of Europe. That's it. Do you think that makes me an idiot?"

"Of course not."

"Me neither. But Aiko speaks Japanese, English, Latin, German, Italian, Spanish, and French fluently. She can get by in Greek and Arabic, and God only knows what else that she hasn't told me about."

"Wow."

I grinned. "I know, right?" I shook my head, my smile fading. "I'm never going to know that many languages. It doesn't matter how hard I work. It isn't something I'm good at." I shrugged. "But I'm better than her with mathematics. I have a better grounding in history, and most of the sciences. I've read most of the major religious and philosophical works, and a lot of the minor ones. And it isn't bragging to say I'm really, really good at making things. So you tell me, which of us is smarter?"

Comprehension dawned on her face. "You're good at different things."

"Exactly. And I'll bet you fifty to one, right now, that there's something you know better than either of us. It might be something small, might seem petty or unimportant, but you know it. You're good at it. Because that's how people work, right? Nobody's good *or* bad at *everything*. Well, that applies to magic too."

"So lightning isn't something you're good at?"

"Nope," I confirmed. "Electricity in general, in fact. It's really not something I've practiced with." I shrugged. "That's how mages work, pretty much. You can work on it, and with enough work you can learn to do other things, but you need to accept right now that you'll never have more than a small subset of skills. Odds are good that electricity will be the only thing you can work with at all for a long time."

"Why?"

"You have to understand, we're kids playing with fire here. We don't really understand magic—or, at least, nobody I've ever talked to does. We know how it works, sorta, but *why*? Beats me." I shrugged again. "Because that's how mages work. It always goes the same way. When your power

starts to develop—usually that happens between ten and fifteen, but it isn't rare for it to wait until you're nineteen or twenty, so you aren't terribly unusual—it always goes in more or less the same way. There's one thing, one single and specific thing, that you can do. It's easy, it's natural, it comes without even having to think about it. The first thing you have to learn is how to control it, how to leash it to your conscious mind. You'll always do it instinctively, but you can learn to use it deliberately, and how to make it do what you want. Once that's done, you can start experimenting with other applications, learn what you're good at."

"How long does that take?"

"Depends," I said. "There's a lot of factors involved. It took me around two, maybe three years from when I started showing a talent until I had solid control over it. But that's something of a special case. It shouldn't take you more than a year, I'd guess."

She absorbed that for a moment. "What's yours, then?"

"Animals," I said simply. "Well, predatory animals, really, and mammals by preference. I can do all kinds of mind magic involving predators, inhabit their bodies with my consciousness, that sort of thing. I have a certain amount of power over them, but I don't use it like that very often, because it's rude and it's unnecessary."

She looked from me to Snowflake and back again, and once again I got to see sudden understanding light up her face.

I grinned. "Nice catch. Not many people get it that fast. Yeah, Snowflake's more than just a normal dog. She's a hell of a lot smarter, for one thing—smarter than a lot of people I know. She also knows more languages than me."

"Could I talk to her?" Alexis sounded almost wistful.

"Not likely," I said, not without a certain amount of sympathy. "It's an extremely unusual ability. You might learn to talk with Snowflake specifically, because she isn't normal herself, but you'll probably never be able to communicate with other animals."

"Oh. What's she say about me?" she asked a moment later.

*You want me to tell her the truth, or make something up?*

*Might as well tell it like it is. Unless you can think of something funny to say, which isn't likely.*

"She thinks you're a bit naive," I said aloud. "She's spent her whole life around me, so she sort of has a hard time understanding how little you know about our world."

*Wow, way to soft-pedal what I said. How gutless. You didn't call her an idiot even once.*

*Oh, shush.* To Alexis, I said, "Okay, we're almost there. Some of the people you're about to meet are pretty scary, but you'll be fine if you follow a few simple rules."

She turned to look at me, her face cautious. She was taking me seriously, and she was smart enough to be a little bit afraid. Good.

"Stick close to me," I said. "I'm known here. If you make it clear that you're with me, they'll treat you with a lot more respect. Don't make any trades. I'm serious about that—not even one as simple as swapping phone numbers. Don't offer anyone a gift. Don't accept any gifts, either, unless I tell you it's okay. If someone looks offended, apologize, even if you think it's their fault or you don't understand what they're upset about."

She waited a bit, then said, "Is that all?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "No, there's a whole hell of a lot more to it than that. It can be a lifetime's worth of work to really understand this crowd. But those are the big ones. Remember those and follow my lead, and you should be just fine."

Pryce's bar is an interesting place. He doesn't advertise, and at this time of day he had relatively few customers, it being between breakfast and lunch. As such, there was little to distinguish his establishment from the abandoned warehouses around it. The restaurant itself was in another warehouse, unmarked by any form of declaration. Either you knew what it was, or you had no business being there.

As with many less mundane parts of the world, it was only if you looked closely that you could begin to see its true nature. There was no graffiti on the building, which was unusual in this area. The door was a heavy slab of oak, not cheap pine or institutional metal. There were never many passersby on this street, but if you watched long enough and closely enough you would still see that those who were there never seemed to go near the building. It didn't seem to be a matter of deliberate choice. It was more like they simply didn't go near, left a cautious space around it without conscious thought, the way they might an undertaker's place of business. It wasn't that you were afraid of it, or that you stigmatized it, because you of course were a reasonable, intelligent, unprejudiced person and would never think of attaching that sort of superstition to the profession.

You just didn't see a reason to go near. That's all. Really. Nothing to see here, move along.

I, of course, walked straight up to the door and opened it. Alexis looked a little uncertain, a bit uneasy, which was in my experience a perfectly normal reaction from an ordinary person approaching Pryce's for the first time. Part of it's the spell he has around it to keep plain old humans from coming around, but I think more is that they are subconsciously aware that this isn't a place which belongs to their ordinary, rational, skeptical world.

She followed along gamely enough, though, and didn't complain. Points for resilience. She hesitated a little when I opened the door to reveal a short flight of stairs down to the restaurant itself. I didn't blame her for that, because the room was just dim enough in comparison to the daylight that a human would have a bit of trouble seeing for the first few minutes.

Of course, the bar itself might have been responsible for that. If so, I didn't blame her for that, either. Pryce's is a rather overwhelming place at first—especially given that, from what she said, I was pretty sure Alexis was interpreting magic as a visual sensation, rather than an olfactory one the way I did. There was a *lot* of magic in Pryce's. Until she learned to distinguish that from actual vision, she might have a hard time seeing in here.

I waited patiently for her to adjust, then led her across the room to my favorite corner table. "Welcome to Pryce's," I said grandiosely. "Favorite watering hole of all the magical misfits, supernatural outcasts, and generalized freaks in the city. Possibly even the state."

"What should I have to eat?" she said, looking around uncomfortably.

I shrugged. "Whatever you want. Just ask; if they can't do something, they'll tell you so." Pryce doesn't actually have a menu. He doesn't see the need, and nobody's willing to argue with him about it.

People don't argue with Pryce about much of anything, in fact. Partially because he's nigh-godly powerful on his home ground, which he never leaves. But mostly I think it's just that if you try, he just responds with noncommittal grunts and monosyllables until you give up and go away. It's hard to really argue or debate with someone who refuses to cooperate.

There's probably a lesson there, somewhere.

Alexis asked for a spinach-and-mushroom omelet, with ice water to drink. I, being rather more ambitious, had a hamburger with all manner of toppings on it, including some that people don't normally think of in that context, including sausage gravy, sliced avocado, and a fried egg, and a very large glass of very strong iced tea.

My cousin looked at me uncomfortably. "You really don't care about your body at all, do you?"

"Alexis," I said dryly, "trust me. Compared to a lot of the things I've done to it over the years, this is a six-month stay in a luxury hotel. There isn't even any blood involved." I frowned. "You aren't really a vegetarian, are you?"

"Yes, actually."

Great. Just what I needed.

While we ate, I sketched out the basics of the supernatural scene for Alexis. I told her who the really big players were, and a little bit about them. (Snowflake made the occasional comment, some of which I passed along to Alexis. But mostly she was more interested in a bowl of meat and bones and another of water that Pryce handed me without being asked. We're fairly routine about some things,

after all.) I explained the dangerous position of people playing the game without one of those groups to back them up, and how a lot of those people tended to congregate here. We—and I made sure she understood she was included in this—were the flotsam and jetsam of the magical world. In some ways it was like being an illegal immigrant, actually; our presence was tolerated by the real citizens, and occasionally they would kick some work our way, but we didn't have the same rights, or privileges, or legal protection. If you didn't have an affiliation with a larger group, anyone who did could kick you around more or less at will, and there wasn't a lot you could do about it.

I wasn't quite that bad off. I knew the Khan personally, and his was a name to scare even scary people. Between that and the years I'd spent racking up accomplishments and building connections, I was pretty well established. I had a decent number of names to drop and a decent collection of achievements to boast about. I'd earned respect in this crowd. They were, by and large, mean sons of bitches, because you have to be to survive that kind of life—but they would hesitate before causing trouble for me.

Alexis didn't have that protection. The only name she knew was mine, and I just wasn't scary enough to shield her with my reputation. I had no intention of broadcasting that she was my cousin, and even if I did, that wouldn't change a thing. In the supernatural world people usually only respect you for yourself. I could probably get some awed whispers by saying that I was related, however distantly, to the Fenris Wolf, but that would be more because I'd spent time talking to him personally and shared a drink with him. I'd met other people with that kind of heritage at Pryce's, and aside from people buying them drinks in exchange for stories it didn't matter a bit who their great-to-the-nth-degree-grandfather was.

Once the food was finished, we set about introducing Alexis to the community, and vice versa. I introduced her to Pryce, and Luna, and Rachel, in all three cases referring to her only as a mage just starting out, rather than making any mention of our family connection. She got along with all of them quite well, or at least as well as anyone gets along with Pryce. He isn't exactly a wellspring of cheer. It was Saturday, which was Chuck's day off (he worked as a mechanic, and had done for a number of years now), so I wasn't especially surprised to see him already there drinking. The shapeshifter takes his booze seriously, and even so early in the morning it wasn't terribly unusual for him to be at Pryce's downing beers. Alexis turned down his offer of a drink, but they spent a few minutes chatting. She flirted with him a bit, although clearly both parties knew there was nothing serious to it, and generally both of them seemed to have a good time. It was good progress at introducing her to the local scene, at any rate; Chuck wasn't aligned with anyone, but nobody really had a grudge against him, either, and those two facts combined to mean that he was drinking buddies with half of the freaks in town.

That was the good news. The bad news was that my primary purpose in coming here, finding out more about what was going on, was a total bust. Pryce wasn't willing to compromise his notoriously strict neutrality, and I didn't even ask him about it. Rachel hadn't heard anything, which wasn't a surprise. She was in the same position as I'd been most of my life—she had magic, she wasn't normal, but she only dabbled in the community. She came to Pryce's for company and food, not politicking. Essentially, Rachel didn't know about the territory war because it didn't *matter* to her who claimed to

own the city, so long as they left the small-timers alone—which all of them would, because there was no reason not to.

Luna, of course, was an entirely different story. She'd heard tidbits, because it was her job to hear things, and she was willing to trade for what I knew. Unfortunately, it wasn't much. She'd heard the rumor that the Daylight Court was making a play, but no hard evidence. The other Council interest in town was a gang of rakshasas, who were more than likely the enemy Katrin wanted me to take out for her. Rumor said they'd tried to hit the vampire (whose name, incidentally, Luna did not know) last night and got their asses handed to them, but the only thing anyone knew for sure was that a building had gone *boom*.

In return I told her that a skinwalker had taken an interest, and the other serious competitors were yokai. I probably gave more than I got, but I didn't mind too much. It couldn't hurt to build up some more goodwill with her, considering that she was still the best source for local info I had.

Chuck, of course, didn't know a thing. He was happily withdrawn from the (slightly) higher level of involvement that working with the Inquisition had forced him to take, and exulting in the peace and quiet.

I tried a half-dozen other people, too, who I didn't know as well. A couple of old small-scale mages, a half-breed fae I'd met through Val, some guy whose magic smelled like rain but was otherwise unidentifiable. He'd bought a few things from me in the past, and we got along reasonably well, but I didn't know his name and hadn't shared mine—although he probably knew it anyway. People like that.

I didn't learn anything from them, either. In all, after close to an hour of work, I had pretty much nothing to show for it at all. I hadn't learned anything new about the territory war, aside from the fact that it was starting to seriously pick up momentum. I hadn't learned what would create the bizarre corpses Frishberg had shown me. I had not, in fact, learned anything.

"Okay," Alexis said as we sat back down. Snowflake had kept the table clear for us while we circulated throughout the room. "So what do we do now?"

I grinned. "Now," I said, "we wait."

"Uh-huh," she said skeptically. "For what?"

"Well," I said, "now everyone knows what we want. We'll give it a few minutes to see if any of them want to come talk."

Said minutes dragged by, slower than molasses in February. It seemed nobody was interested in helping me out at the moment. I was just considering leaving, and trying to figure out what my next move should be, when someone sat down across from us.

She was around five feet tall and slender, maybe a hundred pounds. She was fine-boned and had sharp, Asian features and close-cropped black hair, and was wearing jeans, boots, and a biker's

leather jacket. The leather smelled, obviously, like leather, but through that I could pick out a familiar aroma. Her magic smelled like fox, and under that a tone reminding me of the desert, all hot winds and broad expanses of sand.

Aiko smelled less like desert, and more like spice—nutmeg and cinnamon, mostly. But other than that, it was very similar. A kitsune, she had to be, the second one I'd met.

"You mind if I sit here?" she asked, having already sat. Her voice was much more heavily accented than Aiko's—presumably, this kitsune had less lingual facility. Or perhaps she was just more accustomed to speaking Japanese; Aiko was fluent, and I was reasonably confident it was her first language, but I'd never heard her speak it, not even a word. She has issues.

"Not at all," I said, smiling without any particular warmth and being sure to show teeth. I met her eye as I did, just to make sure the message got through.

"Thanks," she said. If she noticed my coldness, she didn't show it. "I hear you're interested in current events."

I nodded my head, very slightly. "I expect you know something of such things yourself."

She smiled enigmatically. "Perhaps so."

I paused, and then sighed. "Okay, look. I've had a long day, okay? So how about we stop beating around the bush. What do you want?"

"I thought I'd share information."

"No, but really, what do you want?"

She laughed. "I spoke truth, Master Wolf. I wish only to inform you."

"Uh, not to look a gift horse in the mouth here, but *why*?"

She shrugged. It was irritating, because her body language was *almost* the same as what I was used to seeing from Aiko, but just a little different. This particular gesture was somehow both stiffer and more rolling than hers. "It isn't a great burden to me. Besides, you're with my cousin."

"Ah," I said, nodding. "That explains a bit, then. So who's leading your people's bid to take over the city?"

"What makes you think I'm involved in that?"

I smiled again, thinly and coldly. "I really think this conversation would go better for all of us if you would kindly stop trying to trick me into giving things away and just tell me openly what you want from me, madam."



## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

She looked me over again, her gaze more considering this time. "You aren't as dull as they say you are, are you?"

I sighed. "I have little time or patience at the moment, kitsune. Thrice I ask and done, what do you want? Answer me this time, or this conversation is over."

She frowned, and nodded sharply, once. "As you might imagine, even in a relatively minor conflict the fog of war is considerable. We are all pressing our intelligence capabilities to the limits, the more so because we are not familiar with the area. As you have spent a great deal more time here, I think it likely that you have knowledge we are not privy to. Are you willing to trade?"

I spread my hands out to my sides. "There, you see? Was that so difficult?" I frowned, turning serious again. "I'm quite willing to trade information with you, yes, although I must warn you that my information is not nearly as complete as I might hope."

She nodded again. "Not surprising, considering that you're still asking around about it. What do you wish in return?"

I shrugged. "Ideally, I would like to know who leads the yokai here. I would like to know what your goals are, in a general sense." She opened her mouth to protest, and I hurried to cut her off. "I am not asking for information regarding your strategies, or indeed anything which I could use against you. I only want to find out what you want in this city, and why you're moving here and now."

"Why?"

I sighed. "I live here. It's my home. Granted I could move, but I can't say I want to—I like it here. Given that, and given that you apparently want to claim the area, is it really so surprising that I want to know who you are, and what I can expect if you should be successful?"

"I suppose not," she allowed. "That sounds fair to me."

I nodded. "I give you my word I will share all information I have pertinent to this territory dispute, at this time, with the exception of a minor incident of a personal nature which I have excellent reason to believe is relevant only to me, and has no bearing on your request or the conflict which you are interested in."

I could tell she wasn't happy about that addendum, but I was hardly going to tell her about the attack on Alexis. Besides, if I really wanted to deceive her, I wouldn't have mentioned it at all, would I? "And I," she said, "give you my word that I will tell you the name used by the leader of our force in this city, and why he has come here. You first or me?"

"Me," I said. It was polite, and it would tell her that I trusted her word. I'd been pressing pretty hard, especially considering that she was of a species noted more for trickery and misdirection than straight dealing, and I figured if I wanted to not make an enemy right here I'd better start laying it on thick.

"Since the local werewolf pack left for greener pastures this spring," I began, "I understand that this area has been considered vacant territory, although I only found out about this myself a short time ago. It seems that this ignorance is general locally, which makes me believe that this conflict has only recently begun in earnest. However, I have substantial evidence that it *has* properly begun now, and will be escalating shortly."

"What evidence is that?" she asked.

"First, I was informed by one of the parties involved that things are heating up, and he requested that I remove myself from town for a time to avoid the violence—don't worry, I'll discuss him further in a moment. Second, the local law enforcement found several corpses which appear to have been killed using a form of magic I have yet to identify. Circumstances surrounding the victims suggest that they may have been in some way involved with the supernatural, and as a result I suspect that they were killed as an opening salvo in this war. Third, I have an unreliable report claiming that a skirmish occurred last night between a group of rakshasas and a local vampire, involving a sizable explosion. For something that large and public to occur implies an escalation of hostilities."

"It wasn't a vampire," she said grimly. "I can tell you that for free."

Well, wasn't that interesting. "Moving on to the parties involved, then," I said, pretending I hadn't heard her. "A knowledge broker I occasionally deal with said his info reported a group of yokai involved, which I believe you have confirmed, and also that there was a party from the Vampires' Council with an interest. A local source confirmed that, and specifically identified a group of rakshasas as the party in question, although I have yet to investigate that further. I've also heard that the Daylight Court is involved, but at this point I'm reasonably confident that rumor's unfounded."

"It is," she assured me. "We'd know, otherwise."

"Yes, well. Other than that there's a local group of mages interested in claiming the territory, but considering that they have no formal training and there's only four of them actively participating in the effort, I doubt they represent a threat to you. The only other participant I know of is the one who warned me away. I'm reasonably confident he was a skinwalker, but given that nobody else seems to know anything about it he's probably just now starting his bid for power in the area."

The kitsune's eyes got wider—just a little bit, but enough. "A skinwalker? That...explains a few things."

I wanted to ask what. But I hadn't bargained for that information, and I didn't want to give her the satisfaction of telling me so. So I just smiled cryptically. "Well, then, I believe that's everything."

She nodded. "Yes, and generously. My turn, then. The person leading the yokai in this matter is a tengu named Kikuchi Kazuhiro. He's around three hundred years old, and thinks it's time he was dai-tengu. Except he lived on Mount Kurama."

I didn't know much about the tengu, because let's face it, there were just *so many* supernatural critters that nobody could know much about more than the tiniest fraction of them. But they were one of the more prominent yokai, and I knew the important things. Thus, rather than look confused, I was able to nod knowingly. "And Sojobo will never give up his mountain," I said. Sojobo, who was the chief tengu on Mount Kurama, was quite possibly the biggest badass of any Japanese myth, excluding bona fide gods and certain dragons. He sure as hell wasn't going to yield to some kid of a mere three centuries, not when he himself was at least a thousand years old, and probably twice that.

"Exactly," the kitsune said. "And there aren't many unclaimed mountains in Japan. There are a handful of hills he could have moved into, but that isn't a good way to build your reputation. He could have challenged one of the other dai-tengu, but that isn't a good way to keep breathing. Then he found out that there's a great big mountain this side of the ocean, a famous mountain, that nobody had claimed. If he was the first dai-tengu in North America, everyone would know his name."

"That doesn't sound particularly profitable for you," I noted.

She shrugged. "I had nothing better to do," she said easily. "And besides, this is good for my reputation too. And it's never bad for a dai-tengu to owe you one."

"Is it worth your life? Because that's what it might end up costing, given whom he's fighting here."

She snorted. "No, it isn't. That's why I'm only here as a scout. Kazuhiro can fight his own damned battles; I never offered to fight for him."

"You know that," I said gently. "He knows that, and is of course too honorable to ask you to do so." I managed to say that with a straight face. "But that doesn't mean the bad guys do. Just be careful, that's all I'm saying." It was a narrow line between patronizing and threatening on that last bit, so I just delivered it without any particular inflection or tone at all.

She narrowed her eyes belligerently, which made me feel pretty good about that choice. She struck me as the sort who wouldn't react well to being patronized, and threats at that point would have been tacky to say the very least. "What do you care?" she asked, her chin thrust forward as though daring me to pick a fight.

I smirked. "It isn't a great burden to me," I said, mimicking her vapid tone from earlier. "Besides, I'm with your cousin."

She considered holding on to the attitude for a second, then decided on a bark of laughter instead. "I guess you are, at that. Tell her Kimiko says hello." Apparently that was goodbye, because she stood up and walked out without another word.

I was all set to leave, after that. I'd gotten whatever information was to be had here, and I figured that if I left now I'd have time to catch up on sleep and maybe spend some more time talking

with Alexis about just what she was getting herself into. I'd even stood up, Alexis and Snowflake following my lead, when we were interrupted by the sudden appearance of another visitor.

I don't mean that he didn't stop and chat on his way there. I don't mean that he was moving quickly, either. If he moved at all, it was either too fast or too concealed to be visible. From my perspective, he just *appeared*, standing behind the chair just vacated by Kimiko.

Alexis gasped in surprise. I managed to remain silent, but couldn't help twitching a little. Even Snowflake said, *Not bad*, with the mental equivalent of a raised eyebrow.

The man facing us was slender, taller than average, and dressed all in dusty black. The clothing contrasted sharply with his hair, which was a brilliant shade of red I would have assumed to be the product of dye anywhere else, and grass-green eyes. He smelled of grass and trees and hours spent in the sun, and more strongly of a predator's musk.

As I watched, he nodded to me, deeply enough to just about qualify as a bow, and sat down. "Bonjour, Monsieur Wolf," he said, his voice mellifluous and surprisingly deep.

I sat too, glaring at him and being careful not to make eye contact. "Yeah, hello to you too. What do you want?"

"Pardon?" he said, sounding about as French as it was possible to sound.

I sighed. "You said Wolf without any accent whatsoever," I said, not making an effort to mask my irritation. "That, and the fact that you're here at all, strongly suggests that you speak English. If you do not, you might as well leave, because it's the only language I'm fluent in. In either case, I don't have enough time to fool around."

He laughed. "You got me," he admitted, in slightly accented but perfectly understandable English. "A bit wordy, though, don't you think?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I mentioned the need for brevity, did I not?"

He laughed again, throwing his hands up in surrender. I noticed that he had a ring on one of his fingers, a very unusual ring. It was a simple band of gold, but set with three stones, all of which looked just a little bit odd. The first, a red stone I presumed was ruby, seemed to sparkle a bit. I would have passed it off as a trick of the light, except that it was easier to see in the shadows. The second stone was normal enough, except that I couldn't figure out why you would set a piece of quartz in gold. The third seemed to flicker between amethyst and emerald as it moved. Looking at the iridescent gemstone was oddly dizzying, and I quickly focused my eyes on his face again instead.

"Very well," he said, seeming to take no notice of my momentary distraction. "I say truly, though, that you should relax somewhat. I came only to share with you something that you should know."

## Balancing Act (Winter's Tale)

I managed not to roll my eyes, but it was a challenge. Why was it that everybody picked today to act like I was born yesterday? "And why should you do such a good deed as that?" I asked, perhaps a bit sarcastically.

He chuckled. "And why should I not? You are a man not so far from mine own heart, Wolf. You feed my kin, and there have never been so many who look kindly upon them that such a one can be lightly dismissed. *And* you are kith and kin of my favorite bridge partner. That's three ways I'm tied to you. A little knowledge isn't such a great gift that I would hesitate to make it under such circumstances."

I put a few things together, and then inclined my head slightly more than he had at the beginning of the conversation. "Ah," I said. "That explains it, then. Good morning, Reynard."

## Chapter Eight

Of all the archetypes which have ever captured the imagination of people, there is perhaps none either more widespread or more difficult to understand than the Trickster. There are a very, very great many gods and heroes which have filled that role, from Anansi to Ulysses. These days, though, I think the best-known two are probably Loki and Coyote, and in some ways you can understand how huge a variety exists among tricksters just by those two examples. Both were unpredictable, mercurial, cunning and shrewd, liable to flip between extremes at a moment's notice. That's kind of what a trickster *does*, after all. But other than that they have fewer things in common than divide them.

The myths describe Loki as a dangerous and deceptive person, and I knew from experience that they weren't lying. He was a cruel, malicious meddler. He terrified me more than any other being—and, given the competition he's dealing with, that is not an insignificant statement. I have seen him go from death threats, to jovial laughter and good humor, to painfully killing someone for betraying him, and back to laughter, all in the space of a few minutes.

I'd never met Coyote, but the stories of him are very different. He's cunning, yes, but not particularly wise. He's typically good-humored, and relatively easygoing. He plays pranks and tricks on people not out of malicious intent, but for the simple joy of it. Often as not, they're laughing too by the end, and often as not they end up better for being tricked. In some ways I'd even say he's Loki's opposite, the creation to balance his destruction. Sometimes he kills people, yes, but they usually deserve it, which is more than Loki could ever say.

Reynard the Fox is another such trickster, one who falls partway between those extremes. Like Coyote, his stories were mostly a matter of oral tradition and folklore rather than an established or systematic mythology, and all through Germany, France, and the Netherlands you might have found all sorts of different versions of his exploits. Of course, because they *were* mostly orally transmitted, it's hard to say what proportion of them we'll never know.

The stories only have a few things in common. Reynard is always the villain. It couldn't be more obvious he was the bad guy if he dressed all in black, had glowing red eyes, ended his sentences with prepositions, and considered "evil laughter" both one of the most important things on his resume *and* his preferred form of entertainment. He's a sly, vicious son of a bitch, a cheat, a murderer, a thief, and a pathological liar. In spite of that, though, there are three things you have to take into account, which in my opinion set him aside from a simple monster.

First off, he's *clever*. In fact, his stories remind me a bit of a heist movie. He's clearly the bad guy, and his enemies are clearly in the right, but he's so cunning and so quick-witted and just so damn good at what he does that you want him to win anyway—which he pretty much always does, another thing setting him apart from both Loki and Coyote. Reynard's the kind of guy who, on his wits alone, could take on an entire army of people who were absolutely frothing at the mouth with rage, and had assembled specifically to see him dead, and manage to talk them out of it. Even better, he'd talk them

into giving him lands and privileges and their daughter's hand in marriage at the same time, and by the time he finished with them they'd be thanking him for the opportunity.

Second, he's not unilaterally evil. In fact, in some ways I think he's a bit like a prototype of Robin Hood. He takes on the Church and the aristocracy and makes them look like utter fools. His entire history is one of cunning and shrewdness triumphing over book-learning. Everything he does exposes the rampant hypocrisy, corruption, and nepotism of the upper classes. He might not be the best person in the court, but he isn't the worst either, and it's hard to really blame him for his lack of a conscience considering the background he comes from.

Third, and most importantly, Fenris considered him a friend. Now, Fenris himself was usually considered a ravening monster fit only to be put down at the end of time. But he was my distant grandfather, and more importantly he'd never failed to do right by me. He ranked high on my list of Least Untrustworthy People, actually, and a good word from him meant far more to me than a bunch of second-hand stories written by strangers hundreds of years ago.

Thus, it was with a certain amount of caution but not any particular fear that I accompanied Reynard out of the bar. It had begun to drizzle outside, a hard cold rain, and between that and the wind I was just as glad I was wearing my cloak—I don't really get cold, but that doesn't mean I enjoy being waterlogged and windblown as a drowned rat in a tornado. Alexis, who hadn't dressed for Colorado's notoriously unreliable fall weather, looked like she was starting to regret it, and even Snowflake wasn't happy.

Reynard didn't appear to notice a thing. But then, he wouldn't.

"I meant to be there sooner," he said, walking briskly down the street. "But you were rather busy, and I did not wish to interrupt your conversation. What I have to show you will not suffer for a few moments' delay, regardless."

"I don't suppose it's good news, is it?" I said hopefully.

He glanced back at me. "No. No, I don't suppose it is."

"Of course not," I muttered. I grumbled a few more things, too, heartily encouraged by Snowflake. She thinks I don't let my feelings out often enough. Easy for her to say, considering that practically nobody can *hear* her griping.

Reynard, as it turned out, had a car parked only a few minutes' walk away, a two-seater Lamborghini. It was rather cramped trying to fit us all into it, and there were a few tense moments when I half thought Snowflake was about to bite someone. But eventually we managed, and Reynard took off to the north at a speed both highly illegal and more than slightly hazardous. I didn't complain, because I was pretty sure he was doing it to get a reaction, and giving him one would just encourage him.

Long story short, it took only a short time before we were up in the north end of the city. The houses here were larger, more expensive, mostly located in bland subdivisions with ridiculous names

where you weren't allowed in the gate without a damn good reason. Such places always struck me as disturbingly soulless, and I was just as glad when Reynard drove to one of the few that wasn't.

Oh, it was a big house, and I don't doubt it was expensive as hell. But it was just past the ever-expanding border where the city meets the plains, and the nearest neighbor was several hundred feet away. It was a quiet sort of place, one where I imagined strangers seldom went. Perhaps it was just my imagination, overstressed by the events of the past days or by Reynard's presence, but there seemed to be some intangible aura around it, and not a very pleasant one. Looking at it I got the impression that people would avoid it, and that they would be right to do so.

I knew better than to dismiss such instincts. All too often, they were absolutely correct.

Especially about the bad things.

Reynard whipped his Lamborghini through a highly illegal U-turn and parked, tires squealing, right outside the house. Unlike my usual modes of conveyance, it blended in just fine with all the expensive cars around here. We all piled out of it, in a manner almost but not quite as ungainly as we'd piled in, and stood on the sidewalk looking at the house. I don't know about the others, but I was reluctant to go closer.

This was not a good place. Not at all.

Finally Reynard turned and cleared his throat, his face grim and still. I could tell, even after so little time around him, that it was not a normal expression for him; his features were made to be mobile and full of laughter, not locked down harder than a birdcage at a cat fanciers' convention. "You may want to remain outside, miss," he said to Alexis, his voice unwontedly serious.

I hadn't had a chance to tell her how dangerous and powerful this guy probably was, but she wasn't stupid. There wasn't a trace of flippancy in her voice as she said, "What I want is of very little importance here."

He nodded, the impression conveying respect, and turned to lead us up to the door. I had to restrain a shudder, and was powerless to keep the hairs on the back of my neck from rising. Had I been a wolf my hackles would have been doing their damndest to part ways with my body, and I don't doubt that I would have started growling. Strangely, I appeared to be the only one so affected; I wasn't surprised that Alexis wouldn't notice anything, given how inexperienced she was, but Snowflake is usually *very* sharp about such things, and not shy about showing it most of the time. Never mind me, I was surprised *she* wasn't growling and snarling by now.

Reynard glanced back at me. "You feel it already, don't you? Fascinating. There aren't many that would. Mayhap your grandfather was not exaggerating." He climbed the front steps, and as he did I noticed something interesting. He seemed relaxed, very cool and casual, but he wasn't used to deceiving werewolves. The tension he carried in his spine gave the lie to his act.

Whatever this was, he felt it too.



He opened the door without knocking, and proceeded inside without any hesitation. I noticed that the lock itself wasn't just disengaged, it was broken. A quick glance, and a breath of wind slipped into the housing, confirmed that the deadbolt was entirely nonfunctional, apparently disconnected from the locking mechanism. Reynard closed the door quietly behind us.

Within was...well. Suffice to say it impressed me, and that takes some doing. Snowflake made an awed sort of sound in my head. Alexis gagged. I would have too, were it not for the need to keep up a good front.

Most of the corpses were simple enough. I saw several which had been stabbed with some slender weapon, a dagger or a very light sword. Maybe even an icepick. Three had heavy, ugly ligature marks around the neck, speaking of slow and nasty death by strangulation. Two of those appeared to be simple strangling cords, but the third formed the clear outline of a chain. One man's head lolled about on a broken neck. Another had been entirely beheaded, his head resting on the ground between his feet. They filled the living room almost to bursting, barely leaving enough room between them to walk.

Alexis looked away, still gagging, and Reynard silently opened the door for her to go outside. Snowflake went with her, to act as her bodyguard—it didn't seem likely that someone would vanish her while we were right here without us knowing, but it wasn't unprecedented. He closed the door behind them, but I clearly heard vomiting, and smelled stomach acid. That I could pick out the smell so easily suggested that all these bodies had yet to really start rotting, which in turn implied that they had died quite recently—hours, at the most.

I didn't feel too happy, myself. But *somebody* had to pay attention, and at the moment I was the only choice available. So I took a deep breath and forced myself to look at the scene logically, rather than reacting to it. If I let myself feel emotion in response to this, I would rapidly become useless.

So. Eighteen corpses. Nine were dead of stab wounds. Three strangled. One broken neck. One decapitated. That left four with no obvious injuries. I walked over to look at them more closely, idly noting as I did that none of the corpses in the room showed defensive wounds. They hadn't fought back. None of them looked like hardened killers, but they should still have fought if they'd had warning, which meant that they hadn't all died here. They'd been moved. That fit with the way they were all arrayed so neatly, almost as though laid out for funeral. None of them had any obvious physical or magical scents, which was unusual. Most people, so soon after death, would still have smelled of cologne, perfume, deodorant, soap, lunch—*something*.

The coffee table had been moved aside to make room for these four corpses to be laid out on the carpet, which was an almost bizarrely pristine grey. These really *did* look like the mortician had already done his work—totally composed, peaceful, with arms crossed on chests. Three were male, one female—around the same ratio as the rest of the bodies. They had no apparent injuries, and hadn't been dead long enough for discoloration to set in yet.

It could have been poison, I supposed. It could have been four simultaneous heart attacks. It could have been, but it wasn't. I knew that, because on these corpses I caught the first clear smell in the building.

They smelled like nothing. Not the mere absence of smell, which was general throughout the house, but the smell of absence.

Son of a bitch.

I turned to look at Reynard, who had come up behind me. He moved so silently I'd have never known except that I smelled him. "Do you know how this was done?" I asked him, my voice steady and cold.

"Better," he said with a grin that struck even me as inappropriate for the circumstances. "I know who." He tapped one finger on his lip for a moment, evidently thinking, then nodded firmly. "Yes. Come with me."

I expected him to go further into the house, although I'm not sure why. All the evidence had obviously been moved down here. Instead, he went right back out, closing the door neatly behind us. Clearly whatever happened here had been utterly silent, because there was still not even the smallest bit of attention being paid to the place.

"There's someone you need to meet," Reynard said crisply. "I will convey you there and back." He glanced at Alexis, who was standing near the car with Snowflake, and then looked a question at me.

I had no intention of making that choice. "Do you want to come with us?" I asked Alexis. "You'll learn some things, but I won't lie, it could be dangerous."

"What?" Reynard said, amused. "You don't trust me?"

"Of course not. But actually, I'm more concerned about whoever we're going to meet." I shrugged. "Besides. Knowledge is always a dangerous thing."

Reynard smiled, but only with his eyes and posture. I had to wonder whether he was as unaccustomed to werewolves as I had initially suspected; he sure seemed to do a lot of his communicating nonverbally, which wasn't a trait I associated with people who spent most of their time around humans.

Alexis was smart enough to think for a moment before she answered. "Will it help catch the person who did that?" she asked, her voice surprisingly hard.

I looked at Reynard, who shrugged. "I doubt her presence will tip the scale in either direction. But I have been known to be wrong before. It isn't impossible."

Alexis seemed to take that as a useful answer, for some reason, and nodded. "All right then. I'll come."

"Very well." Rather than get in the car, Reynard turned to the open air just at the edge of the street. He held his arms out in front of him. His magic surged, filling the air with smells of the wild and the hunt. Perhaps ten seconds later, a portal unfolded between his outstretched hands, the motion reminiscent of a flower opening.

"Oh, bloody hell," I muttered. Then, to Alexis, I said, "Okay, this is gonna suck. Step through all at once, don't try and inch through it." I didn't actually know what the result would be of trying to be inside and outside the gate at the same time, but it didn't sound like a good idea. "Other than that, try not to throw up on anyone, and remember that no matter how bad it feels, you'll be okay. Ready?"

She nodded, looking less perturbed than I would have expected from someone watching a hole open in the fabric of the world. I took a deep breath and went through first, because I was less fragile and it would be more pleasant for all of us if Reynard went last. The portal would stay open for a couple seconds after the maker went through, presumably because that was the time spent in transit, but it was less stable, and therefore more horrible.

It was not very much fun. In point of fact, it was very much not fun. But it didn't feel much worse than any other portal to the Otherside, which was about all that I could ask for.

When I came back to myself again, we were in a small, dimly lit room. It was barely tall enough for Reynard to stand up in, and barely wide enough for all of us to fit—although that wasn't helped by the fact that Alexis was still prone on the stone floor, unconscious. The walls and ceiling were oak, and the light was cast by an oil lamp. I noticed all those things in the first few seconds, and one other as well. It was that last one I asked Reynard about.

"We aren't on the Otherside," I said to him.

He grinned a sharp, vulpine grin. "You're quick on the uptake, aren't you?" he said. I couldn't tell whether he was being sarcastic or not.

"I thought it wasn't possible to open a portal between two spots on the same plane," I noted.

"It isn't," he agreed. "Technically, we actually passed through two portals. The trick is to open one, then open another just on the other side of it, and step through both at once."

Huh. That was an interesting trick—not to mention hard as hell. I couldn't even really estimate the kind of power it would take to hold open two simultaneous portals, let alone how skilled you would need to be to hold two spells that complex in your mind at once. If I'd had any doubt that Reynard was a badass like few I'd seen, this dispelled them.

Alexis started to sit up at around that time, just in time for someone opening the door to hit her in the side and knock her back over. The newcomer was dressed in a black outfit not unlike Reynard's, but hers didn't look nearly so deliberately dramatic—more like she was tired of stains, and didn't get out enough to care about her image. Her hair was a shade of brown that made me think of rat's fur, and cut very short and plain. Her eyes were likewise brown, and hidden behind classic librarian's glasses. In fact,

the only thing about her which was at all remarkable was her one article of jewelry—if it could be called that; I wasn't sure. Hanging on a long silver chain around her neck was an ornate bronze key. It was the type of large, heavy key used in a warded lock—you know, the ones they use in movies when they want to make it clear how archaic and old fashioned a person is, the ones with keyholes you can spy through.

Her expression when she walked in the door was neutral and professional, which lasted all of the two seconds it took for her to lay eyes on Reynard, at which point it was replaced by distaste, lightly seasoned with anger. "*You*," she said in a similar tone of voice.

He sighed. "Hello, dear," he said. "Monsieur Wolf, meet Keeper Jacqueline Fleur. Jacqueline, this is Winter Wolf."

She stopped glaring at Reynard for a couple seconds to glare at me. "I know who it is," she said coldly. "What do you want, Reynard?"

"They need to know about the stone."

Jacqueline Fleur suddenly stopped looking like a frumpy woman of indeterminate years and started looking like something altogether different, something more than a little frightening. Her gaze sharpened to a glare, the iciness of which I'd seldom seen surpassed. Her fingers curled into claws at her sides, and the smell of magic filled the room, human's disinfectant overlaid with something almost papery. Her power hung in the air around her almost like the heat haze over asphalt in the summer.

Damn. I'd seen stronger mages—but I'd never seen one this close to throwing down.

"You have no place in deciding that," she said, her voice impressively chill.

Reynard's was no less cold, although he made no threatening moves to match hers. "It should never have been entrusted to you. I said so long ago, and now that I am proven correct, you would tell me my place? You overstep yourself, Keeper."

She maintained her coldly furious demeanor for another second or two, then crumpled. The smell of readied power faded, leaving just the milder aroma of a mage not currently magicking. "Very well," she said in a resigned tone. "Your dog had best behave itself," she told me, sounding perhaps a bit spiteful.

I snorted. "Don't worry," I said dryly. "Unless you piss her off, she's probably the best-behaved person here."

The Keeper looked doubtful, but didn't argue with me. We stood around and waited for Alexis to finish getting herself together. It took a few minutes, and she didn't say a thing the whole time. I got the distinct impression that my cousin was feeling seriously out of her depth, and it was making her subdued. I couldn't blame her for that, though; I was rather overwhelmed myself.

"Please refrain from touching anything. Many of the things here are both fragile and irreplaceable," the Keeper said as she opened the door and led us out down a short hallway. Her

professionalism was firmly back in place, and you couldn't have determined anything of her feelings from her voice. "You should feel honored, really. Usually only clan members in good standing are allowed in here, and even then only after completing a great deal of paperwork."

She was so serious, I couldn't resist teasing her a little. "What about Reynard?" I asked, keeping my voice utterly innocent.

She glared at me, and I got the definite impression that she wasn't fooled a bit. "Reynard," she said, biting off the words, "is the exception to a great many rules."

"Yes," he agreed, good humor evidently restored. "It's part of my charm. I wouldn't be half so fun if I were unexceptional."

He might have kept talking after that, but I sort of lost track when Jacqueline opened a wooden door about halfway down the hall. It was an ordinary enough sort of door, opening into a very unordinary sort of room.

It was a little on the small side, which surprised me a little. I'd expected a vast warehouse of some sort, I suppose, but the room was only perhaps fifty feet wide, with a seven foot ceiling. I couldn't see how long it was, because there were obstructions in the way, but from the way the air moved I was guessing no more than twice its width.

What it lacked in size, though, it made up in content. The walls were lined, floor to ceiling, with oak bookshelves, and the shelves were straining under the weight of the books on them. More shelves filled the room, leaving crooked aisles barely wide enough to walk down. There were all sorts of books, from ancient tomes two feet thick bound in faded, cracked leather to the most recent hardback bindings. None of them had any kind of label, and I didn't look closely. As we moved through the stacks I saw racks of scrolls, tablets of stone and bronze, even a standing runestone of the sort that still dots the Scandinavian countryside. It wasn't hard to figure out where we were. This mage didn't just resemble a librarian, she *was* one—and of a library the likes of which I'd never imagined, let alone seen.

"Wow. This is incredible. I've never seen a library its equal. What all do you have here?" That's what I *didn't* say, because I was trying to come across all cool and worldly to everyone present except Snowflake, who knew better, and that wasn't the sort of thing that went with that image.

Instead, I commented, "You've got a lot of books here," as though it was inconsequential. The reality, of course, was rather different. I somehow got the idea that these weren't the sort of books you bought at Barnes & Noble. Between the reek of magic and the fact that the librarian was a clan mage, I was pretty sure these were the sort of books that were filled with old knowledge and secrets man was not meant to know.

You don't buy that sort of book with simple money. You don't keep it with simple locks.

"It's one of our larger collections," our guide agreed. "Mostly the Keepers prefer to maintain numerous smaller archives. The objects here are mostly of historical value, though, making their loss a

minimal danger, and the defenses here have been built up over a longer span of time. As such it was deemed safe to store more things in this location."

Reynard snorted. "Yeah, right. And I'm sure the fact that it lets you assign one Keeper to it instead of ten didn't factor into it at all. Face it, Jack, you don't have the *manpower* to keep up all your old archives."

Some of the wind seemed to go out of her sails. "True," she admitted. "But that doesn't invalidate the logic behind it. It should have been safe."

Reynard snorted again. "Should have. Would have. Could have. And yet, strangely, was not."

"No. It wasn't," she said, drawing us to a stop beside a small glass-covered table. We'd passed several of the sort on the way, with miscellaneous items on them. I'd noticed that they smelled quite strongly of magic, although it was mostly masked by the general reek and hidden behind seriously heavy-duty protections. Other than that I hadn't examined them closely. I got the impression that showing too much interest in such things wasn't a healthy action to take in this place.

Besides. I didn't really want to know. There are reasons magic has been so poorly regarded throughout history, reasons why reason and science and civilization have been so eager to dismiss it as a myth and a fantasy. Magic is absolutely freaking terrifying, even to me. I didn't want to know what the Conclave's archivists had felt a need to keep hidden and protected.

I had seen enough, though, to know that there was something wrong with this particular case. Namely, it was empty. There was a depression in the jet-black velvet the size of my fist, but it was hollow, and from the dust I was pretty sure it had been that way for a long time.

"How familiar are you with the story of Sessho-seki?" the Keeper asked me. I must have gotten a blank look on my face, because she clarified, "The Killing Stone."

"Can't say I've heard that one," I admitted.

"I see," she said disapprovingly. "It's not a very complicated story, really, although the implications are fairly interesting. In the reign of Emperor Konoe—this was around the middle of the twelfth century in Japan—a beautiful courtesan called Tamamo-no-Mae came to court. She was sweet-smelling and very neat, and though she looked young there was no question she couldn't answer."

"Sounds too good to be true," I noted.

Her lips twitched faintly before she remembered that she didn't approve of me and went back to frowning. "It was, by all accounts. Needless to say the young Emperor was utterly smitten with her, and began lavishing attention on her as though she were his Empress rather than a glorified prostitute. At the same time, he became mysteriously ill. He spoke to all manner of doctors and mystics, all of whom told him the same thing. Whatever was wrong with him had been caused by evil magic, and they couldn't do a thing about it."

"I can't imagine he liked that answer."

"No. He became convinced that he was going to die, but continued asking for help. This whole time Tamamo-no-Mae had been rising higher in the court, until by this point she was the only person the Emperor would listen to. Finally, an astrologer told the Emperor that his beloved Tamamo-no-Mae was actually a nine-tailed kitsune, and had been the one making him ill the entire time. When he returned to court the courtesan had fled, and he sent his two finest hunters to hunt her down. To make a long story short, she begged them to spare her life, they refused, and one of them shot her dead with an arrow."

I frowned. "No normal arrow ever killed a nine-tailed kitsune." Hell, Aiko had only *one* tail, and she could go toe-to-toe with a werewolf and walk away whistling. Given that a nine-tail was the height of power among the kitsune and was, of necessity, not less than nine hundred years old, you'd have to be both very powerful and very skilled to even get near her.

"That's one problem with the official story," Jacqueline agreed. "There are several others. But I digress. To conclude, the kitsune died, and her body became the Killing Stone. As you might have guessed from the name, anyone who touches the stone dies, instantly."

"What happened next?" Alexis asked, making me start a little. She was standing behind me, and she'd been so quiet for the past several minutes that I'd almost forgotten she was there.

The Keeper shrugged. "Nothing. That's the end of the story, with the exception of a Buddhist morality tale which was rather obviously tacked on at the end."

"So that's the official version. What really happened?"

"We don't know. The Emperor didn't approach any clans for advice, and between that and the poor communication of the day we didn't know any of this at the time. We do know that there are a number of inconsistencies in the story as given. Why should Tamamo-no-Mae have tried to kill the Emperor, when it would surely be more valuable to keep him alive and besotted with her? Why wouldn't any of the other people he consulted, some of whom did know a certain amount of magic, have been able to identify the source of his illness? As you said before, how could a simple hunter possibly kill an elder kitsune? To make matters even more unclear, the Emperor died shortly thereafter, in spite of the astrologer's assurance that the kitsune's death would cure his ailment."

"Gosh," I said dryly. "What an informative and reliable story that is."

"Fortunately," she said sharply, "this is the point where Conclave records *do* begin mentioning the stone. For the next several generations, adventurers and thrill seekers of all stripes came to the Killing Stone to test themselves against it. Monks and mystics came to exorcise it. Hotheaded young samurai came to prove they could survive where others had not, or simply so they could say that they had spent the night in the vicinity. Conclave mages came to study it. Only the last of those survived the experience, and not many of those."

"The effects of the stone are exotic, but predictable," she continued, settling more firmly into lecture mode. "Making skin contact with it is instantly and invariably lethal. There are verified records of contact with men, women and children, with werewolves, vampires, fae beings, and mages. It does not matter what you are or what defenses you have in place, you die. If it comes into contact with any variety of magic, it drains it—and, assuming there's an open connection to the mage responsible, it begins to drain them as well. Several of the Conclave were unable to shut down the connection fast enough and were killed. Spending time around it produces feelings of unease, and is detrimental to the health over time. Anyone sleeping in the area experiences horrible nightmares, which were in many cases severe enough to cause insanity or suicide."

"Nice," I said after a moment. "I think I'm starting to get why you had it locked in here."

She smiled humorlessly. "Oh, it gets better. Prayer, exorcisms, and persuasion have all failed to remove the curse. However, it does react to them—violently. The nightmares and the draining effect seem to worsen dramatically directly after such an attempt. The stone particularly appears to hate being prayed over, and in several cases actively attempted to kill those responsible. These incidents, as well as several other pieces of evidence, make us suspect that the stone wasn't produced by Tamamo-no-Mae, *it is* her, or what's left of her. Not just her body, but her mind, and her soul if you believe in such things."

I imagined what that would be like. Start with the fact that I was pretty sure she'd been framed. It couldn't be much fun to be betrayed and sentenced to death by the Emperor you thought loved you, and whom you just might have actually loved in return. Then to spend the next nine hundred years trapped in a rock, paralyzed and incommunicado, just stewing in your anger and hate for centuries....

I shivered.

"The stone was given into our keeping around three hundred years ago," the Keeper continued. "We performed a number of experiments on it, and failed to discover anything particularly useful. After around fifty years, it was simply placed in containment. We had no problems with it—unlike many of the more dangerous collections we maintain, it was essentially inert. There were no escape attempts, nor any apparent manipulations of the environment. Our higher security sites are always stretched for resources and personnel, and over time it was deemed essentially harmless and moved here."

"Somebody stole it," I guessed.

"Indeed. Eighteen years ago, someone broke in here." She frowned. "Mister Wolf, I think perhaps you have been given an inaccurate perspective on the security of this location. We are currently several hundred feet underground in France, in a cave system which was collapsed two hundred years ago. The only way to access this archive is with an Otherside portal, and outside of the Keepers there are very few individuals with the appropriate coordinates. Additionally, there are a number of wards which would trigger at the presence of an unauthorized person, and the Killing Stone itself was behind a number of additional wards and protections. It would be significantly easier to break into a secure government area than this archive."



"And yet," I commented, "somebody did it anyway."

She nodded shortly, her lips pressed tightly together. "Yes. They managed to gain access without setting off any alarms, which not even authorized visitors can do. They bypassed all of the protections and went straight to this case—and I assure you, Mister Wolf, that there are much more valuable things in this room than the Killing Stone, and more lightly guarded as well. In spite of that, they took nothing else, didn't even *touch* anything else."

"Unfortunately for them," she said, "we also maintain more subtle protections. Everything that passes through this room is tagged with an energetic marker to make tracking it simpler. The stone was hidden in some manner for the first several weeks after its theft, but we eventually tracked it down to an ordinary enough human woman. She must have purchased it from the original thief—indeed, she may have commissioned him in the first place—because there is no way that a normal human could have stolen it."

"I can't imagine you just sat around once you found that out."

"Indeed," she said wryly. "Two Keepers were dispatched immediately. They weren't combat-trained, but it was deemed unnecessary. The Killing Stone is very dangerous, but more as a trap than a weapon. They were prepared for it—both of them had worked with the stone in the past, in fact, and were inoculated to its effects on the mind—and two mages of any disposition were deemed more than enough force to handle a single human."

"What happened?"

"She killed them. We don't know how. She killed them, looted them, and left the bodies in a public area as a challenge to us." She took a deep breath. "It was deemed necessary to make a gesture of strength. Not just to recover the stone, which was clearly more dangerous than we had realized, but to ensure no one thought we were weak or vulnerable. We could not afford to seem weak. A team was assembled, consisting of four Guards, four Watchers, and one Keeper, and given orders to kill the thief and return with the Killing Stone. None of them came back."

"Wait a second," I said. "You're telling me this totally ordinary human took out *nine fucking clan mages*?"

"Trust me, it gets worse," she assured me. "We took the time to do some research after that. Nobody knows what name she was born under, possibly including her anymore, but these days she goes by Vivian de Sousa. Twenty-one years ago she married Felipe Louis de Sousa. Two years later he was the victim of a highly public case of spontaneous combustion, the work of a local wizard on behalf of conflicting business interests. De Sousa was left the sole heir to a sizable fortune, including stakes in numerous major companies."

"Since then," Jacqueline continued in a grim tone, "she has dedicated herself to a life as a witch hunter—although her targets are much more varied than that would indicate. Since obtaining the Killing Stone, she has assassinated thirty-six mages that we know of. She has slaughtered more than a dozen of

the fae, eradicated at least one nest of vampires, killed twenty-seven werewolves resulting in the dissolution of two different packs, and been the death of innumerable miscellaneous magical creatures and lesser talents."

"Unlike most serial killers and extremist sects, de Sousa has never ritualized her murders, and in no cases are there signs of torture prior to death—it appears clear that she is motivated less by the suffering of her victims than by a desire, however twisted, to protect others. However, collateral damage apparently does not upset her; in her efforts to exterminate the supernatural she has also killed at least a thousand human beings, and probably a great many more. While she seems to prefer precise, surgical strikes, she adapts her tactics to the situation, and has been known to utilize a wide variety of weaponry. She is a skilled marksman, trained in demolitions, a practiced martial artist, a poisoner, and an arsonist. We cannot accurately estimate how many other artifacts and magical items she may have acquired over the past eighteen years; however, it is safe to say that she has taken several from her victims, and she isn't without the contacts to commission more herself."

Well.

Shit.

"The smell you noticed was left by the Killing Stone," Reynard said as he started his car again. "It's her usual practice to touch it to each of her victims, in order to ensure they aren't simply feigning death and to remove any identifying traces she may have left. It leaves a distinct trace."

Behind us, Alexis looked more than a touch nauseous. "Jesus," she muttered. "This woman killed all those people?"

"Yes," Reynard agreed. "Four of them were rakshasas—demonic beings from India. The remainder were human servants they had retained, most of whom were mentally dominated or compelled into service."

"But that doesn't make any sense," she protested. "I mean, they were just people. They were *victims*. Why would she kill them too?"

*You sure it isn't stupid?* Snowflake asked me. *Because I'm really thinking she might be dumber than a post. Never mind the vegetarian bit.*

"Perhaps you were not paying attention, Miss Hamilton," Reynard said dryly. "De Sousa is not a rational being. Attempting to apply logic to her actions is not a worthwhile investiture of time. Monsieur Wolf, where would you like me to drop you off?" I'm not sure why he called me Monsieur; he clearly spoke perfect English, and besides, he used Miss not five seconds before.

"Home, if you don't mind," I said, feeling very weary.

Reynard didn't need directions. I tried to pretend that didn't scare me.

Back at home I got a solid four hours or so of sleep, then reluctantly roused myself, showered, and got dressed. I'd been thinking for a while about my costume. I didn't believe for a minute that I wouldn't be judged for it, which made the choice a rather important one. Fortunately, I thought I'd come up with something that might actually work.

I wasn't trying to show off or look fancy. I wouldn't have a chance with that, not when I was competing with the Sidhe. No, my objective was just to make an impression, to do something bold enough that people would *have* to pay attention, and respect me for having the balls to try it. It wouldn't earn me many friends, but then, that wasn't why I was going. I couldn't afford to be seen as weak at a party like this; everything else was secondary.

Thus, rather than the armor I would rather have worn, I dressed in a loose black silk shirt with bands of white embroidery at wrists, hem, and neck, more lightly embroidered across the chest and back. All of the embroidery was of naturalistic designs, mostly wolves with a handful of ravens and snowflakes scattered in the mix. I matched it with loose black pants, more silk, held up by a broad black leather belt studded with bronze which wasn't *quite* a sword belt. The pants tucked into tailored leather boots with more designs worked into them, in something that looked like silver but didn't burn my fingers the way silver would have, and I tucked a pair of black silk gloves into my belt. I swept my cloak of shadow over the whole, pinning it unnecessarily at the neck with a gold wolf's-head brooch. The eyes of the wolf were emeralds, and glittered when the light hit them.

I glanced in the massive full-length mirror lining the back wall of my closet and nodded in satisfaction. The ensemble looked both obscenely expensive and more than a little bit scary. Perfect.

To that I added enough jewelry to really drive home the "I have more money than God" image. I put a gold earring and a platinum one in each ear (as a werewolf, I can't actually have piercings, because they heal too quickly. Instead, I had to shove the pins through my flesh every time, which was why I didn't wear such things often. It was irritating, painful, and bloody to put in, and even worse taking out—but tonight I felt it was worth it). The pendant Edward had made in the shape of my mother's lupine form had too much iron in it to wear to a Sidhe party, so I made do with a heavy gold chain, the pendant of which was a large chunk of black opal carved to resemble a wolf's head. I wrapped my leather bracelet around my left arm, under the shirt, and put a gold bracelet set with amber on my right. I added a pair of gold cufflinks set with emeralds, and checked in the mirror again.

Yep. I looked like I was really, truly, disgustingly wealthy, and not afraid to flaunt it. I also looked like I hadn't yet ruled out the possibility of attending a funeral after the party—all I'd have to do is lose a little bit of the jewelry and I'd blend in perfectly, assuming it was a very high-class funeral. Like, for royalty, maybe. Anywhere else it would look like I was considering buying the cemetery, or possibly the town it was situated in.

I made my way downstairs, where Aiko had already gotten herself prepped. She actually looked like she belonged at a party of this sort, which was a relief. The last time we'd gone to such an event she

died her hair green and wore heavily patched jeans and a T-shirt with the legend *Meddle not in the affairs of dragons, for you are crunchy and taste good with ketchup*. To the court of the Dragon King. Aiko is not necessarily the most stable, danger-conscious person around. She'd *said* she wasn't going to do anything like that this time, but you can never quite tell with her.

She'd cropped her hair raggedly just above her ears, most likely with a knife, but it was still black, which was something. She wasn't wearing a dress, but that was to be expected; I'd never once seen her in a dress, and in fact had a hard time imagining it. But she *was* dressed in a manner which could at least vaguely be construed as somewhat formal, sorta, in a perfectly white judogi jacket belted with a narrow obi striped red and white, a jet black hakama, and black slippers. She wasn't wearing nearly as much adornment as I was, just one ring each of shadow and ice, another of twisted gold wire, and a close-fitting necklace of fancy chainmail (gold, of course, because really, why not?). There was a tanto tucked into her obi, just discrete enough to not look like she was trying to conceal it, which was almost pretty enough with its jeweled sheath and carved bone handle to qualify as jewelry itself.

It wasn't that far off from what I was wearing, actually, at least in intent—a little classier, a little more understated, subtler, but not any less threatening. Not any less of a statement of wealth, either; that necklace wasn't as flashy as what I was wearing, but it was perfect craftsmanship using very small rings. You have to pay through the roof for that kind of quality—not to mention that it was several ounces of gold.

Of course, at the moment she was sitting in front of the enormous fire in the sitting room prodding Snowflake with one slippered foot and trying to convince Alexis of the virtues of the electric cello, which did a lot to subtract from the image. But that was the sort of thing you got used to around Aiko.

Alexis looked up when I walked in, then blinked and did a double take. "Holy shit, Winter. You look scary."

I grinned. "You wouldn't say that if you'd ever seen her *use* that knife. It only looks like it's for show."

Aiko snorted. "At least I'm not carrying a grenade."

"It isn't *technically* a grenade," I said in a wounded tone. "Besides, it'll only trigger if I say *boom*, and I don't—" I broke off suddenly, and turned a horrified stare on my cloak pocket.

Alexis, proving that her survival instinct was developing apace, promptly threw herself behind a couch. Even Aiko stood up and quickly put some space between herself and me. Snowflake didn't move, but then she could see my intention, so she hardly counted.

I held it in as long as I could before I broke out laughing. Aiko, being quicker on the uptake and more accustomed to this sort of prank, stalked back to her upset chair, righted it, and sat back down. "Bastard," she muttered, not without a certain amount of admiration.

"The person I bought it from promised me it takes a command phrase—which I'm *not* going to say—and an effort of will," I said, laughing. "Come on, people. Do you really think I'm *that* dumb?"

"With reason," Aiko said. "Remember the Hamadryad Incident?"

"You were the one picking music for that," I said in an outraged tone. "And don't even mention the Koala Incident, that was all you."

"Uh-huh," she said skeptically. "And the Chinchilla Incident?"

I sniffed. "Could have happened to anyone."

"Right. And the Steampunk Incident?"

"That one was not—wait. Which one was that?"

"The one with the hairbrush," she said helpfully. "And the cowboy boots. And the glass of punch. I think there was a cursed teapot involved, too."

"Oh, right. *That* Steampunk Incident. I don't even *know* what the hell was going on there."

"Are you two for real?" Alexis interrupted.

I snorted. "Think about it. Do you *really* think I'm creative enough to make this sort of thing up?" I glanced at the enormous grandfather clock in the corner. "We need to go."

"Where are we going?" my cousin asked.

"We are going to a party. *You* are staying here."

"Why?" Give her credit, she sounded only moderately defensive.

"First, you aren't ready for this sort of thing. You walk into this sort of party with as little as you know, you'll be very lucky to walk back out. Second, I can't afford the distraction. I walk into this sort of party trying to look after you, I'll be very lucky to walk back out. Third and most important, the invitation was for two only, and they're expecting both of us, so I couldn't bring you even if I wanted to."

She'd been looking progressively more outraged as I went on, but her expression fell at that last bit. "Oh."

I grinned. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll get to risk your life for no reason doing something pointlessly dangerous and mind-bogglingly stupid again soon. Until then you've got the run of the house, with the same rules as before." I didn't offer to tell her said rules again; if she couldn't handle a memory exercise that simple, she had no business sticking her nose into this sort of thing anyway. "Remember, if Snowflake tries to tell you something, pay attention. She's probably the smartest person in this room."

*Gosh, not setting the bar very high, are you?* She came over and butted her head against my thigh, making a sort of soft growling noise. *Go on, get out of here. The sooner you two leave, the sooner we can get the part where you get kidnapped or some such shit because I'm not there over with.*

Chapter Nine

More than any other, particularly in oral tradition and everyday folklore, it is the scary story we are enamored of. We are obsessed with the eyes in the darkness, the laughter in the night, the shapes half-seen in the shadows beneath the trees. Every culture has its stories, and likewise every culture has its monsters and demons, its ghosts and goblins and things that go bump in the night. It's a universal urge—and don't think it's limited to normal humans, either.

Werewolves and vampires and wicked witches are the stuff of terror. To many people—at least those you could convince to admit such things—we are the most frightening things in the world. But, naturally, we can't be scared shitless of *ourselves*. We still hunger for stories, though, and so it is that you find another whole world of scary stories among the weird and preternatural folk than everyday humans.

Ours tend to be scarier. If only because, in my world, oftentimes the scary stories weren't quite as fictional as you might wish. And sometimes it's the lucky ones that die.

Thus, if you know the right places to listen, you can hear stories about the Wild Hunt, which rides like a storm through the sky, with a fury that is awful and beautiful to behold. It hardly matters whether you die, or you're lucky enough to hide and avoid drawing their attention, or you're predator enough yourself to ride beside them. You don't walk away from the experience, not as the person you were before the Hunt came. It changes you.

Or there's the Khan of the Werewolves, a young-looking man with a terrible old soul. He knew everything about everyone, the whispers said, and if you were careless or stupid or just didn't walk as lightly as you should you just might wake up from a nightmare some evening to find eyes in the darkness.

But I have to admit, if I were to pick one, I'd say the scariest of all are the Sidhe Courts. Strangely, though, the most terrifying of their stories aren't those of blood and death, of war or the hunt. Because, although they are a terrifying force, the Sidhe really aren't frightening for violent reasons. If you don't pick a fight with them, they aren't terribly likely to pick a fight with you.

No, it was when they were wheeling and dealing that the Sidhe became truly scary. Like the genie of pop culture (not the actual djinn; they were equally scary for entirely different reasons), they always kept their bargains to the letter and yet what you got never quite seemed to be what you wanted, and what you wanted never quite seemed to be worth what you paid. It was commonly said, and not entirely in jest, that if you ever found yourself under the impression that you had gotten the better of a Sidhe in bargaining, you should immediately count your relatives. Then your legs, then arms, followed by fingers, toes, eyes, teeth, and testicles.

Thus, rather than a battlefield, many of the truly terrifying tales of the elves took place at parties and festivals, in crowded ballrooms and ancient castles. See, the thing you have to remember is that

Disney took a *lot* of the grimmer parts out of the legends of the faeries. And, even if you feel some need to stick to that interpretation, remind yourself that the wicked faeries and evil stepmothers got invited to such parties, right alongside the good and the benevolent.

So it probably shouldn't be a surprise that at a *real* faerie ball the carriage didn't revert to a pumpkin and Cinderella never had to leave, not even when she was so weary of dancing that her slippers had filled with blood. The wine was sweet as poisoned apples, the wolves weren't half so dangerous as the grandmothers, and every game was played with house rules for infinite stakes. No one cared enough to tell you the name of the game, and there was nothing protecting you from your own decisions. It was quite possible to sell your soul with just a few wrong words to the right being at the right time.

They say that only the desperate and the foolish have dealings with the Courts of Day and Night. They are not far wrong.

We stepped through one of the official portals, which by some strange coincidence had been located in a domain Aiko was reasonably familiar with. I find that such coincidences abound, when there's a Twilight Prince smoothing your way.

We emerged onto a dusky mountain path about a million degrees colder than we were dressed for. That didn't bother me too much, because I'm really hard to upset with cold, but Aiko started shivering almost immediately. "Bloody hell," she muttered grimly, hurrying down the snowpacked path. There was more snow all around us, so deep that it seemed more like we were walking down a trench cut into the snow than along a path. "They couldn't make it open *inside* the flipping castle?"

Before we'd gone a dozen feet, there was someone walking next to us. I couldn't have told you where he came from; he was simply walking beside us, where a moment before the trench had been empty. His appearance should have shocked us and had both of us reaching for our weapons, but it somehow didn't, and I wasn't at all sure why.

He was better than six and a half feet tall, and thin without looking skeletal. He was obviously Sidhe, with slit pupils in intensely deep green eyes, predator's teeth, and sharply pointed ears. Unlike most of his kind, though, he was not pretty, nor did he take any care to hide that fact. His features were rough and coarse even by human standards, and his anthracite-hued hair was cropped shorter and more unevenly than Aiko's. He was wearing a leather tunic and breeches, the latter held up with a length of rope, and had a fresh wolf pelt thrown around his shoulders as a cloak. It moved slightly in a nonexistent breeze, and left traces of blood on his skin where it passed. He was barefoot, and should clearly have been freezing, and just as clearly was not.

"Blaise," I said, with just a touch of respect—enough not to be insulting, not enough to be fawning. "I thought that the whole point of a masquerade was to come dressed as something that you aren't, as opposed to looking exactly like what you are."



"Some of us are beyond such things," he said dryly. "And yourself? What masque do you wear tonight?"

"I'm a werewolf," I said cheerfully.

He raised one eyebrow. "Did you not just say criticize me for resembling my own nature too closely?"

I smiled. "Precisely why I chose the costume I did."

He nodded slowly. "I see. An interesting message, to be sure. There are many who will spend much of the evening debating what you meant by it."

"That was the point," I said. "You're strong enough that you don't need to worry about what people think of you. Not all of us are that lucky. If people aren't sure what I mean or what I'm capable of, I think they're a lot less likely to dismiss me as prey."

"A valid point, although I think you give yourself too little credit." He shook his head. "In any case, I understand your intention. And what of you, my lady? How have you chosen to present yourself this evening?"

"I," Aiko said grandiosely, "don't give a fuck."

Blaise blinked a little at that, for which I couldn't blame him, because so did I. "Are you saying that you didn't care to costume yourself, or that that *is* your costume?"

Aiko's smile showed a great many teeth. "Exactly."

The Twilight Prince laughed deeply, shaking his head. "Excellent," he murmured. "Truly, it is too long since you graced one of our festivals with your presence." We emerged from the snow-trench onto a staircase a hundred feet wide set into the mountainside, and I got my first glimpse of Utgard. I'd seen a lot of things in my life, but I'd never seen the seat of the king of jötnar, and even my jaded mind was awestruck for a moment at the sight.

The mountain we were standing on, for one thing, dwarfed any I'd ever seen. We were in the middle of a mountain range, and looking down on the peaks all around, an ocean of white-capped mountains spreading out as far as the eye could see. Even the least of the mountains was the size of Pikes Peak, and the greatest had to be twice its size. The ground itself, which was almost unimaginably far below, was shrouded in dense white mist, into which the snowy mountains faded imperceptibly. Up here, though, the air was painfully clear, exposing a sky just fading from the brilliant colors of sunset into the deep, piercing blue of a night untainted by any city lights. The stars were just beginning to come out, brilliant sparks of light that made the snow look fallow. I'd never in my life seen them so bright, not even in the forests of Wyoming with the nearest lights a hundred miles off.

All of it, though, was easily eclipsed by the fortress-castle of Utgard. It crouched high on the mountain, a castle like none ever dreamed of by mortal architects. I couldn't really estimate how large it

was. The cold grey granite seemed to rise from the mountain itself, making it hard to say where one began and the other ended. It was easily a thousand feet from side to side, though, and the highest tower soared far above the peak of the mountain itself. Instead of a moat, there was a natural chasm between us and it, several hundred feet across and deep enough that the bottom was hidden in the mist. The grand staircase turned into a delicate-looking bridge of ice that arched over the crevasse with all the deceptive strength of a spider's web, large enough for a commercial plane to use it as a runway. I was betting it could handle the strain of it, too.

"I thought you might like to see it from the outside," Blaise said by way of explanation, as I picked up my jaw and we started up the stairs. "It's rather impressive the first time, no?"

"Sure," Aiko said, keeping her teeth from chattering by the simple expedient of clenching them and growling through them. "If you're a freaking *snowman*."

The Twilight Prince glanced at her, as though he'd just now noticed that she was cold. He gestured slightly, there was the faintest brush of wolf-and-tree scented magic, and the cold retreated. I wasn't sure how he'd done it, exactly; the snow wasn't melting, the wind hadn't stopped, and yet the air suddenly felt warm. "My apologies, Lady Miyake," he said seriously.

She glared at him, but didn't complain as we crossed the icy bridge. It should have been nerve-racking, crossing a bottomless pit on a bridge made of literal ice, but it wasn't. Perhaps the sheer scale of the bridge made any concern of falling seem ridiculous. Perhaps I simply assumed—correctly—that, ice or not, it wouldn't be the least bit slippery. In any case, we crossed without difficulty, and passed through granite walls fifty feet tall and at least as thick to enter the castle courtyard. The gates, which were built to the same scale as everything else in this land of giants, were slabs of ice nearly as thick as the walls, with layers and layers of runic inscriptions in them.

It was incredible. You couldn't lay siege to this place. All the defenders would have to do was collapse the bridge and close the gates, and you would never get inside, not unless you could fly—and even then, I was pretty sure the jötnar would knock you out of the sky without much difficulty. It was as near to impregnable as a place could conceivably be.

But then, if you're going to war with the gods, I suppose that's probably not a bad idea.

We passed through the barren snow-filled courtyard, which was otherwise empty, and ascended another sweeping stone staircase to the great doors of Utgard. They were made of some pale wood, perhaps ash, around a hundred feet tall and fifty wide, bound with bronze and iron. The jötnar were not fae, not precisely, and they had no more difficulty with iron than I did.

Blaise opened a smaller door inset into the massive ones and ushered us through into an entryway a thousand times as impressive as mine, although rather more sparsely furnished. It was large enough to fit a few soccer pitches without difficulty, and the granite ceiling was easily a hundred and fifty feet overhead. Blaise led the way straight through it to another door in the opposite wall, one a little more humanly-scaled. There was a fellow standing in front of it, wearing servants' livery of white

and blue, who looked like he could wrestle a polar bear and make it cry for its mother. He looked at me and got a seen-it-all-before expression. He looked at Aiko and it only deepened. He took one look at Blaise and his already pale face—what little of it could be seen behind a massive black beard, at any rate—started trying to imitate the snow outside.

He essayed a low, surprisingly graceful bow to the Twilight Prince. "Good evening, Your Lordship," he said.

"Good evening, Sveinn," Blaise said. "Might you escort my companions and I to the festival?"

Sveinn looked like he would rather shove his hand in a blender. "Might I see your invitation, sir?" he said diffidently to me.

I pulled it out and handed it to him. He read it pretty normally until he got to the signature, at which point he gulped hard, went even paler, and handed it back to me in hands which shook a little. "Everything seems to be in order," he said. "If it would please you to follow me, my lords, my lady." He turned and led us through the door and down a series of stone corridors. It was a *really* big castle; it probably took five, maybe even ten minutes for us to reach a broad balcony overlooking the party, with a magnificent staircase sweeping to the ground on either side.

The festival itself was being held in a room the size and grandeur of which I'd never seen bettered. It was a single massive hall easily a hundred and fifty or two hundred yards square, all of smooth grey granite. The ceiling, which was easily a hundred feet overhead, was a single enormous, flawless sheet of ice, letting in the light of moon and stars as the sunset faded outside. We had arrived early, it seemed, and the floor was sparsely inhabited. I couldn't see a band, but the air was filled with music, something that sounded like bagpipes skirling along over a heavy, rhythmic drumbeat that made me think of keeping time on a longboat. There were voices, lots of them, singing in a language I couldn't understand, and doing an excellent job of it.

At the balcony, Sveinn turned us over to an even burlier blond servant with unmistakable relief. Blaise proceeded past him and down the stairs, but the servant stopped us with an upraised hand and grim expression. He, too, checked out the invitation, also paling a little at the fact that it was signed, and then turned and walked out to the railing. He slammed his staff three times on the ground, the impacts resounding with the sort of volume more normally associated with medium-caliber gunshots, and the room, not all that noisy or active to begin with, went utterly still.

"My Lords and Ladies of the Sidhe," the herald boomed in a voice louder than most concerts. "Allow me to present to the Court the jarl of Ífingr, baron of Thrymheimr, and peer of Járnvithr; knight-banneret of the Most Noble Order of the Mistletoe; favored vassal of His Excellency Fenrisúlfr; slayer of Grutte Pier, champion of the Daylight Court of the Sidhe; bane of the Six Witches; chosen wielder of the most illustrious blade Tyrfin; the Honorable Lord Winter Wolf; and his consort, kitsune of the Chrysanthemum Court, the Lady Aiko Miyake." He gestured for us to proceed down the stairs. We did so, Aiko even going so far as to rest her fingers lightly on my arm—purely for show, of course; she was less likely to trip than I was, even wearing a hakama.

The Sidhe applauded, briefly and purely for form's sake, and went back to what they were doing. Thankfully; it had been quite uncomfortable having all of them focused on me. I didn't want to be dismissed, but that was a far cry from being the center of attention.

"Consort?" Aiko murmured as we went, so softly as to be nigh inaudible to werewolf ears two feet away. "*Consort?* Shouldn't they have *asked* me first?"

"If it's any comfort," I replied at equally low volume, "they didn't ask me, either. I don't even know what most of those titles *mean*."

Blaise was waiting for us at the bottom of the stairs. "A lovely performance," he told us, leading us off through the crowd, which parted before him without ever quite making it clear that was what they were doing. "Skrýmir will want to speak with you first, of course. His throne is directly in front of you, you can't miss it. I'll leave you to that, and then perhaps we'll be able to speak more later." He vanished into the crowd without waiting for us to reply.

"You know," Aiko said in a bare murmur, "I can't help but recall that the last time we tried to introduce ourselves to the host at one of these shindigs, it went rather badly."

"Me too," I muttered. "But there's not a lot of choice for it. C'mon, let's get it over with." We edged forward through the crowd, who all seemed to sidle out from in front of us. I suddenly wondered whether they'd been getting out of Blaise's way, earlier, or mine.

Something to think about another time.

The hall was pretty freaking big, and it took some time to move across it at a politely snailish pace. For once, though, it turned out to actually be impossible to miss the thing we couldn't miss. As it turns out, when a frost giant does a throne, he does it big. The dais was elevated several feet above the ground, and the throne itself was carved from a single piece of ice big enough to dwarf a man. The figure currently in it was well matched, being better than eight feet tall, and massively muscled. He looked like he could bench press a truck without any supernatural assistance.

He beckoned us closer once we were within sight, and we hesitantly climbed up onto the dais. He seemed content to spend a few moments examining us, and I returned the favor. Skrímir's skin looked hard and white as ice itself, and icicles had formed in his mane of ash-blond hair, and in his beard. His eyes were a shade of blue just a touch paler than Snowflake's, and inscrutable. He was wearing what looked like the entire skin of a polar bear for a cloak. Other than leather breeches and fur-lined boots, that was all. The cold didn't appear to inconvenience him.

He grinned suddenly, showing shiny white teeth that would have looked quite at home in a wolf's mouth, and leaned forward to thump me on the shoulder. It was a casual, friendly gesture that was still strong enough to make me stagger sideways. If I hadn't been braced against it, I don't doubt it would have sent me sprawling. "Hail and well met!" he said. His voice was so deep that even a speaking voice practically qualified as a growl. "Ah, but it's good to meet you at last, nephew."

I stared blankly for a second. "Nephew?"

"Well, I suppose if you want to speak technically, it's—" he broke off suddenly and turned to look at one of his hangers-on nearby. "How many greats, Ólaf?"

"Nine, my lord," he murmured.

"Aye, that's right. Nine-times-great nephew." He took in my blank expression and a scowl gathered on his face, swift and dark as a sudden storm. "They hadn't told you?" He really *was* growling now.

"Your Majesty," I said dryly, "I usually find it a safe assumption that no one tells me anything."

He chuckled. "Fair enough. You're one of us, boy, of my brother Hrym's line. What's the descent again, Ólaf?"

"Winter Wolf-Born, son of Carmine No-Counsel, daughter of Björn One-Hand, son of Herjólf the Sharp, son of Njáll Half-Burned, son of Asolf the Unwashed, son of Hallgerda Manslayer, daughter of Egil the Black, son of Sinfjötli Longtooth, son of Signý the Bloody, daughter of Hljoth the Fair, daughter of Hrym the Mighty." There was no hesitation in his voice.

God, I hoped there wasn't a test on this later. "I really, really want to stab something right now," I muttered, too quiet to hear.

Ólaf cleared his throat in the background. "There will be contests of arms later in the evening, if you would like to participate."

"There, you see?" Skrímir said with a laugh. "You've noble blood, nephew, and strong. Aren't afraid to show it, either, are you? Good! That's as it should be! A jotun is meant to be strong, aye, and fierce as well." He reached out and thumped me on the back again.

I swallowed dryly. "So...when your herald said I was a baron earlier...he was being serious?"

"Ah, that. You must speak with my brother for that, I fear; 'tis a courtesy title only, my boy, without lands or privilege. The lordship proper is held by—" He paused and glanced significantly sideways.

"Atli Nine-Graves holds the Völsung title following Gimli the Tall's death, my lord," Ólaf provided smoothly.

"Ah, yes, Atli. Fine young man, if a bit grim. I don't deal with him much," Skrímir said to me by way of explanation. "He's a forest lord, you see, and those folk keep mostly to themselves. As I was saying, you're a baron in name only until you tell Hrym to grant you lands to go with it, or you challenge Atli for it. Of course, my brother did make a point of calling you a peer, so you've a voice all the same in his Court."

I was starting to feel a little overwhelmed. "That's fine," I said numbly.

The jotun king grinned again. "Aye, you've no great need for legitimacy in any case, have you? As it should be, I say; we could use more fire in the younger blood. Although, it must be said, you're jarl in your own right. Fenrisúlfr made it so, and there's not a one as will challenge his word, is there?" That was apparently a humorous comment, because the half-dozen or so people on the dais laughed heartily.

"But that's enough of that," the giant said, chuckling a little. "You've a hunger, I'm sure, and if you're anything like any wolf I've ever met you'd rather feed it than listen to an old man talk. Go, eat, enjoy yourselves. And don't those pansy elves push you around, either; you're of my blood, and any as raises hand against you or yours in my hall shall answer for it, I tell you truly."

He waved us off and we backed down from the dais. Aiko's hand was still on my arm, but it was more to steady me now than her; after so many years of trying to figure out my ancestry, to have such an overload of answers simply *handed* to me was almost more than I could wrap my head around. "Are you all right?" she whispered to me once we were safely on level ground, and out of earshot of Skrímir and his kin.

"Fine," I murmured back. "Just a little overwhelmed, that's all." I glanced around and saw an enormous white-clothed table along the wall under the balcony where we'd entered, covered with an almost unimaginable array of dishes, bowls, and covered platters. "What say we follow Skrímir's advice? I haven't eaten since lunch."

"Hell yeah," she muttered. "I'm telling you, Winter, the food is worth coming all by itself."

I grinned, and we turned to enter the fray.

The only other time I'd attended a Sidhe party, I'd spent less than half an hour actually partying—and I'd been entirely focused, during that time, on obtaining certain information. I had been utterly overwhelmed, flooded with so many sensory experiences which someone from my world was quite simply not meant to experience that my mind went into safe mode and flat-out refused to process much of it.

Or, at least, that was what I thought at the time. In retrospect, it was really rather tame. I know this, because as it turned out the All Hallows' Eve masquerade of the Sidhe Courts was a whole lot more...*intense*. It was an experience beyond understanding, and far beyond the ability of words to convey. The room was mostly darkened, with only a few lanterns and the moonlight coming through the ice of the roof to illuminate the hall, with flashes of lightning casting everything into sharp relief. The music, which continued to drift sourcelessly throughout the hall, shifted and danced unpredictably, slipping from one style to another without warning, with a preponderance to the weird and spooky. Through this twilit hall strode and slunk and danced the Sidhe, though I would never have realized it had I not known whose party this was.

There were Sidhe guising as clouds of multicolored lights, or rail-thin shadows that spoke in a voice to chill the soul. Another being was nothing more than lips followed by a pair of arms, which picked them up and positioned them into the appropriate expressions. A gentleman in a dark suit who looked quite normal except for the smooth, blank skin where his face should be chatted amiably with a gowned lady who had a golden apple for a head. Their voices seemed to emanate vaguely from the chest region. And those were just a handful of the most tame out of hundreds of Sidhe there.

I swiftly discovered that everyone not of the Sidhe Courts was introduced by the herald before they entered the room. I wasn't entirely sure why; certainly nothing of the sort had happened at the last festival. Perhaps it was in reaction to my party-crashing and subsequent escape from custody, but I rather doubted it. I wasn't that important. More likely it was a difference of protocol from Ryujin's court to Skrímir's.

Some of those introductions were fairly interesting—although I quickly noticed that almost none of them were as long or aggrandizing as mine had been. The strangest might have been a skinny man in a grubby overcoat who looked even more uncomfortable here than I felt and was introduced simply as, "The fire in the wire." A woman pale as paper with eerie white eyes and waist-length hair blacker than a raven's wing was apparently, "The freezer of hearts and bane of men." She wore a floor-length white robe and moved as gracefully as a snow flurry. There were more, too, many, many more. After a while I mostly gave up trying to keep track of them, and only occasionally glanced up to look at the newcomers.

Time itself seemed strange, warped. This wasn't like the dislocated sense of time that intensive magic produced; I was quite familiar with that altering of perception. This seemed more like time itself had become something fluid, instable. I grew hungry and ate a dozen times, yet never grew tired or sleepy, nor did the logical consequences of all that food follow. Perhaps because time had become so strangely distorted, my memories of the parties are snapshots, instants and scenes unconnected by any form of narrative.

The food itself was, naturally, quite excellent. The cutlery was all of ice, yet it didn't melt, and it wasn't just me not finding it chilly. There was a staggering array of food, everything from the entirely mundane to the outlandishly exotic, every bit of it superb beyond anything my world had ever produced. I ate fruits I'd never heard of before, dined on the flesh of everything from snake to lemur, from raccoon to stoat. The roasted butterflies were pleasantly crunchy, although they had very little substance, and the raw squirrel with lingonberry-and-lemon sauce was incredible.

In one corner of the room, a group of satyrs and goblins and less identifiable things were holding up the bar, where a jovial jotun laughed and poured drinks from a jug which never emptied. I stayed far away from it—if it was anything like dwarven mead, which was the only other Otherside liquor I'd ever experienced, I couldn't handle a mouthful, let alone a glass. Aiko was more bold, and brought back a pair of icy goblets filled with amber wine. It tasted sweet and sour and cold and spicy all at once, and had a kick more like brandy than any normal wine.

A grove of dryads performed a mad, incredible dance, which had them flickering from naked, inhumanly beautiful young women into trees in an eyeblink. The trees themselves spun and lashed like

willows in a gale, though the air was perfectly still, as other dryads in human form danced through the boughs. Afterward, one of the dryads propositioned me so blatantly that I thought Aiko was going to stab her—although, to be fair, the dryad *had* made it clear the kitsune was quite welcome to come along, if she wished. Aiko touched her knife meaningfully, and I growled a refusal. The dryad shrugged and sauntered off, completely unconcerned.

Skrýmir, as it turned out, really *had* entered me into the contests of arms—without, I might add, telling me so. I performed with sword, and also in the wrestling competition. I was defeated handily by the second Sidhe I faced with the sword, but did rather better at the wrestling. I'd learned a decent amount of judo in my youth, and between that and my werewolf's (and, as it turned out, maybe jotun's, but that wasn't something I was prepared to think about right now) strength and speed I acquitted myself reasonably well. I beat a pair of the Sidhe, a jotun, and a small troll before losing to a jotun who went on to be the champion. I did well enough that Skrýmir congratulated me personally, and pressed a tankard of mead on me. It wasn't quite as good as the dwarven stuff Fenris had given me a taste of, but it was better than anything I'd had other than that and the wine earlier.

A slender, startlingly beardless jotun stood and declaimed skaldic poetry in a resonant baritone. I didn't know a word of the language, but the alliteration fell from his tongue with a power and significance that I could feel even so, and the poem had a beauty and a sorrow that transcended language barriers. The whole hall erupted into applause when he finished, and I was not the least enthusiastic among them.

Aiko, perhaps inspired by my example, took part in a gymnastics competition. It was a lot like a normal gymnastics meet, except that it was being held by the Sidhe. Thus, the parallel bars were a dozen feet apart and twenty high, the balance beam was no thicker than Aiko's belt, and so on. I doubt there are more than a handful of human athletes in the world that could have even performed a routine under such extreme circumstances. Aiko, who was by no means human and showing it more openly tonight than was usual, managed it handily, and still put on such a good performance that I don't think most professional gymnasts could have matched it under ordinary conditions—although she was still far from operating at her best. Her left side hadn't entirely recovered from its near-lethal dosing of deathstalker venom, and might never. She usually hid it well, but it's nigh impossible to do so while performing freaking gymnastics, and I could see that her limbs weren't reacting quite as perfectly as they should be—though, in all fairness, I was something of a special case. I doubt anyone who didn't know her fairly intimately would have noticed it.

She didn't win, of course. That went without saying. She was a kitsune, and thus far superior to most humans, physically—but she wasn't competing against humans. The Sidhe were as far beyond her as she was beyond a human. Even from my biased viewpoint, I couldn't deny that she had been blown out of the water. But she did better than some of the competitors, and what she lacked in technical perfection she made up for in spirit. She, too, got congratulations and mead from Skrýmir.

A pair of Sidhe nobles played a game of tennis like nothing I'd ever seen. The ball looked like pure starlight, and they batted it back and forth with silvery swords. When one of them finally missed



his parry, the starlight burned a hole straight through his chest. It must have cauterized it as it passed, because there was no blood when he slumped to the ground. The party didn't even slow. I saw a woman so beautiful it hurt to look at her dance by, wearing a black domino mask and nothing else. She never even flinched as she pirouetted across the body, her black stiletto heels leaving small bleeding holes.

There was a riddling contest. Neither of us tried our hand at that; we knew when we were overmatched. But it was quite popular, attracting several dozen of the Sidhe, a comparable number of jötnar, a pair of leprechauns, and a number of less easily identifiable races, attached to one or the other of the Sidhe Courts. I could hardly even understand half the riddles, but apparently it was very well done, and the eventual winner was unanimously decided to be a Sidhe lord of the Midnight Court.

I spent several minutes talking with an anthropomorphic wolf who was drinking what smelled like an exceptionally literal Bloody Mary. He congratulated me on having not been killed by the Wild Hunt that spring, at which point I recognized him as the only member of said Hunt who had seemed to be on my side against Pier's, and invited me to come hunting with him soon. I politely demurred, saying I was extremely busy and not sure when I would have the time, but we spent a while chatting, and I arranged a way to contact him before I left. Because, let's face it, I *am* a werewolf. We hunt in packs naturally, and I hadn't had anyone along but Snowflake in quite some time. I liked him, and it might be nice to go hunting with someone else.

At another table, a gryphon, a sphinx, a mantichore, and a pair of jötnar were drinking (or lapping, as the case may be) copious amounts of alcohol and trading hero, damsel, and sidekick recipes. I'd never have guessed you had to cook them differently. They invited me to join them, saying a werewolf's perspective would be refreshing, but I politely declined, because I was a terrible cook and as far as I was aware I'd never eaten any of the three. Besides, most of the time a werewolf's perspective boiled down to, "Have you tried eating it raw and bloody?", which I didn't think was likely to be particularly useful.

Aiko, possibly in competition with the dryads (unless maybe it was the other way round; afterward, I could never quite say what order my flashbulb memories occurred in, and Aiko wasn't much help) was talked into performing a dance by a Daylight Sidhe who apparently knew her in her younger, even wilder days. It involved a lot of jumping and athleticism, and flickering back and forth between human and fox, sometimes in midair. I couldn't even conceive of the coordination and practice it would require to manage it. She made it look easy and utterly graceful, although I'm reasonably confident she'd had at least one drink by then. It earned her a round of applause, complete with hooting and hollering—not from the Sidhe, of course, but some of the lesser fae and most of the jötnar were intoxicated enough that inhibitions were loosened. More mead was pressed on both of us.

A leprechaun (I recognized him as such only because Aiko, who had been friends with a leprechaun until he died, pointed it out to me) juggled a hundred gold coins, with more appearing and disappearing from thin air every second. I'd never seen anyone's hands move so fast.

There was a watermelon spitting contest, which turned out to be a lot like a watermelon *seed* spitting contest, except that it required a much larger mouth.

Something that looked like a cross between a wolf and ball lightning put on a light show like no storm my world had ever played host to. It must not have been attached to the Courts, because the herald had introduced it, but I couldn't for the life of me remember as what.

Aiko, who was pretty plastered by now, apparently said the wrong thing to a troll only a little bigger than Andre the Giant. It took a clumsy swing at her, which she dodged easily. All that booze must have gone to her head, though, because she had little of her usual agility, and actually tripped and fell getting out of the way. I stepped up and decked the troll before it could take advantage of the situation. Skrímir, who had apparently already been on his way to defuse the situation, slapped me on the back some more, and insisted I join him in quaffing another horn of mead. I was starting to feel a bit woozy, but couldn't see a polite way out of it.

A dozen Cu Sith crowded beneath the banquet table, squabbling over bones and snatching up tidbits dropped to the floor. Two of them began mating, as uncaring of their surroundings as if they'd been ordinary dogs although I was fairly confident they were as smart as people, or smarter. No one paid any mind, except to nudge them out of the way to get to the food. I stepped around them, and pretended I didn't see Aiko looking toward me significantly. My sensibilities don't align perfectly with society's most of the time, but there are some things even I won't do.

I know, it shocked me too.

There was a competition for the most obscene limerick. Aiko tried hard, and (perhaps inevitably) did much better at it than either of us had at the other contests. Eventually, though, she had to admit defeat at the hands of no less a personage than Skrímir himself.

I got her back in the stuff-a-ferret-down-your-pants contest, though. I was eventually disqualified by reason of having used magic to calm the ferret, but I still outlasted everyone else, and walked away without a scratch. Plus, because the rules hadn't technically forbidden that (probably because there weren't very many people who could pull it off; like I told Alexis, communicating with animals isn't a common talent), I still got the consolation prize, which was another drink with Skrímir.

A pair of female Sidhe flyted, surrounded by a jeering crowd. Only around a quarter or so of the insults they tossed back and forth were in English, the rest being a mixture of more languages than I could count (although Aiko, inevitably, understood quite a few of them). I thought it rather telling that "You couldn't sell beef to the starving" was considered by the onlookers to be one of the most extreme. Only the Sidhe.

Aiko sang a filthy German ditty with a jotun and a satyr, and followed it up with a French sailors' song describing a large number of anatomically improbable sexual activities, and which had more than a few people rolling on the ground laughing. Literally.

A group of sylphs put on a synchronized flying display. One of them, apparently more blitzed than the rest, flew into the wall and dropped to the ground. It got up and flew away without evident

impairment, though, and between that and the laughter and applause it garnered I suspect the accident was rather more intentional than it wanted it to appear.

One male Sidhe's costume was particularly good. He stood ten feet tall with limbs no thicker than pool cues, and his black clothing hung off him in tatters to expose a gaping void beneath. His head was a bare skull with vivid emerald flames in the eye sockets and a mouth much too wide, filled with teeth much too sharp. He pulled it off and did tricks with it, to the delight of the crowd. His skeletal companion, not to be outdone, removed a femur and played fetch with one of the faerie hounds.

Some sort of fae being I didn't recognize put on an elaborate puppet show. The puppets flew about without any sort of suspension, and spoke independently. I was pretty sure they were acting out some play or other by Shakespeare.

Aiko was approached by a Sidhe noble who'd seen her dance. Because she didn't carry her clothing with her when she shifted forms, she'd had to dance in the nude. He apparently thought her casual attitude towards that meant more than it did. I must have been getting fairly schnockered myself, because rather than politely disabuse him of that notion, I just stepped up and punched his lights out. I gathered he wasn't very popular, because even most of the Sidhe applauded that action. I knew I'd just made an enemy, but couldn't seem to regret it.

And on, and on, and on. More mead, more wine. The table never emptied, the music never ceased. Existence began to seem fluid, malleable. Reality stretched, twisted, melted, warped. I could no longer recall where I was, or why. The world outside these walls seemed no more than a fever dream half-remembered, ephemeral, like morning fog come sunrise. Had I ever not been here? The answer seemed elusive as a trout in the stream, inconsequential as a breath in the hurricane.

I ate and drank and danced and fought in a twilight hall beneath a roof of ice, while outside the stars wheeled and spun through a sky dark and cold as a midwinter night's dream and the snow fell ever more thickly. For a time I had no yesterday or tomorrow; I simply was, and that was enough.

Chapter Ten

The next thing I was aware of was pain. It felt like a giant with a slingshot had been using my head for target practice. I was additionally more nauseous than I had ever in my life experienced, and my mouth tasted like seven generations of rodents had lived and died in it.

I thrashed my way out of the blankets and flopped onto the floor, although it was a heroic effort. Crawling to the bathroom was harder than conquering a small continent. I managed to make it to the toilet and threw up my toenails before curling up on the floor and whimpering. I stayed there and waited for the world to stop spinning. I noticed, in the tiny portion of my mind not currently dedicated to tracking my own suffering, that I was not only at home, I was naked, and had no idea how either of those conditions came about.

*Serves you right*, Snowflake said lightly, not stirring from her place on the bed. *How many drinks did you have, anyway? You were both pretty well smashed when you got back.*

*I have no idea*, I said after a moment of thought. *There was quite a lot of mead involved, though. How did we get back here, anyway?*

*Through a portal, just like usual. You and Aiko staggered in arm-in-arm around dawn carrying a bottle of rum and a rubber chicken. I'm not entirely sure how you managed the stairs, actually; presumably you were swaying in opposite directions, and it balanced out. Then you had sex, which is actually fairly impressive considering how poor your dexterity and muscular coordination were, collapsed into bed, and crashed for almost ten hours.*

I groaned—well, I was already groaning, but it gained new tones of woe. *Oh gods. This is why I don't drink.*

*I thought that was to avoid the hangover.*

*Well, yes, that too.* This was the second I'd ever had—well, I suppose third technically, but the time I got hammered on one swallow of Fenris's mead the pain had been more because of my recent crucifixion—and I would be ecstatic if it was also the last.

Something occurred to me. *What time did you say it was?*

*Almost five in the evening. Why?*

*Shit.* I stood up, trying to ignore the way it made my head swim. *I'm supposed to meet the vampire at dusk.*

*Better get a shower then, don't you think?*

*No shit, Sherlock*, I said sourly, climbing into the shower. I turned it on very, very cold—by my standards, I mean, which means just above freezing. It wasn't very comfortable, which made it exactly what I needed right then. I threw up again meanwhile, but by the time I was finished showering I felt much better—or, at least, capable of ambulation and vocal communication. Barely.

I dressed hastily, somewhere between last night's costume and everyday wear, including my foci. I also had my Bowie knife and pistol on my belt, quite openly. If Katrin got upset by that when there was quite literally a war on, she could find some other schmuck to do her dirty work.

I hastily let Alexis know that we were still alive on my way out—I didn't have time for anything more. Aiko was still out cold, and I wasn't taking Snowflake on this trip. It was better, I thought, that she not show up on the vampire's radar more than absolutely necessary. I could tell she didn't like vampires any more than I did, because for once she didn't argue with me.

I jogged, unhappily, to Pryce's, and just barely made it in time to be considered dusk. By some standards, at any rate. I walked in the door and straight over to the bar. "Private room?" I said to Pryce, who nodded and gestured shortly. One of his staff, a sour-dispositioned man who moved with a fluidity entirely at odds with his elderly appearance, led me down a few back hallways to an unmarked oak door.

Pryce's private meeting room was nice. The carpet was thick and spotlessly clean. I knew it was spotlessly clean, because it was also spotlessly black, and black carpet shows *everything*. The furniture was very high quality, handmade with lots of oak and mahogany and no pine to be seen anywhere. The fireplace, which was big enough to roast a cow whole, held a massive blaze. Like the other time I'd been here, I thought that the pennants hanging from the rafters gave the place an oddly medieval feel.

I knew a bit more now than I had then, though. Before, the only one I had recognized was the Pack's stylized wolf's-face in black on grey. Now I knew that the nine-pointed white star on a black background was the Conclave's symbol. The Twilight Court was represented by a sunset (it could just as easily have been rising, but somehow I always thought of it as a sunset), more a matter of lines and suggestion than picture, in scarlet on green. The Vampires' Council's flag was azure, charged with a black dagger.

There were still plenty I didn't get, though. I had no idea what the cross-and-dragon was representative of, for example, or the crossed keys, or the three interlocked triangles in red, green, and blue on black. Given the context, though, I was reasonably confident they were important people. I should probably look into that.

"Rather petty to avoid looking at me, don't you think?" Katrin sounded amused.

"You'll have to forgive me," I said, doing so. She looked no different, of course; vampires, like most preternatural beings, are not troubled by the passage of time, at least not on the outside. She was tall and slender, and somehow hungry-looking despite full cheeks and chest, with ash-blond hair and sky-blue eyes. "It's been a long few days."

"You *do* look rather peaked," she said with mock concern. "Should you sit down?"

I growled, but took the seat across from her. "Damned faerie booze," I muttered. "What do you want?"

She sighed. "And here we were doing so well at being polite," she said, an edge of laughter only thinly veiled in her voice.

"I've been informed that I look peaked," I said dryly. "And I know for a fact I've got a lot on my plate, so how about for tonight we settle for businesslike instead?"

She chuckled. "As you wish. I assume you're aware of the rakshasa presence in the city?"

"Yup. I take it they're the folks you want me to whack for you?"

"Quite so."

I yawned, hugely and genuinely. "Well, it's kind of you to be so blunt. I don't suppose you could tell me why I should be inclined to do so? And don't tell me you'd owe me one," I said, forestalling her reply. "I've never been a hitman, and I can't say the idea has much appeal. I've got favors owed already, and I can get more without resorting to violence."

Her lips tightened, but other than that her pleasant mask remained firmly in place. "I assume you've heard about the bombing two nights ago?"

"Only very vaguely."

She nodded, as though she'd expected as much. "I expected as much," she said. "A kitsune had rented an apartment for the duration. They blew it up trying to kill her."

"The apartment?"

"The apartment *complex*."

I blinked. "That seems a little like using a grenade to kill a spider."

She smiled a little. "Not exactly. With the grenade you could at least expect to kill the target, whereas the kitsune was not even in the building at the time." The humor faded from her face. "Unlike more than a hundred and fifty civilians who were killed by the blast."

I suddenly felt less like laughing.

Her emotionless mask was firmly in place now, and she spoke with a cold, implacable ferocity. "Such a thing is not merely sloppy, it is inexcusable. It was the action of someone who kills for pleasure, nothing more. Such a clumsy, imprecise attack betrays an intolerable lack of discretion. It is beyond disgusting." She paused, and visibly reined in her emotion. "Wolf, I know that we've not always seen

eye-to-eye. You don't think highly of me, and I know that. But believe me when I say that I would never engage in such a...gaudy display, and I have no taste for killing without reason or precision."

I believed her.

"Where are they?" I asked.

"If I knew that," she said sharply, "they would not be."

I nodded. "Right, of course. Sorry. Look, I'm not any more kindly disposed to that sort of action than you are, but there's not a lot I can do about locating them, and even less I can do without that information."

"So you will help me?" she said, fastening on my lack of actual refusal like a leech.

"Maybe," I hedged. "But I'll be honest, I've got a lot going on right now. I don't know that I'll be *able* to help you. So let's put it like this, I'm not *opposed* to the idea. If you find them, call me and we'll see."

She looked like she was going to argue with me for a moment, then nodded reluctantly. "I suppose that's all I can ask. In the meantime, go get some rest; you look like you could use it. And Wolf?" she said as I turned to leave.

"Yes?"

"Watch your back. These people are ruthless, and it won't much matter to them whether you agree to help exterminate them or not. You're a threat to their dominance over this area just by existing."

I nodded, and did not thank her for the advice.

Less than three steps out the door, my phone rang. I glanced at it, and swore tiredly when I saw that it was Frishberg's number. "What the hell do you want?" I snapped as I answered it.

"Get your ass to the morgue," she growled, equally as brusque as me, and hung up.

I muttered under my breath, but I went. Fortunately my Jeep was more or less permanently in Pryce's parking lot; that made it simpler.

Of course, it is indicative of the poor condition my brain was in that I didn't realize that the last time I'd used the car, I'd left it out where I met Brick. Meaning that someone must have somehow arranged to have it brought back here, and I hadn't even realized until well past the point at which they could have used that opportunity to cause me lethal harm.

I had to get my act together, before it got me killed.

There wasn't a lot of purpose to worrying about it now, though. So I just grumbled some more and kept going. As before, Frishberg met me at the door. The pace of her work, which I somehow doubted had slowed, was beginning to tell. She looked worn, haggard, her eyes sunken. I was guessing she hadn't slept or eaten in quite a while.

"You look like shit," I said by way of greeting.

She snorted. "Yeah, well, you ain't exactly pretty yourself. Come on."

"What's the problem?" I asked, following her into the building.

"Well, let me put it this way," she said grimly. "When I said I wanted a change of pace, this was *not* what I had in mind."

I winced. "Ah. I see."

"I doubt it. You made any progress on those mystery corpses I showed you?"

I shrugged. "Minimal. I talked to a fairly reliable source who claimed it was the work of some latter-day witchhunter. She sounds like a real piece of work—ultra-rich, dedicated, and absolutely freaking psycho. He says she's been pulling similar stunts for the better part of twenty years, worldwide. Why, have you found any more of them?"

"Yeah, four. Surrounded by a dozen bastards just cut to pieces, normal-style." She glanced at me, and frowned. "But you already knew that."

I didn't bother denying it. "Well, yes."

"You didn't tell me," she said coldly.

I shrugged. "Wouldn't have done a lot of good. There was no evidence there you could use, and I knew you'd find it sooner or later."

"That isn't your call to make."

"Was I wrong?"

She glared at me and did not answer. "In any case, that's not why I called you. Hell, I only *thought* those were bad. If they were the worst thing I had to deal with I'd be frigging ecstatic. Instead, I've got *this*." She drew me to a stop next to corpse sitting on an examination table. Even by the standards of corpses, this one smelled pretty awful, fetid and sour. Otherwise, though, it seemed almost bland, with no visible injuries.

"Okay," I said after a moment, "I'll bite. What happened?"

Sergeant Frishberg looked like she'd just smelled something bad. "I've got twenty eyewitnesses saying this guy was walking down the street in the middle of the day. He was wearing a hoodie, and a lot



of people seemed to think he was a gang member or some shit, but he wasn't doing anything aggressive, just minding his own business. Then he suddenly draws a knife and starts waving it in the air, screaming. A college student who was out shopping told me it sounded like Indian—from India, I mean, not American—but he didn't have any idea what he was saying, says it was an archaic form."

"I can't imagine the tourists liked that," I said dryly.

She snorted. "No, they did not. So anyway, after a second or two, he took off running down the street, still waving his knife around and screaming his head off. Then he just dropped to the ground. We bring him in here, and do you know what the medical examiner tells me?"

I shook my head. At this point, I couldn't even guess.

"He *drowned*," she spat. "Middle of the street. There wasn't any water within a block of him. But when we cut him open, his lungs were fucking *soaked*."

Well, that was nice. It had to be magic—or at least I couldn't think of any other way for that to happen. If he shouted in Indian under stress, he was most likely a rakshasa, which meant he was most likely involved in the turf war, which meant that I could narrow down the suspects a little. It wasn't de Sousa; she would have stabbed him, or more likely touched him with her Killing Stone, not offed him with wacky magic rituals. It wasn't Katrin; even if it hadn't occurred during the day, this was not her style. If she wanted someone dead, I got the impression that the police would never find the body, let alone have twenty witnesses to a bizarre and overt killing. That left another rakshasa killing him in an internal power struggle, the yokai, and the skinwalker. I wasn't sure which prospect disturbed me most.

"I don't think I can help you with this one," I said after a moment's thought. I was being honest, for once. I didn't know anyone who could do this sort of thing; people with an affinity for water tend not to gravitate towards Colorado, after all. I like my city well enough, but it isn't exactly coastal.

"Nothing?"

I shrugged. "I can tell you it was probably magic. That's about it."

She exhaled through her teeth. "Damn. Well, he's not the only one I've got."

I blinked. "He's not?"

"Nope. The Asian guy's missing a bunch of inch-wide strips of skin—doc said blood loss was probable cause of death, but he didn't sound real confident. The chick has a broken rib through her lung, but there's no sign of blunt impact or anything to say how it happened. And the Latino's hair started growing the wrong direction, went straight through the skull and ripped his brain apart."

"You're shitting me."

"I wish. Creepiest thing I've ever seen. Made the examiner sick, and I didn't think that was even possible."

Well, that was interesting. That many bizarre, probably magic-caused deaths in a short time definitely suggested things were heating up. More than that, it suggested that someone had *wanted* to be obvious. Why? Because it would intimidate their opponents? Because they thought the competitors would be reluctant to garner that much publicity, and back off? I couldn't really say for sure. There were too many players whom it could have been, with too complex and obscure of motivations, and no way to say for sure which of them this had been. I did try to catch a whiff of whose magic it had been, but either they'd covered their tracks or the scent had faded. Probably both.

"I can't help you," I said to the sergeant. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing here for me to work with."

"Nothing?" she said testily.

I paused. "Well, almost nothing. I can tell you that this was meant to be seen. It's...gang warfare, right? This," I gestured at the corpse, "this is the equivalent of shooting up a restaurant in broad daylight. It's big, flashy, obvious. Someone was sending a message to their competitors."

"Gang war, eh?" she said thoughtfully. "I might be able to use that."

"Don't," I said seriously. "This isn't the work of ordinary gangs. They aren't afraid of the police, you personally can't do jack to them, and they can kill you easy as breathing."

"If I didn't know better, I'd say you cared."

"Well, then, I guess it's a good thing you *do* know better, right?" I grinned. "Look, sergeant, think of this as a professional courtesy. You're good at what you do. I'd hate to see you die for no reason. Chase these people if you want, but watch your back, and don't try to take them solo. If you manage to find them, call me. I'd be happy to help you deal with them."

"Deal with them how?"

I thought of bombed apartment buildings, and smiled grimly. "You know, sergeant," I said calmly, "I don't think the good people of Colorado Springs should need to worry about these folks, when there's so many other things going on right about now. Do you?" My smile spread, and she flinched a little and looked away. "As stressed as you are, mistakes are bound to happen. If they should get unlucky, why, I imagine they might run into an unfortunate accident while resisting arrest."

She nodded slowly, and escorted me out.

I would have liked to go home, climb back into bed, and finish the process of recovering from the Sidhe party. Unfortunately, I had obligations to fulfill. Alexis was owed a talk.

My little errand with Frishberg had eaten some time, but not all *that* much, and I wasn't surprised to find Alexis still awake. Snowflake, who was still upstairs, informed me that Aiko was awake,

but—astonishingly—significantly worse for the wear than I was, and disinclined to move. I told her that was fine and that I would be up shortly to resume sleeping, then sat down in the sitting room with Alexis. "Congratulations!" I said. "You're a blueblood."

"I'm what?"

"A blueblood. Fairly high nobility, I think."

She snorted. "Not hardly."

"Actually, you are," I said dryly. "Have you ever heard of the jötnar?"

"I don't think so."

"They're frost giants," I explained, "in Norse mythology. The Æsir—that's the gods, Odin and his kin—were constantly at war with them. If you needed a bad guy, it was almost always a jotun. They usually came out on the losing side, but not always, and if you consider whom they were going up against that isn't bad."

"What's that have to do with anything?"

"Well," I said slowly, "not a whole lot. But you're one of them! A quarter, at least."

"Winter," she said patiently, "you're not making a lot of sense right now."

"Right, sorry. It's been a long day. Anyway, the story is our maternal grandfather was Björn One-Hand, son of Herjólf the Sharp, son of Njáll Half-Burned, son of Asolf the Unwashed, son of Hallgerda Manslayer, daughter of Egil the Black, son of Sinfjötli Longtooth, son of Signý the Bloody, daughter of Hljoth the Fair, daughter of Hrym the Mighty." I thought it was fairly impressive I'd managed to remember the whole tally.

"I don't know what that means."

"Well, neither do I. I'm going to have to look into that, clearly, as soon as I have the time. But the important bit is that Hrym is big news—he's either the king's brother, or another king in his own right, I'm not entirely sure—which means that we're both nine generations removed from jotun royalty."

She stared at me. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely. The even gave me an honorary barony—although I wouldn't recommend presenting yourself to the court tomorrow and asking for one. I get the impression that the jötnar are old-school, which means that they value strength highest of pretty much anything, and you aren't badass enough to impress them. No offense."

"None taken, but...what does this *mean*, Winter?"

I shrugged. "Like I said, I'm still looking into it. But it explains a few things. It makes sense that even a quarter-jotun wouldn't feel much cold." I frowned. "Unless you're less than that. In the Eddas Sinfjötli was only half, which probably means another jotun bred into the line at some point, or you wouldn't have enough of it in you to notice."

"What about you?" she said, only half joking.

"I'm a special case," I said dryly, then paused. "Although, now that I think about it, Sinfjötli was also a werewolf—of some variety, at any rate, although in the saga he's described as being born with the talent, which suggests a different mode of action than a true werewolf. That's an interesting precedent, especially taking Fenris into account. I wonder whether there's an interaction between that and—"

"I'm sorry, Winter, but you're losing me."

I shook my head briskly. "I'm sorry," I said. "I'm a little fried, in case you didn't notice that. That's something I'm going to have to research later. For now, what's important for you to know is this. You're descended from jotun nobility, which means you might be able to get something out of them later on—they seemed really big on blood kinship. They're also strong and cunning enough to seriously challenge the gods, which means really, really old. Given that you got enough of it to do some low-level magic, I'm guessing that sort of power will be enough to retard the aging process, if not stop it entirely."

"Are you saying I'll live forever?"

I snorted. "Forever? No. Nothing lasts forever. But I suspect you won't age normally, which makes it quite possible that you will survive for a long time. Centuries, at least." I took in her expression of shock and grinned. "That's another thing we'll have to talk about later. For now, I'm going to go get some more sleep. I just thought you should know this much." I stood up and left.

The next day was the sort of thing nightmares are made of.

It started out reasonably well. I woke up just before dawn, as usual, and felt entirely recovered. Snowflake was bright-eyed, bushy tailed, and bored after a day of inactivity. Aiko, who drank about as frequently as I did and was significantly more susceptible to alcohol, was grim-faced and had a number of choice words on the subject, but had ceased to feel half-dead.

Snowflake and I got dressed, including our weaponry and armor, and left. I breathed a sigh of relief when there were no messages on my phone. The sunrise was lovely. We made it to Pryce's without incident, and the gossip was hardly aflutter with news of recent developments. It was emptier than usual, and I suspected that many of the lesser flames of the supernatural world were in hiding or gone elsewhere until this storm blew over, but none of the people there had heard of any explosions or attacks or other drama in the past day or two. I was reasonably confident that that was good news.

We ate an excellent breakfast and left, and I was really thinking that things were looking up, when someone fell in beside us on the walk home. He was of average height, but slightly stocky, with pale skin, brown hair and eyes, and aquiline features. "Good morning," he said in a pleasant but unremarkable voice.

I glared at him. "Do I know you?"

He smiled faintly. "We've not met, if that's what you mean. I am Sojobo."

"Ah. I'm Winter."

"I know who you are, of course," he said mildly. "Pleased to meet you."

"And yourself, of course," I said, and, belatedly, "good morning."

His smile broadened, very slightly. "It is quite lovely, at that, though the afternoon will bring rain." I had no reply to that, and we walked in silence for a time.

"I suppose you're here to tell me to piss off and let your kin take over the city," I said eventually, reluctantly. It seemed too pleasant a morning to ruin in this manner.

"Kazuhiro, you mean?" he said. "No. He's an earnest young man, but I don't know that he could or should hold this territory. He's made his choices, and he will succeed or not on his own merits."

"And yet," I commented, "you must want something, or you would not be here. We are far from your mountain."

He made a vaguely affirmative sound. "We all want something, don't we? It is a failing, I think, that we seek to so exert our will upon the world. If there is one wisdom I have gained, it is that I am far too foolish to deserve to make such choices."

"I have time for discussion," I said after a moment. "Maybe even for banter. But I think I'm rather too busy at the moment for games, and almost always for discussions of philosophy."

He laughed again. "Fairly spoken. I will be brief, then. You know, I think, that the one called de Sousa is here." I nodded. "She will not stay long. It is her way. She comes, and does her bloody work, and then is gone. She is always in places of disturbance, where her victims will arouse no excitement. This city is unsettled, in chaos—her favorite sort of place, and why she has stayed so long, when it is her more normal practice to move on after only days, or even hours. But even so, she will not remain in this area much longer."

"I cannot say I greatly regret that," I admitted. "I don't like having her around."

He chuckled. "I cannot argue that point. However, it also means that she will soon be beyond your reach."

I frowned. "That's true. And I also can't say that I'm happy just to let her go. I...don't approve of her actions."

Sojobo grunted quietly. "Good. You should not approve of such things." He was silent for a few steps, then said, "The Keepers will want you to return the stone to them. Have, perhaps, asked such of you already."

"That is true."

"I would rather that you gave it to me instead."

"Because they can't keep it safely?"

"In part. In part. But no, that is not my true reason." He frowned, and I got the impression that he was choosing his words carefully. When he did speak, they caught me entirely by surprise.

"I loved her, Winter. We had been together a thousand years, and neither of us anticipated that we should not be together a thousand years more. I *loved* her." His voice was intense, his expression grim.

"What happened?"

"That spring, she told me she wanted to spend a year or two at court," he said. He had lost something of the intensity; now, he just seemed bleak. "It was something she did, now and then. She loved deceiving all the courtiers, running circles around them, making them fight over her and then rejecting the victor. She made an art of it; she always said that humans were more amusing victims than her people or mine."

"Sometimes I went with her, played the attentive and devoted samurai paying court to her. But that year was one of much turmoil among the tengu. There were battles to be fought, traitors to be uncovered—the usual fare. And she was a nine-tailed kitsune. She could take care of herself."

"And she didn't call you for help? Not even after she'd been unmasked?"

He stopped walking, and his fist tightened at his side. "She did. I was occupied, and could not attend to the more ordinary ways of messaging. The emergency couriers she sent were...intercepted. I knew nothing of her plight, and had anticipated that she would be at court for at least a year, perhaps two or more." He sighed. "Tamamo was never fond of violence. I was not surprised that she had chosen to remain among the human court until it had passed. We had been in love for centuries; a few years of absence would not harm anything."

Sojobo was silent for a long minute, and when he spoke again his voice was thick with emotion. "Five years," he said. "Five long, bloody years. That's how long it took me to settle matters and return home. I expected that she would have tired of the humans, and would be waiting for me. Do you know what I found instead?"

I was silent.

"Nothing!" he roared, the volume making a few pedestrians look askance in his direction. "I found nothing!" He visibly forced himself to calm down. "I found, years too late, the messages she had left for me—though it would take me years more to learn of the couriers she sent, who were waylaid. I loved her for a thousand years, but when it mattered most I failed her."

I winced.

It was a long moment before he continued, and when he did his voice had gained a new tone, a deceptive and dangerous calm. I recognized it. There were a number of old werewolves I'd dealt with who, when they were *really* pissed, got that same calm, almost serene tone. People who didn't know them were sometimes fooled into thinking that meant things were safe. People who *did* know them had a tendency to make themselves scarce at that point, or sometimes just scurry for cover.

"Her murderers had hidden their tracks well, but they did not anticipate that I would be alive, nor that I would dedicate myself to their destruction with such a wrath as to shake the earth. I hunted them down, over a period of decades, and found a cabal of yokai and humans, led by another dai-tengu. They thought that her death would break me, and leave room for them to take power."

"I showed them wrong."

"It has been nigh on a millennium since that day," he said, still in that frighteningly calm voice. "My pain has not lessened with the passing of centuries. Since then, there has been no joy in my life. All lands are bleak and wasted to my eyes. All my thoughts are grim and drenched in blood; my heart lies fallow, and brings forth a crop of weeds and poison. I hear her laughter on the wind, and see her smile in my dreams, but these bring no surcease from the pain. Such things only serve to keep the agony fresh in my soul."

Wow. That was impressively lyrical. Also, seriously hardcore.

"As you might imagine," he said after a long, brooding pause, "the story was not so clear in the years after her death, nor was it so widespread as it is today. I had not heard of her death until years after it happened, and when I did my first priority was slaying her killers. It took more than sixscore years for me to learn of the Killing Stone she had left behind, by which time it was in the Conclave's possession. They told me it was merely the subject of her death curse, meant to bring sorrow and death to the world which had hurt her so, and I did not question. It was not, I thought, so surprising that she would wish vengeance, and in the moment of her death not care whom that vengeance was inflicted upon. I did not ask for the stone. I wanted no reminders of my failure, nor did I care to interfere with my beloved's revenge. I dedicated myself instead to enforcing order over my kin. There is no dissension among the tengu any longer. There is no warring. I do not permit it."

Okay, Sojobo was really starting to scare me now.

"And then," he continued, "twenty years ago, I learn something else. Reynard, with whom I have had some acquaintance and who is kin to her people, came to tell me that the Killing Stone had been taken. That it had been turned to evil ends by a madwoman. And, as none before had the courage to do, he told me that this Stone was no mere cursed bit of rock, but the body and soul of my love." His fist once more clenched by his side, and he resumed walking, heels striking the ground with unnecessary force. "Now, when it is too late, I know how very deeply I have wronged her, how I have failed her once again. I cannot find this woman, de Sousa. She is protected against divinations, and knowledgeable in the arts of concealment. For twenty years have I sought her blood, and for twenty years have I failed."

We walked most of a minute in silence. Sojobo was breathing hard from the force of his emotion, and I couldn't blame him. A thousand years of self-loathing and perceived failure was a hell of a burden to carry, and I doubted he had let it out in this way for a long, long time.

"I will help you," I said finally, reluctantly. "You have my word. If what you say is true. Should I obtain the Killing Stone, it will be yours, and no other's. Should you find this woman, if it be at all possible, I will help you to kill her."

"Why?"

I thought for a moment. "I suppose," I said slowly, "it's because I know how it feels to fail someone. I can't make up for my mistakes. It's too late for the people I failed. But you can, and you're trying to. I respect that." I glanced at the eldest tengu. "Find her. And I will help you bring her down."

He nodded, his expression thoughtful. He turned down the next alley, and I did not follow.



Chapter Eleven

After my chat with Sojobo I went back home, at least for a while. I wasn't at all sure what to do next, and figured it would be better to sit and think in a safe location.

I hadn't had much of a chance to just sit back and think for some time. Now that I did, I was almost surprised at how overwhelmed I was. I felt like a man trying to tread water while holding a barbell over my head.

I'd spent the past several days running from crisis to crisis, desperately trying to keep any one fire from growing too large to handle, unable to concentrate on any of them long enough to actually extinguish it. And the hell of it was, I hadn't really accomplished all that much. I mean, sure, none of my friends were dead, but plenty of other people were. I still didn't know who or where my enemies were, not with any precision. I couldn't stop the fighting.

It had been unbelievably arrogant, really, for me to think that I could. This was too big for me.

It was at around that time that Aiko walked in, guzzling what smelled like watermelon juice. "Hey," she said. "Who's dead?"

"Nobody, yet," I said. "I did have a chat with Sojobo, though."

"The Old Man of the Mountain himself?" she said, impressed. "Damn. You move in high circles."

"You know him?"

She shrugged, the motion neither confirming nor denying. "Stories. You know. Never met him. We can't all be like you, related to frigging everybody."

I snorted. "Yeah, you aren't exactly a peasant yourself. Speaking of relations, did I tell you one of your cousins is helping the tengu with their turf war?"

"Don't think so. Which one?"

"Kimiko, or at least that's what she told me to tell you."

She grimaced. "Oh. *Her*."

"Something wrong?"

Aiko shrugged. "Not exactly. We aren't, like, nemeses if that's what you mean; she's just...way, way, *way* too serious. Her father was a six-tail, scary dude. He was old-school, samurai style—you know, codes of honor, service without question, death before dishonor, the whole thing. Went around whacking bad guys and stuff. When I was twenty—she'd have been six—a handful of vampires decided

they'd had enough of it and kidnapped her and her mother. He got 'em back, but died doing it—you know, typical goody-two-shoes sort of thing."

"The sort of thing that might leave you with something to prove," I mused.

She snorted. "No shit. Doesn't help Kimiko turns into a fennec. She's got an inferiority complex the size of a mountain."

I could see why. A fennec fox was the smallest living canid in the world—seriously, we're talking poodle-size, or smaller. Rather a comedown from a notorious samurai father. I mean, that was one heck of a reputation to live up to. I thought I was starting to understand why Kimiko might be willing to risk her life for a bit of street cred.

"What are you doing now?" she asked. I could hear a touch of something not quite envy in her voice. She didn't blame me for it—she'd made it very clear, all along, that it was her choice, and she'd known there would be consequences—but I knew she resented being trapped on the Otherside while I went out and got in brawls.

"Not sure," I said. "I'm considering throwing in with the yokai."

She stared at me. "You gotta be shitting me."

"Actually, for once I'm being entirely serious. I don't have the resources to deal with this myself. I don't think I can kid myself into believing otherwise anymore, do you?"

"Well, no, but you can get them. I mean, shit, Winter, you've got contacts, you know people. You don't think any of them would back you on this?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "But think about it. You're talking about begging help from Loki...making deals with the Twilight Court...bringing the Khan into a local conflict...." I shook my head. "You know what that would mean, Aiko. There would be a price to pay. There would be *consequences*."

"What about Skrímir? He seemed fond of you."

"Sure. But there's a pretty big difference between giving your great-nephew a drink and giving him an army. And there'd be political backlash if he were to stick his nose into this at this stage. He wouldn't do it for free." I looked at her curiously. "Why are you so upset about this, anyway? It's *your* people we're talking about."

"Exactly," she said grimly. "We aren't good people, Winter. I mean, hell, you've seen the stupid shit I do. You know exactly what kind of irresponsible, immature, irrational imbecile I tend to be. I'm a delinquent virago, a brazen kleptomaniac, a flagrant zoophile, a recidivistic vandal, and a feckless hussy with more neuroses than a small fandom convention."

"That was really nice," I said. "I'm impressed."

*I know*, Snowflake said, the first she'd spoken since we got home. *I'm going to have to look a few of those words up.*

"Thank you," she said modestly. "But the fact remains that you've gotta ask yourself, do you *really* want a bunch of people just like me in charge around here? I mean, shit, at least I'm smart enough to recognize that I shouldn't be responsible for anything more important than a teacup."

"Granted," I acknowledged. "Do you have a better idea? Do you have even *one* better idea? Because I don't."

"I hate when you get all rational," she grumbled. "Completely out of character. How am I supposed to deal with that?"

"Beats me," I said cheerily. "Don't worry, though, you've got some time to think about it. I'm not going to act on it until I'm sure there's not a better option. Is Alexis awake?"

"Not sure. But I strung a tripwire across her doorway, so—" There was a sudden crash from upstairs, making Aiko grin. "Well, speak of the devil. She's definitely awake now, I'd say."

I laughed. "Did the maple syrup get her? I haven't had a chance to ask."

Her grin became wider and more malicious. "Yep. You should have heard her complaining about how hard it was to get out of her hair."

"That's wonderful," I said enviously. "I'm going to have to remember that one." I frowned. "Expensive, though. Good maple syrup is spendy as hell."

She snorted. "Yeah, like that matters to you." She stood up. "Come on, I'm hungry. Think there's any pizza left?"

I frowned, following her to the kitchen. "Can't remember," I said, and then almost ran into her when she stopped in front of me. "What is it?" I asked, edging closer.

"That wasn't there before," she said, walking slowly over to the table. I felt a twinge of panic at the words—it's almost never good to be surprised in your own home—and followed her. Snowflake stuck to my heels, growling slightly. Aiko picked up a sheet of parchment maybe a foot square and read it.

"What's it say?"

Rather than answer she handed it to me, her expression unwontedly grim. I understood why the second I saw the letter. It read:

*Wolf,*

*I regret that it has come to this, but your actions leave me little option. I have your friend, the cook, in my keeping. Quit the field and leave the city immediately, and she will come to no harm. Remain, and she will die. Oppose me, and that death will be slow and horrible. The choice is yours.*

*Again, I regret the necessity of this ultimatum; rest assured that had you listened when first we spoke, this eventuality would not have come to pass.*

There was no signature at the bottom. Instead, it had three marks of authenticity. The first was a long, dark, straight hair. The second was a drop of blood which had stained the parchment. I had no doubt that they both belonged to Anna. The third was a red wax seal, with the impression of an eagle in it. I sniffed it tentatively, and—as expected—found that the wax was shot through with the reek of magic and rot. A guarantee, of sorts. This had been sent by the skinwalker.

*Are you okay?* Snowflake asked, at almost the same time as Alexis walked into the room and said, "Is everything all right?"

"No," I said. My voice was such an icy, flat sound that I almost didn't recognize it. It was, I noted absently, almost the same tone Sojobo had used. "Nothing's all right." I resisted the urge to shred the parchment far past the point of recognition. I knew I wouldn't be able to stop there once I got started, and it's never wise for a werewolf or anything like one to lose control of his anger. Besides, it wouldn't improve anything. My motions were calm, almost gentle as I placed the letter back on the table.

*Well, obviously,* Snowflake said, *but your shoulders are really tight and you're breathing pretty fast and your knuckles are going white and I'm really starting to worry over here, so if you could maybe take a few deep breaths and count to ten I think it might help, all right?*

I ignored her. "That's it," I said, in that same deceptively calm voice. "That is *it*." I turned and walked towards the front door.

"Winter? What are you doing?" Alexis's voice was shaking, and she looked like she was about to be sick.

"I'm ending this," I said. My voice held all the warmth and kindness of a mountain blizzard, and even Snowflake flinched away at the sound. I walked out without further conversation.

I wanted to kill the skinwalker. I really, really wanted it. My instinctive, ingrained reaction to threats against my pack was to respond with swift and brutal violence. My first impulse upon reading that note was to put on my armor, buckle on Tyrning, grab every weapon I owned, and go visit the wrath of me upon him.

However, I also knew that that was *exactly* what he was expecting. I mean, sheesh, could it *get* more predictable than that? I was known for an irrational protective streak regarding those few individuals I cared to protect; I was known for anger issues, and for preferring simple, straightforward solutions where possible; I was a *werewolf*, which could only exacerbate those traits. It's no harder to predict a stopped clock than to expect violence from a werewolf under those conditions.

Rushing in blind would get me killed. Now, I'm going to die someday, and I can guess with some confidence it will be my own fault, but I didn't want it to be because of a mistake *that* stupid. Furthermore, I was certain that playing right into the skinwalker's hands would do nothing to help Anna.

Reacting quickly wouldn't get me anywhere. I had to react *intelligently*.

With that in mind, I set about making certain arrangements, getting into contact with certain people. It cost me a fair amount of cash, and a couple of debts that I would normally have hesitated to cash in. At the moment, I didn't think once about it, let alone twice.

I'd had enough of this war. If ending it meant paying a price, well, it was a price I was willing to pay, even if I didn't know just what it would be.

Finally, at around noon, I decided I'd done everything I could think of to do, and went home to seek counsel from a demon.

It is said, by some New Age gurus and self-help books, that thought is real. Now, most of the time I have less respect for such sources than for the advice of circus performers, who at least have to have a sizable quantity of skill and knowledge to do their jobs. However, in this specific case, they actually *do* have a point—more by accident, I suspect, than any actual intelligence.

Thought is real. It has a weight, a substance to it which, although unlike physical objects or strength, and unlike magic, would only be discounted by fools. In thoughts—purely mental constructs, with no physical reality or reflection therein at all—like *love*, *hope*, and *faith*, there is a power quite undeniable.

It's only a short step from there to the idea that some thoughts have so much reality that it doesn't matter anymore whether someone is actually *thinking* them. They can, in essence, think themselves. They're...alive, in a certain sense of the word, although it doesn't apply precisely. They have a sense of self and a discrete nature.

That's Legion. Except he isn't an idea like love or hope or faith. Legion is a spirit of death, destruction, decay—and, because there is very little which is wholly positive or negative in this world, also of rebirth, strength, regeneration. The simplest way I've found to describe him is as a necessary evil. Not in the sense that there's some choice between him and something worse, but because he embodies that which is unpleasant and destructive and horrible, but without which you cannot grow, and become weak.

Someone has to do it. But there are reasons I call Legion "demon", and not the more general term "spirit." He isn't one of the good guys, on any level.

I didn't see Aiko, or Snowflake, or Alexis when I walked in. Probably they were avoiding me, and with reason; I was still all but shaking with suppressed emotion. I was chafing with the knowledge that

every moment of delay was probably causing Anna significant suffering—because, come on, did *anyone* buy that line about coming to no harm? Yeah, didn't think so—but unable to come up with any way to do this faster that didn't end with me dying in agony, and probably her too.

The resultant tension had me a little upset.

I walked into the lab and sat down on a plain hardwood chair at the worktable. "Legion," I called. "I need you."

A skeleton, tucked neatly into the corner of the room, began to quiver. It was more or less canine in shape, but larger than most any dog, and lean. Aiko had pieced it together from Cu Sith much like the ones we'd seen at the party the other night. By the time we got through with them, they weren't in very good shape; it took her a dozen faerie hounds to get a complete skeleton. Legion, as a spiritual entity, needed a vessel to interact with the physical world, and the skeleton was it. It was more common to put a spirit into an animal host, but I hadn't cared for the idea, for rather obvious reasons.

"Took you long enough," he said irritably, as thick black fog seemed to boil out of the bones and cover them in a dense, shifting cloud. It was filled with sparks of multicolored light, with two larger aquamarine sparks for eyes. "It's been four weeks since you called me."

"You go into a state of dormancy in between anyway," I said, relaxing slightly. Sparring with Legion was an old, familiar routine, pun most definitely intended. It was calming. "So don't tell me you got bored. Besides, before that I took you to that amusement park, remember?"

His eyes glittered a bit more brightly. "Hell, yeah. We should do that again."

That was, more or less, how I paid Legion. He wasn't physical in nature, and this world was very foreign to him. There were many things I took for granted—sensory input, emotional reaction, that sort of thing—which were a source of intense fascination for the demon. Occasionally I—or Aiko, or rarely Snowflake (she has issues with demons in general, and Legion in particular)—let him temporarily occupy my body and mind in order to vicariously experience material existence. He's a sense junkie, basically.

One of the more interesting things I've learned about demons is that they don't seem to distinguish between positive and negative experiences—hell, he can't even tell the difference. He's equally as intrigued by hunger, pain, and fear as things like lust, pleasure, or happiness. It's like the specific character of a stimulus doesn't matter nearly as much to him as its absolute value.

"How much do you know about skinwalkers?" I asked him, toying idly with a pencil. I have a tendency to take notes while talking with Legion, because he mocks me relentlessly if I have to ask him to repeat a point.

Legion had a nasty habit, which I had been entirely unsuccessful at breaking him of, of conveying an impression with perfect clarity, but without giving me any idea of *how* it had been conveyed. This time, I understood that he had imparted the equivalent of a shrug, but the skeleton never moved, and his voice didn't change at all. "Enough," he said simply.

"Wonderful," I said. "Start with the basics."

"You da boss, Boss," he said in an affected Chicago accent. "How familiar are you with native superstitions and beliefs regarding magic?"

I grimaced. "Not at all, beyond extremely basic stuff." There was, as I had often been given cause to bemoan, simply *too much* for anyone to know it all. I'd focused most of my efforts on present-day organizations, and particularly on the denizens of the Otherside who had a tendency to interact with my world. My knowledge of historical trends and minor sects was woefully incomplete.

"Of course," he said. His tone was the usual utter blandness, but I got the impression of disgust all the same. "Well, essentially, the native tribes had a much different attitude than most of the world. Magic was never seen as something external to everyday life, and mages were never marginalized the way most human cultures historically have. The shaman was considered a normal, if respected, member of the group, not entirely unlike a priest in that regard."

"Clarification," I interrupted. "Do you mean shaman as in the social role, or the definition of a skilled mage with an unusually strong connection to the spiritual?"

"The first," he said, displaying no anger at being cut off. "Although there was an extraordinarily high proportion of shamanic magic among them, as well, presumably due to cultural background. In any case, the salient feature is that magic was seen as a tool, something which existed to serve the people. The shaman was expected to serve the tribe, often at personal expense or danger."

I frowned. Mages were essentially just ordinary people, in most ways. And, like any group of people, that one inevitably included assholes. "Not every mage would be willing to do that."

"Precisely," the demon said, his manner that of a schoolteacher when a dim bulb managed to make an intelligent observation. "There will always be mages who look at a millennia-old tradition of helping, guidance, and sacrifice, and turn their backs on it."

"That doesn't make sense, though," I murmured. "People like that turn up everywhere. Skinwalkers are native to North America. What gives?"

"You would learn more if you interrupted less. To answer your question, not everyone abandons tradition. Sometimes you get a person who elects instead to turn it inside out, corrupt and betray it actively. In this context, that means harming others for your benefit rather than vice versa. Thus, skinwalkers: those who sing to harm rather than heal, sacrifice others for personal gain, and reap the power of sorrow and death for their meat and drink."

"In most accounts," I said thoughtfully, "a skinwalker tears the hide from his victim and uses it to change shape."

"Right," Legion agreed. "Skinwalkers are almost never natural shapeshifters. That's a rare talent, and it tends not to occur alongside the magics they depend upon. In essence, a skinwalker examines his

victims on an extremely intimate level. By observing, both physically and magically, how the body and mind react to various stresses, he begins to understand that body and that mind. People opposed to the practice tend to characterize it as torture, but the process is actually a good deal more complicated than that. It's as important that the skinwalker understand the subject's responses to pleasurable stimulation as to pain. Eventually, once he understands them from the inside out, he kills them, slowly—usually he'll skin 'em alive, but that's not actually necessary for the ritual. They just have to die slowly, so that he has lots of time to take in the pain and the emotion and the *life* the victim puts off. The skin serves as a symbol that he can associate with the person it came from. Because he understands them so well, and there's a bit of them still in him, he can use it to take on their form, right?"

I stared, caught between horror and a sickened fascination. "Holy shit," I breathed. "Legion, that's horrible. Even by your standards."

The demon gave the impression of a shrug. "What can I say, Boss? There's reasons people don't like skinwalkers."

"No kidding." I rubbed my forehead and shivered a little. "Wow, that's seriously creepy. Okay. You said there's a part of the victim that stays in the skinwalker. How does that work?"

"I'm not entirely sure. I've never actually worked with a skinwalker, you understand, so this is all from talking with spirits that have. But as I understand it, the key is the process of oscillating between pain, pleasure, sexual release, and various emotional extremes. It degrades mental barriers—hell, even you monkeys have figured that out, and you've got nothing on skinwalkers when it comes to torture."

I frowned. "Almost like a vision quest, then. Breaking down the mental filters we use to interpret reality."

"Exactly," he said approvingly. "The whole thing is a mockery of shamanic tradition, right? The same principles, just inverted and corrupted. Most skinwalkers, if they're seriously trying to acquire a new skin, drag the process out over a couple months at least—years, sometimes. After that long you don't even know who you are, let alone what's happening to you."

I shook my head. "But how does that let them change shape? I mean, drive someone crazy, yes, I can see where that sort of thing would be great at that. But how do you get from that to a skinwalker?"

"Like I said, I've not studied it in detail. But the theory is that they've forged a connection with the person, established a bond, whatever. Sort of like lovers. It's in the opposite direction, sure, but there's the same intimacy and so on, right? Then, when they finally die, you sort of use that connection. They're gone, but they've left a mark on you, and between that and the fact that you *know* how their body works, you can turn yourself into some semblance of them."

"So the shape they take on has some connection to the person they took it from?"

"Yep. That's why most skinwalkers tend to pick their victims carefully; you want the biggest, strongest one you can find. It's hard to have more than one skin that are really similar to each other,



though; you run into trouble trying to keep them distinct in your mind. Most skinwalkers can only do one of any given animal, and they can't turn into another human at all."

I made a note of that. It might be useful at some point. "You know," I mused, "that sounds almost like what Garrett did." Garrett White, werewolf, shaman, serial killer, and all-around lunatic, had killed wolves and bound their spirits to his soul and those of other werewolves. It had been a while, but I would never forget the feel of his magics. Garrett has a special place in my heart, after all; it was killing him that put the last nail in my chances of ever having an even slightly normal life.

"Right," Legion said. "I wasn't there for that part, but I'm pretty sure what he was doing was based on skinwalker traditions. He was really sloppy, though, or else whoever showed him that wanted him to die. When he killed those wolves, they never really *died*, you know? He took the mind and personality, not just the feeling. That's why he went batshit. A good skinwalker, the skin is just an extension of himself. The person who contributed it is dead and gone."

"You keep saying person," I noted. "I thought this wouldn't work on humans."

He snorted. "Yeah, right, 'cause there's *such* a huge difference between humans and animals. You of all people should know better, Winter. The whole point of this is to target the part of the animal that *is* a person. Try it on something stupid, like a snake or something, it doesn't work very well. It won't work at all on an insect or a sponge, or anything really without a brain and some degree of self-awareness."

I shivered again. "Right. So how many...skins? Is that the right word?" Legion, once again, indicated confirmation without any gesture or word, and I continued. "How many skins does a skinwalker have?"

"Depends," he said, with a motionless shrug. "The thing to remember is that a skinwalker is still a mage, just a really psycho one. It takes time for them to learn these things, and most of their power *comes* from learning, from knowing things and studying things. The older they get, the stronger they are. And they don't age, either; they absorb life energy when they kill, sort of like a vampire."

"Wonderful," I muttered. "I'm guessing the really old ones have several thousand years of experience, right?"

"Yup. Don't worry, though, it isn't likely you'll run into one of those. I don't know why, but the Conclave *really* hates skinwalkers, and the Council isn't much better. They actually managed to get along long enough to do a purge around a thousand years ago, and practically wiped them out. That's why they allied with the Pack, actually; no one else would have them, and they needed *some* kind of backup or they were going to be eradicated."

"Why would the Pack want anything to do with them?"

Legion made an interested noise. "You know, I'm not actually sure about that. I was working with a necromancer in Russia at the time—he did some really fascinating work, I'll have to tell you about

it sometime—and by the time he paid any attention at all it was a done deal. They must have gotten something out of it, because no one would help a skinwalker otherwise, but I don't know what it might have been."

I grunted. Another mystery to look into, then. "So, assuming they aren't one of the ancient ones that survived the purge, how scary are we talking? Ballpark."

Legion not-shrugged again. "More than you. Not as much as a god. A true skinwalker has all the power of a witch with at least thirty or forty years of experience and no limits. They're good at various curses. Most of 'em have a fair amount of skill with blood magic, necromancy—you know, the usual 'evil witch' repertoire. You do the math. The actual shapeshifting isn't really that great, combat-wise. It's the magic you've gotta worry about."

I groaned. Wonderful. I'd gone up against witches a few times before. I'd had werewolves, the Inquisition, Aiko, and Snowflake backing me up, and the witches hadn't even been fighting seriously, and they still thrashed me soundly. Every time I'd encountered one in anything like a fair fight, straight-up, I lost fast and hard. It wasn't even a contest.

And I was pretty sure neither of them had been anywhere near skinwalker-scary. Let Legion say shapeshifting wasn't a threat; I'd *seen* shapeshifters go at it before. They dished out a serious beating, and that was with only *one* alternate form and no other witchery backing it up. A polar bear with no fear of humanity was a serious opponent, easily a match for several unarmed people. Add in humanlike intelligence, and a shapeshifter could potentially represent a real danger to armed humans, or a werewolf in fur.

A skinwalker would be worse. *Lots* worse.

There wasn't a lot I could do about that, though. So I pushed aside the thought of how insanely dumb I must be to voluntarily tangle with this nut, and set to preparing for it as best I could instead. I made a stored spell, with Legion's guidance. Like everything produced with his methods, it was unstable, humming faintly with the energies coursing through it. They were stronger than I could manage with a comparable amount of effort using the techniques Alexander had shown me, but the shelf life was just a few days, which is why I didn't really use them very often.

Of course, in this case, that wasn't a bug, it was a feature. Besides which, this one would probably last longer than most. It was a lot more in line with my natural talents than most of the things I made, and that helped a whole lot.

That done, I sent Legion back into dormancy, and went upstairs.

I found Aiko and Snowflake easily enough, in the library on the second floor. It was a smallish room, which in this context means merely large enough to be a perfectly adequate, even comfortable enclosure for, say, a wolf. I'm not exaggerating, either; I measured it once, just for kicks, and it was a little under half an acre. And it was *still* on the small side, as far as rooms in that house went. Our bedroom was easily five times that size, probably more.

The library was still one of my favorite rooms, though. It wasn't anything like the Keepers' archives, but it still had a few thousand feet of shelf space, of which I'd filled relatively little. There were all kinds of bookshelves, ranging from lovely ebony built-ins to freestanding shelves tall enough to justify the rolling ladder. There were even a couple of heavy, glass-doored cabinets for the display of particularly valued works—or, in the case of the one with heavy-gauge wire screens, bulletproof glass, multiple locks, and heavy-duty built-in warding spells, particularly dangerous ones. That one had my handful of texts on magic, supernatural politics, and unexpurgated histories. I had one of the keys. Aiko had the other.

I considered it one of my better tricks. You see, if you have a cabinet full of dangerous, invaluable books, one complete with extremely serious protections, people *expect* you to keep the key on your person at all times, so I did. With luck, they would work so hard trying to steal it, it would never even occur to them that for a key to even *exist* would be an unacceptable security breach. I'd destroyed the real key almost immediately after moving into the house. The only way through those locks was to pick them. And they were very, very difficult to pick.

The only other display case I'd moved anything into was filled with philosophical and religious works. I had a lot of them. I'd always been fascinated with mythology—it started with trying to figure out the identity of my father, a process I'd only partially succeeded at, and grew into a near-obsession—and once Loki implied that the Poetic Edda was at least slightly accurate, I figured it would be smart to make a point of studying such sources more closely. Thus, in addition to more mainstream religious texts, I had both Eddas, a number of sagas, all four of the major Irish cycles, the Kalevala, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, the Iliad and the Odyssey, the Aeneid, the Theogony, the Popol Vuh, the Kojiki, the Tao Te Ching and the I Ching, the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Enuma Elish, the Book of Coming Forth by Day, and the Principia Discordia, and I'd read every one of them. Fenris had replaced my original heavily battered collection of used books with a matched set bound in black leather with gold-leaf lettering. The result was visually striking, to say the least.

Aiko, being Aiko, had duct-taped a paper sign to the front. It read, in large block letters, IN CASE OF APOCALYPSE BREAK GLASS.

At the moment, she was sitting in an overstuffed armchair next to the fireplace, which cast a circle of cheerily flickering light against the relative dimness of the room, tinting Snowflake's fur an eerie red. Aiko was reading a *Calvin and Hobbes* compilation, and occasionally reached down to turn the page in Snowflake's book of German fairy tales. "Hey," she said as I walked in, not looking up from her book. "Feeling better?"

"Not really, no," I said cheerfully. "But marginally less psychotic, and significantly calmer and more logical."

"Hardly counts as improvement, I'd say."

"Well, duh," I said, at the same time as Snowflake. "I do have a meeting lined up just after dusk, though." I glanced at the clock, a mahogany work of art with a swinging pendulum that invariably made

me think of Poe, and confirmed that I had a few minutes before I had to leave in order to arrive a half an hour or so early.

"You going through with that plan to sell your soul to my cousins?" Aiko asked me. Her voice was light, and she still didn't look up from her book. I was not fooled.

I smiled cryptically. "Not exactly," I said in my best mysterious voice—which, for the record, isn't very good.

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, be that way. I'm guessing you want your thug back?"

I shrugged. "If she'd like to come. I need to talk to Alexis, too. I don't suppose you know where I might find her?"

"In the kitchen," Aiko said, while Snowflake stood and stretched. "Your cousin has a fascination with food preparation that makes me look well-adjusted. Especially given that she's vegetarian."

"It disturbs me too. Thanks. I'll see you later."

I went downstairs and did, indeed, find Alexis in the kitchen, where she was doing inexplicable things to a bunch of arugula, and possibly violating the Geneva Conventions with how she was treating the celery. "Good afternoon," I said to her.

She glanced at my face and then quickly away, her posture almost fearful. "Hi, Winter," she said, setting the knife down.

"I've got to go to another meeting," I said. "And, trust me, you *really* don't want to be there. I do have something for you, though." I held out a fine silver chain, holding it gingerly through the fabric of my cloak.

She took it and examined the pendant on it, a piece of glass that most people would assume was only *seeming* to glow a shade of green somewhere between grass and Gatorade, wrapped in brass wire. "What is it?" she asked curiously.

"I've never done anything quite like this before," I said honestly. "But I'm not terrible at that sort of thing, and the theory is sound. It should provide a certain amount of protection if you wear it."

She seemed to accept that explanation, and put the necklace on. I smiled. "Okay," I said. "I'll see you later. Come on, Snowflake, we've gotta get dressed for this."

For the second time in as many days, I strode—not walked, mind you, but *strode*, which is much harder—into Pryce's and made my way over to the bar. I did not speak to anyone on the way, and no one tried to speak to me. In fact, more than a few people drew back when I passed near, and a handful got

up and walked out. I smiled inwardly, being careful not to let the faintest trace show on my face. If their reaction was anything to go by, I'd gotten the look right.

Pryce himself, of course, wasn't intimidated. I wasn't surprised. The only time I'd seen the big guy look shaken was when the Fenris Wolf himself walked in in a bad mood, and I wasn't anywhere near *that* scary. He didn't say anything either, being a man not much inclined to small talk—or any other kind of talk, really. He just twitched his head in what might, with enough generosity, be called a nod. A moment later a waitress—fae of some sort by the smell, but otherwise unidentifiable—came and led me to the private room. She, too, was silent.

I could have found my own way, obviously—I mean, sheesh, it had just been last night—but it was just as obvious that wasn't how it worked, and I was willing to go along with it. I, like pretty much everyone else, held Pryce in great respect.

For once, I was the first one to arrive. I made my way to the head of the long oak conference table. I sat down, being careful not to entangle Tyrfin in the chair—it actually takes a lot of coordination and practice to wear a sword on your belt without knocking stuff over and tangling in things. I arranged my cloak so that it would frame the armor without doing the least to conceal it, or the various weapons I was carrying. Snowflake, wearing her collar and a black silk eyepatch without any form of marking on it, sat on the floor just to my right and looked serious. I checked that everything was in place, and we settled in to wait.

It was a pretty long wait. We'd arrived almost thirty minutes early, so as to be sure of being the first ones there. I can be patient when necessary, though, and Snowflake amused herself with making up filthy limericks in a number of languages.

The first person to arrive was Katrin, about five minutes early—which meant only ten minutes past sunset. I'd suspected she would show up early, which was why I had set this up so soon after dusk. Early bird or not, a vampire couldn't be there before me if I came while it was still daytime.

She'd brought flunkies with her, as I suggested, two of them. The first was a short woman looking like she was barely out of her teens, with brown hair and a face most people would automatically classify as "cute." The other was a man going for the classic Dracula look: tall, slender, very pale with jet black hair, dressed all in black. He was even wearing an opera cloak. Seriously. Granted, I'm not in much of a position to throw stones, considering that I was also wearing a blackish grey cloak, but still.

They were both vampires, of course. Even if I couldn't have guessed that, which I could and had, I could smell it on them. They were also clearly minions, though; they both hung back around the door while Katrin walked over and talked to me. For once, she wasn't wearing modern casual clothing, having opted instead for velvet and silk, including a black velvet doublet, because apparently someone had gotten the "diplomatic meeting" message mixed up with "Renaissance Fair."

"I'm here," she said to me. Her posture was relaxed, hands hanging casually at her sides, but there was a touch of anger to her voice. Or maybe annoyance would be the better word for it; I'm not sure. "What's this about?"

"I'd rather not explain it twice," I said, half-apologetically. "So, if you wouldn't mind waiting for the others to arrive...."

She scowled, and there was a trace of true anger to the expression that made me wonder how long it had been since someone offered even that much defiance to her. This was a side of the vampire I hadn't seen before, one which reminded me why I hadn't gone to any lengths to spend time around vampires in the past. But she nodded tightly and stalked over to a chair about halfway down the table, leaving plenty of space between us. The vampiresses followed her, taking seats on either side of hers. None of the three was visibly armed, but given that they were *vampires* that probably didn't mean very much. At all.

The room had been silent before, but it was an entirely different sort of silence that settled over it now, an oppressive sort. The vampires were utterly still—not person still, or even frightened-rabbit still. They were statue still. Corpse still. They didn't twitch, or blink, or breathe.

Gosh, that wasn't creepy at all.

Maybe three minutes later, Kimiko opened the door. She was wearing biker leathers again, although these moved with a sort of stiffness that made me suspect they were reinforced with some sort of armor. She was followed by, presumably, the yokai contingent.

There were four of them, and it wasn't hard at all to tell what each of them was. Kimiko, obviously, was the kitsune representative. The man following her was more hirsute than anyone I could remember seeing before. His beard covered most of his face and the upper portion of his chest, his mustache stretched from cheek to cheek, and even his eyebrows were so aggressively bushy as to cast his eyes in shadow. He was huge, towering over her, with a large belly that didn't look like fat, and also dressed like a biker. It looked more appropriate on him. He smelled somewhat similar, too, fur and musk and a hint of citrus, although his magic was deeper, less playful in nature. That made him the tanuki.

The next through was in the form of an old man with a pinched, sour expression. He was bald, and his scalp gleamed so brightly I wondered if he oiled it. His eyes were grey and cold, and before I'd met so very many scary beings I probably would have shivered when I met them. His clothing was of a loose, simple style I didn't recognize, the pale tan of cotton that hadn't been dyed. He smelled wet, like slow-moving water and rice paddies, and just a hint fishy, and I immediately pegged him as the chief kappa.

The fourth person, then, had to be Kikuchi Kazuhiro, the tengu who would be chief. He was smaller than I'd expected—an inch or two shorter than me, and I'm not a tall guy. He was fairly slight of build, too, almost effeminate. He moved with the precise grace and confidence of someone who could handle himself in a fight, though, and he was wearing armor much like mine, complete with a wakizashi

on his belt. I went through pretty much the same deal with him as with Katrin, enlivened slightly by the fact that we hadn't met before. He didn't like it much either, but eventually I convinced him to wait too. He sat a little further away than, and across the table from, the vampires, flanked by his chief minions, and the two groups proceeded to ignore each other studiously. The yokai, too, didn't make any kind of conversation among themselves, although at least they *breathed*.

Sojobo walked in less than a minute later. He looked the same as when I'd spoken to him earlier in the day, although somewhat more composed. He nodded to me, nodded to Kazuhiro, and took a seat midway between us. The yokai reacted to that with varying degrees of surprise. Only the kappa didn't so much as blink. But then, that didn't much surprise me. He didn't seem the sort to give anything away.

We all sat and waited, in silence. And waited. And waited. It was nearly three minutes past the scheduled time when Reynard sauntered in like he owned the place, wearing a black Robin Hood hat with a jaunty scarlet feather. He yawned deeply and then slouched into the chair opposite Sojobo, who nodded again, politely. "What's everyone waiting for?" he asked with a sprightly grin. It was the sort of smirk the fox shoots the farmer on the way out of the henhouse, with blood already on his teeth.

I cleared my throat, drawing their attention back to me. "I think," I said, eyeing the tension in the room, the way Katrin's weight was centered over her feet and ready to rise, the way Kikuchi's hand didn't stray far from his sword, "that it might be more productive if we all agreed to a truce. Does the duration of this conversation and twenty minutes afterward sound good?" There was a chorus of nods and murmured agreement, and I nodded firmly. "Very well, then. I shall cause no harm to any of you gathered, nor permit harm to occur if it is within my ability to stop, save only in self-defense, for that time."

Everyone else—including Reynard, which I hadn't been sure about—swore more or less the same oath. I relaxed a bit once they had, and I wasn't the only one; oaths were solid currency in the supernatural world, and you'd be a fool to break your word, doubly so if sworn in front of your most powerful retainers. Triply, with people such as Reynard and Sojobo there to guarantee it—which had, of course, been the whole point of asking them to come. (I could, of course, have called Loki, and he probably would have come. But I wasn't *that* desperate.) "Wonderful," I said. "Now—"

The tanuki cleared his throat loudly, cutting me off. "My apologies," he said. "But your hound has not sworn any oath." His voice was very polite, and I got the impression he actually did regret the necessity of interrupting me.

I tried to mimic that courtesy when I spoke. "Forgive me," I said. "So few understand her, I forgot it completely. Thank you for reminding me." I glanced at Snowflake, who sighed but repeated the oath. "Will that suffice?" I asked the tanuki.

He narrowed his eyes, and I got the impression he was trying to decide whether or not he was being mocked. "Quite so," he said. "And you are forgiven, of course."

"Thank you," I said. "Now, I believe a round of introductions is in order?"

I think that Kikuchi would have protested my assumption of authority, except that Sojobo spoke before he could. "An excellent idea," the ancient tengu said. "If there are no objections, I will begin." No one spoke up, so he continued, "I am Sojobo, dai-tengu of Mount Kurama, and lord of my people. I am the eldest of my kind, and the strongest." He said it plain, no trace of bravado in his voice. It was simply a statement of fact.

"I am Kazuhiro, of the clan Kikuchi. I am a tengu of three centuries, and the leader of my people in this place. I am a knight of the Order of the Serpent, and an honored servant of the Lord Sojobo, and soon I will be the first dai-tengu on this continent."

"I am Matsuda Kimiko, one-tailed kitsune, the daughter of Matsuda Yasunori. I am Kikuchi Kazuhiro's chief lieutenant in this city."

"Kenichi," said the kappa. His voice was much like the rest of him—colorless, watery, flat, but with the suggestion that dismissing him would be a most unwise thing to do. "Master of the Yellow River. Kappa."

"Miyazaki Kenta," rumbled the tanuki. He sounded amused, and was slouched in his seat in a posture reminiscent of a movie-goer. "Tanuki. I'm the birdbrain's thug."

Kikuchi glared at him. I had to restrain a smile. Reynard didn't bother, and Snowflake chuckled in the back of my mind.

"I am called Katrin Fleischer." For the first time, Katrin sounded exactly like what she was: an old, terrible monster, returned to existence by powers I wasn't prepared to contemplate and kept there, in that state of undeath which was itself a mockery of nature as I understood it, by actions I wasn't prepared to consider. Her raspy voice was lifeless, utterly devoid of any feeling I could recognize, except perhaps a cold, dry mockery. She and her minions were still unmoving, unblinking, not even breathing except to talk, and I found it an unexpectedly creepy tableau. "I am a vampire of significantly more than three centuries and the young of this city answer to me. More than that you need not know."

The next to speak was the male vampire. His voice was, much like the rest of him, so stereotypically vampiric that he would never have to worry about dressing up for Hallowe'en: smooth, dark, cultured, just a touch of a vaguely guttural accent. I imagined that, between the voice and the looks, he wouldn't have to work hard to find victims; he could just walk down the street, and teenage girls would faint across his path. "Hrafn Gunnarsson is my name," he said simply. "I am a soldier. That is all."

Well, I had to give him credit for brevity.

"Natalie Sullivan," said the third vamp in a voice not nearly as drama-laden as the others'. "I'm a lawyer." She smiled winningly. "Don't worry, I've heard all the jokes before." I found the third vampire, in many ways, to be the creepiest. Oh, don't get me wrong; Katrin and Hrafn were both plenty spooky. But they were spooky in ways I *understood*, ways I could quantify and explain. Natalie wasn't nearly as overtly frightening as the other two, but there was something subtly unsettling about her. It was like,



where her compatriots flaunted what they were, she was trying to act human—and getting it ever so slightly wrong, like she couldn't quite remember just what it was she was trying to mimic. The contrast between the bland, pleasant features and that underlying inhumanity set my teeth on edge.

Besides. She was a lawyer.

Reynard yawned. "Reynard Fox," he said in a bored tone. Kenichi blinked his watery eyes, once. Hrafn and Kimiko both looked at Reynard with new interest. "I expect you know what that means."

It was rather sketchy as introductions went, but no one complained. Presumably they all knew who he was already.

Now, those were some fairly impressive introductions. You might be thinking I couldn't compete, and you would be correct. I was almost certain that, with the exception of Kimiko, I was the weakest and most inexperienced person in this room, and everybody knew it. Hell, even the kitsune was older than I was. She was younger than Aiko, but if she really did have that much to prove to herself, she might well have driven herself harder, too.

But I didn't want *them* to know it, not for sure. Reynard had probably heard about me from Fenris, but the rest couldn't be *certain* that I wasn't more than I seemed. So I wanted to sound more impressive than I really was. So I modified my introduction to Skrímir's court slightly and used that, because it sounded terribly important without actually providing any information worth noting.

Snowflake spoiled the effect slightly by saying, *Hi, I'm Snowflake. I follow this nitwit around and occasionally he lets me kill something. I'm sort of like a dog, except not really, and why am I bothering with this?*

That, too, was a calculated gesture, and valuable. Miyazaki. Reynard's smile broadened. Hrafn glanced at me as though expecting me to respond in some manner. The rest failed to react at all, meaning that either they had incredible poker faces—not unlikely—or they hadn't heard her. Not immediately useful information, but it might be worth having at some point.

I leaned forward slightly. Those who had heard Snowflake would see this as me taking the floor again; those who hadn't would assume I had just paused slightly, and wanted to emphasize what I said next. Both were valid interpretations. "I am a peer among the jötnar, declared so by Hrym's own word, made jarl by no less a person than Fenrisúlfr himself, announced as such before Skrímir and both Courts of the Sidhe. Are there any present who would like to contest that claim?"

Nobody said anything.

I nodded slightly. "Excellent. Now, as you all have some interest in what happens in this city, I felt I should let you know that I am claiming it as my jarldom."

There was a moment of shocked silence, which was broken by Reynard's laughter. He laughed long and hard, tears streaming down his face. "Good gods, boy," he said, still laughing. "You've got a

damned heavy pair on you, don't you?" I noticed that he'd ditched the French accent; no one could have guessed from his voice that he was anything other than a perfectly ordinary college student.

"Your courage is not in doubt," Kikuchi said. "But I have to question your judgment. You cannot truly believe yourself capable of defeating me, let alone all the other contenders in the field."

I looked him in the eye, and spoke my next words to him personally. "Who does this fighting help, honored dai-tengu? Does it benefit you to throw away resources and lives? Does it profit *any* of us present to do so?" I shook my head. "No."

"I am no coward," the tengu said stiffly. "And your words will not sway me from the path of honor."

"Nor should they," I agreed. "But tell me, wise elder. Is it the honorable way to sacrifice needlessly? To fight without thought, without meaning, without end?"

He didn't say anything, but I got the definite feeling that my words had left an impression.

"I don't think this fight is necessary," I said, looking around the table. "And I've damned well had enough of unnecessary fighting. I think that we can negotiate a peaceful solution."

"I notice," Katrin said in a voice which, although still rather dry, at least didn't sound like it was being spoken by a corpse, "that you didn't invite the rakshasas to your little summit. Or this skinwalker I've been hearing about."

"The rakshasas," I said bitingly, "bombed an apartment complex trying to kill one person. The skinwalker is currently holding a friend of mine hostage against my good behavior. I have little use for people like that."

Hrafn frowned. "This hardly seems like good behavior," he said. "Won't that be dangerous for your friend?" There was something in his voice—concern, maybe, or perhaps just disappointment—which sounded honest. It made me like him more.

"I've never interacted with a skinwalker before," I said honestly. "But from what I know of them, I doubt she would fare much better if I *were* to do whatever he asks."

Reynard cleared his throat. "Actually, I'm afraid it's rather worse than that. I *have* had dealings with skinwalkers, and I expect she will suffer more for your compliance than if you deny him."

I inclined my head towards him slightly. "As you say, then. In any case, this represents my best chance to rescue her, or failing that get revenge upon him." I shook my head. "I do not abandon my friends, if that is what you are asking. But it will do no good to react rashly and without thought."

The kappa—Kenichi was his name, or at least what he wanted us to call him at the moment—narrowed his eyes and nodded slightly. I got the impression I'd just earned some points with him.

"So," I said briskly. "You all are aware now that I have a personal motivation here, as well as more general ethical and political reasons for my actions. Let's get down to it. What do you want?"

Katrin cleared her throat softly. "I do not particularly desire political power or recognition," she said in a mild tone. "I have coexisted with werewolves frequently, for many years. I see no reason I could not stand in the same relationship with you."

I nodded respectfully and turned to Kikuchi. "And you, honored dai-tengu? What do you desire?"

"The mountain is ours," he said firmly. "That is nonnegotiable."

"That's fine," I said easily. "I'm really more interested in the city itself, anyway. Would it be acceptable for the road, the cog railway, the trail, and the buildings at the summit to be neutral ground?"

He frowned. "Not neutral ground, no. It must be ours. But safe passage, that is acceptable."

"It would mean a great many people passing through your lands," I warned. "I expect you to leave them in peace."

"Within those areas, yes," he agreed. "And elsewhere, folk who come in peace have nothing to fear. But those who seek to harm the mountain—" Kikuchi frowned severely, his black eyes glittering—"that is not acceptable."

I sighed, but nodded. "Not unreasonable, I suppose," I said. "That makes it my turn, then. Within the bounds of the city, I would be preeminent. You would agree to come to me with any disputes you have with me or those who owe me fealty. I won't act against you except in defense of self, vassals, or property, and will tolerate your presence within my territory. In return, you would agree to provide reasonable assistance in defending the area against intruders, and would not act to harm any personal friend of mine. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Come now," Katrin said. "Under those restrictions, you could simply declare every inhabitant of this city your friend. I must needs feed, *Jarl* Wolf. I am, after all, still a vampire." She ladled more scorn into my quasi-title than I would have believed possible.

"There are, what? Fifty of your kind in this city?"

She glowered at me. "Fewer," she admitted.

I nodded, carefully keeping my face reasonable. "Let us use fifty in our estimates, then, to be generous. Five human chattel is enough to sustain a vampire, is it not?" Katrin nodded, her glower deepening. "We'll call it ten, then, that you might live in comfort and security. That would give you a requirement of five hundred people for your stables, combined." I grinned at her. "Last I checked, there were more than four hundred thousand people living in this city, not counting outlying areas. I don't

know about you, but I don't think I've met that many people in my life, let alone formed lasting friendships with them. You should be all right."

"Fine," Katrin said, biting the word off.

"As wonderful as all this peaceful negotiation is," Miyazaki said dryly, "I can't help but think it's a tempting fate to be settling the peace before the war is won."

"And thank you for that masterful segue to the next topic of discussion," I said. "Assuming everyone is satisfied with the agreement we've outlined verbally?"

Kikuchi nodded after only a brief pause. Katrin was slower, and more reluctant, but she *did* nod, and I was calling that a success.

"Excellent," I said. "So. You've been competing with the rakshasas for some time now, and given that you aren't dead I imagine you've done fairly well at it. Given that the skinwalker has so far been playing a subtle game, more inclined to scavenging and opportunism than outright assault, I assume he can't be in much stronger of a position than they are. Both of your groups together should be capable of overcoming them. Additionally, I will be assisting, and while I am—as the respected dai-tengu said—no great power, I think it's fair to say that I will contribute *something* myself. Do any of you disagree with that assessment?"

Had there been crickets available to chirp, it would not have made the silence any more telling.

"Good. As our ability to deal appropriately with our enemies is dependent upon first *finding* them, I would recommend that you pool your information—I, unfortunately, have little or nothing of value to add, I suspect. But if you find a target, just let me know. I'll be happy to help you terminate them with quite extreme prejudice."

"You will be bringing my cousin with you, then?" Kimiko asked. "She'd rather have her nails torn out than miss a fight like this, unless she's changed more than I can imagine."

"She would," I agreed. "Unfortunately, at this time Aiko is restricted to the Otherside, and I doubt the fight will take place there. So probably not."

"What, still?" Kimiko sounded incredulous.

I shrugged. "It hasn't been *that* long since the sentence was passed."

Sojobo growled something I couldn't quite hear. "That is ridiculous," he said grimly. "I'll be having words with the nine-tails."

"In that case," I said, "she will probably be there. She hasn't gotten to take part in a battle for quite some time. It makes her grouchy."

Sojobo grunted with something that might have been amusement, then stood up and left. Kikuchi and Katrin followed, accompanied by their respective flocks of henchmen, presumably to go set their underlings, lackeys, and minions to the appropriate tasks. The two groups kept a cautious distance between them, but I was hopeful that there was at least a little less tension than when they came in.

That left just Reynard, still sitting in his chair. He was sipping from a goblet of what smelled like red wine, although I had no idea where he'd gotten it from. "You pushed them pretty hard," he said, his voice almost contemplative. "There will be a price."

"There always is," I said calmly. "This way, there's a decent chance it will be me paying it." He grunted noncommittally and drank some more wine. "You didn't have much input tonight," I said, making sure not to sound even slightly accusatory.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" he asked curiously. "Your message said you just wanted me here as a witness."

"Well, sure. But since when does Reynard Fox do exactly what he's asked, and nothing more?"

He laughed. "True, true. But I didn't really have a great deal to add, in any case." He shrugged. "Sooth, if anything I would soonest have you in power, of those available. You are of my dear friend's line, you feed my kin, and you made me laugh. That's three ways I owe you, and this was no great payment."

"Will you be joining us in battle, then?"

"Likely not. Honestly, open combat has never been a great strength of mine."

"You beat Ysengrim in a fair duel," I pointed out.

Reynard smirked. "I hardly think pissing in someone's eyes and wrenching their testicles counts as a fair dueling tactic, do you?" He shook his head. "If I beat the wolf—and I'm not saying I did; really, you shouldn't trust everything you read—it was by cheating."

I stared, then made a show of cleaning out my ears. "Sorry," I said. "For a second there, I almost thought you might be implying I had any intention of fighting fair." He chuckled, but I kept my face deadly serious. "I've never pissed in my tail and slapped someone about the face with it to blind them," I admitted. "But only because the opportunity never seems to present itself. If I have a chance to do that, or some even less sporting tactic, in this fight, you can bet your ass I'm going to take it. These people don't *deserve* to die honorably, and in any case I've never been fond of a fair fight."

"We'll see," he said. "I must think on it." He stood, draining the wine, and tossed the empty goblet over his shoulder to shatter in the fireplace. "Good evening, Winter," Reynard said, tipping his hat to me. "And watch yourself. You think you know what cost this night will exact, but I tell you truth that you have no knowledge of just how high a price can run." He walked out without another word. If I hadn't been watching so very closely, I never would have realized that he didn't actually open the door.



Chapter Twelve

*Well, that went well.*

*Not badly,* I agreed, stepping cautiously out Pryce's front door. I was probably safe—even rakshasas, a species with a reputation for being reckless, egotistic, and arrogant, wouldn't dare violate Pryce's truce—but I was feeling especially twitchy at the moment, for some strange reason. *I do believe they might even wait for the enemy to be dead before they stab me in the back.*

Snowflake snorted. *Come on, Winter. If there's anyone more paranoid than you, it would be a vampire, which means they understand how your mind works. As much time as you spend watching your back, they'll know to come from the front. There was a brief, considering pause. Or from above, I suppose. Can vampires actually turn into bats?*

I frowned. *I don't know. Legion hasn't mentioned it when we've talked about them, but then he might not.* My frown deepened. *I suppose, if nothing else, they might be able to use blood magic to duplicate a shapeshifter's talents. Although they'd have to leave their equipment behind for that.*

*Like that would matter,* Snowflake said, laughing. *If a vampire hits you from behind by surprise, do you really think you can take him? Even if he is unarmed?*

*No.* I wasn't actually sure how strong vampires were, in a practical sense. Stronger than humans was obvious—almost all of the stories could agree on that much, and it just made sense, besides. But that wasn't a meaningful statement, under the circumstances. I mean, hell, *I'm* stronger than most humans. So vampires might be no stronger than me, or they might be able to rip my head off like a gingerbread man's. The only way to find out was no way to find out.

*They freak me out,* she admitted. *That bit with the not breathing was fucking scary. Their hearts weren't beating either, by the way; I don't know if you heard. And they smell wrong.*

*You could smell them?* I said, surprised.

*You couldn't?*

I shrugged mentally, turning down a one-way alley that was lightly traveled even during the daytime. If someone was tailing me, hopefully they would stand out more here. *I could,* I said. *But I have a hard time sometimes distinguishing between physical scents and magical. Vampires have a really strong magical signature, and that makes it difficult to catch anything but an overwhelming scent. Especially in this body.* I shrugged again. *Besides, I was a little bit distracted.*

She snorted. *Yeah, I bet. The things reeked. Almost like old blood, but there was something just wrong with it. They aren't right. Is it just me, or is that guy moving too purposefully to be just another pedestrian?*

I chewed my lip for a moment, then came to a decision. *Ready to run double?* I asked, drawing my power close around me. Snowflake indicated in the affirmative, and then we did something pretty cool, something I would have said was impossible even a handful of months ago. I was pretty sure it was, actually, and that we could get away with it only because we were both such strange, hybrid creatures. Oh, and we'd practiced it endlessly. That helped.

It happened very, very quickly. It took, from start to finish, no more than a half-dozen heartbeats.

First, Snowflake slid her awareness along the link my magic had forged over years of interaction into my body. It was smooth, swift, and effortless. I felt her presence, instinctively, the barest whiff of a winter storm and the feeling of feet and feet and feet of snow, cold and merciless and just itching for the chance to be an avalanche. I hardly even noticed; we pulled *this* trick all the time, whenever one of us wanted access to the other's senses.

The unusual part was what came next.

As Snowflake slid *in*, I slid *out*. My mind, suddenly dissociated from my body, cast around for a moment, before I found a raccoon sitting on a window ledge and slipped into his mind and body.

Meanwhile, Snowflake exerted control over my body in my absence. I think the specific way it worked was actually that Snowflake herself remained in her own body, while the wolf that timeshared her mind ran mine, but the distinction was a fine one, even to me. The important thing was that, rather than collapse like a marionette with the strings cut when I removed myself, my body kept walking down the street without so much as a stumble to betray the switch.

While she did that, I was focusing on the raccoon. I attuned myself to his senses—not forcing, not coercing, because that wasn't something I did. I'm no saint, but I have my limits. I simply accepted an invitation. Like most predators and semi-predators in the neighborhoods I frequented regularly, this raccoon was familiar with me, to some extent. I didn't think I'd worked with this specific animal before—raccoons are more scavenger than predator, and while I spent a significant amount of time at or near Pryce's, I hadn't put in the hours and hours of work to build the network of animalian spies I'd had around my old house. But I had a pretty good rep, all the same. I consistently provided food and water, sometimes shelter, and occasionally more tangible protection as well. Between that and my blend of unusual magic and quasi-human psychology, if an animal can help me without putting taking any risks, they usually will.

It took me less than a second to get my mind into the appropriate shape, and I was looking out through the raccoon's eyes. I prodded gently, and he amicably turned his attention to the person Snowflake had noticed following us.

It was a big guy, six and a half feet or better and built like a weightlifter. He was wearing a black trench coat, black combat boots, and black gloves, and had a shapeless, broad-brimmed black hat pulled low on his head. I'd say that all that could be seen of his face were his eyes, except that he was also



wearing a pair of mirrored shades. The raccoon couldn't see any details, identifying features, or exposed skin. That could have been coincidence—coons aren't famed for their keen vision, after all, and the distance and angle were both unfavorable—but I highly doubted it.

I manifested myself more strongly, fitting my psyche more strongly into its current mold. It wasn't easy—this was more of a connection than I usually established—but for a moment I was more than simply a hitchhiker in the raccoon's mind. And, for just the barest instant, I could smell this being's magic, pale and attenuated by distance and disembodiment but still recognizable, the scent of water and rich vegetation and exotic spice. Definitely ginger, with subtler tones of cardamom, turmeric, and maybe a touch of jasmine. It was an exotic but not unpleasant mix.

I expressed gratitude to the raccoon and withdrew from his mind, returning to my own body. It took me a second or two to reorient myself, after which I took control back from Snowflake. It was difficult to do without stumbling, but we *had* practiced this, a lot. I was confident no one watching would have noticed a thing.

*Rakshasa*, I said to Snowflake, blinking a couple times. As usual, returning to my own body took some adjustment. Not as much as sometimes—I'd been working out, and I'd only been gone a very short time—and this, too, was unobtrusive. *No chance it's a coincidence.*

*No shit. Why now, do you think?*

I shrugged mentally. *Attack of opportunity? They almost certainly have spies in both groups, which means they probably knew about this meeting well before it happened. It wouldn't surprise me if they had hitters waiting to take out the ringleaders when they left. We just happened to walk out alone, which makes us look vulnerable.* I shrugged again. *Or maybe there were enough of them to put a tail on all of us.*

*That sounds more likely to me. If you think about it, this is the last time you'd want to try a hit. Everyone brought their inner circle to this meeting, which means a high concentration of military strength. The smarter thing to do would be to have your minions tail them out, get information, and arrange to attack when they're vulnerable and not anticipating it.*

Snowflake's pretty good at tactics, for a dog.

*What do you think we should do about it?*

*Well, it's a beautiful opportunity to send a message,* she said, after a brief pause.

A thought occurred to me, and I smiled nastily. *Excellent idea*, I said. Then I turned around and shot our tail in the knee. He let out a yelp, sounding more startled than pained, and dropped to the ground.

Most interactions people have in the modern world are very, very highly scripted. Greetings between strangers, for example, are so formal and stilted that you can write out the whole conversation

before a word is exchanged. But occasionally you get other situations where there aren't any societal rules telling you what to do. It's interesting, because without those guidelines you can't quite predict how anyone, even someone you know well—hell, even yourself—will react. Just what those situations are changes from person to person—violence, for example, terrifies a lot of people when it occurs outside of a handful of tightly defined scenarios, but it hardly perturbed me at all. But there are some that are, in my experience, universal. A person's first exposure to the supernatural, for example. The sudden, unexpected death of a loved one. Discovering that something you assumed with a bedrock certainty isn't true. That sort of thing.

I've never experienced it. But I imagine discovering, in a violent and painful way, that you've been made by the person you were assigned to spy on is one of them. I've no idea how I would react to that.

But I know the rakshasa was furious.

After the first yelp, he hardly seemed inconvenienced by having just taken a bullet. He was back on his feet in an instant, his flesh seeming to warble and twist beneath the clothing. He'd just taken a modified, high-powered .45 round to the knee, though, and he hadn't thrown off his human guise enough to ignore that kind of damage. His leg buckled, and he dropped into a position intermediate between kneeling and crouching. The injury healed itself with an audible, icky sound of bone and cartilage sliding against each other, and he was standing up again, snarling.

Of course, by that time Snowflake and I were standing right next to him. I had Tyrfin in my hand, and unsheathed. Snowflake was growling, the sort of deep and savage growl that begins deep in your throat and concludes deep in someone else's. Between that and the fact that he'd just taken a bullet to the knee, we were more trouble than the rakshasa wanted to buy right now.

"Good evening," I said to him, quite calmly. "You're going to give your superior a message from me."

He snarled some more and spat half a dozen words at me. I didn't understand the language, but it didn't take a genius to guess that he was cursing.

"You know," I said mildly, "you don't have to be *alive* to convey this message."

The snarls cut off as abruptly as if I'd flipped a light switch.

"Better. The message is really very simple. Get out. Get out *now*. Be gone from this city by midnight tonight, and I'll let you go. No harm, no foul, scales even between us." I smiled. "Or don't. And I will find you. I will come into your place of power, and I will tear it down around you. I will slaughter you like cattle. You and yours will fall under the edge of my sword like wheat before the reaper. When I leave your fortress will lie in rubble, and there will be not one living thing therein. Those who hear of your destruction will wonder what god you angered, that such a thing should happen to you, and your people will speak of it in whispers for a hundred years." I smiled at the rakshasa, cold and cruel and sharp as a knife's edge in the winter. His sunglasses had been knocked off in the fall, exposing startlingly

red-orange eyes, and he flinched slightly when I met them with my amber ones. "Your choice," I murmured.

He stared at me with hate in his eyes, and was silent.

"You got the message?" I asked. He nodded, still not speaking. He must understand English, because his responses were too appropriate and well-timed to be coincidence, but I hadn't heard one word of it out of him. I backed away a few steps, bringing Snowflake with me, although I didn't sheathe Tyrfing, and she was still growling a little. He stood, looking only slightly unsteady on his wounded leg, shoved his half-broken sunglasses into place, and hobbled back along the alley the way we'd come.

*You should have killed him, Snowflake said. I'd have killed him. I can still kill him. Be no trouble. Just say the word. Hell, you don't even have to talk, just nod.*

*No, Snowflake.* I sounded, even to myself, very weary.

*No, really, I can do it. Look at him. That leg isn't all the way fixed. There's no way he can outrun me. I'll trip him, take the other leg, go for the neck. Rakshasas die when you bite off their heads, right?*

*We're not going to kill him.* She knew what I had meant, of course. If I wanted him dead, it wouldn't have taken much work to do the deed. I could have just shot him half a dozen times, then chopped him into pieces with Tyrfing. That, I was fairly confident, would kill damn near anything.

*We ought to. You know it's the smart thing to do.*

*He's inconsequential. Their leader wouldn't send anyone important on a job like this, and if he had half an ounce of sense or skill he wouldn't have been that easy to catch. Besides, it's more important to send the message.*

*That doesn't preclude killing him,* she argued. *Shit, Winter, a corpse is a much stronger statement of threat than letting him go. You could even write down your ridiculously melodramatic threatening spiel and leave a copy on his body if you want.*

I sighed and turned away, sheathing Tyrfing. It wanted blood, like always, but it was a familiar effort to let the sword go, and I hardly even had to think about it. It might have been just my imagination, but it seemed like it had been getting easier to do recently. The cursed blade hadn't been showing up inconveniently as often, either, and the entropy curse didn't seem to be affecting me or my allies as much.

I wasn't sure how I felt about that.

I kept walking, in the opposite direction as the rakshasa had taken, and Snowflake came with me. She came reluctantly, still growling almost inaudibly, glancing frequently over her shoulder at the departing rakshasa, but she came.

*The problem, I said to her as we walked away, is that if this plan works, we aren't just independent small-timers any more. I just declared myself as a political entity. That changes what messages people will take from my actions. By letting the rakshasa go, I announce that I'm reasonable, and I don't go around killing people senselessly—and also that they scare me so little I don't care that I gave one of them a grudge against me and then let him go.*

*Yeah?* she said sarcastically. *Because I'm thinking it says more that you're such an utter Spatzenhirn that you let your enemy get away. Have you never read Machiavelli, man?*

*You know I have,* I said, amused. *Given that I was the one who gave that book to you.*

*Yeah, well, I think maybe you didn't pay enough attention. 'Cause if this doesn't take you into "despised and hated" territory, I don't know what will.*

*Tell you what, if it gets us horribly killed I promise to let you say you told me so without interruption or complaint. Guaranteed.*

*I think you and I both know you won't be able to resist making sarcastic comments.*

Well, there was that.

"Guess what," I said, walking into the trophy room. "You're going to get to kill some rakshasas. Maybe even help take out a skinwalker, if we get real lucky."

Aiko looked down at me from her perch on a small stepladder. "How's that?" she asked, adjusting the wreath of holly and mistletoe she was weaving through a spiral of glittering steel blades hanging on the wall which hadn't been there a few days ago. It took me a moment to recognize them as the claws from the constructs which had attacked Alexis. How they had gotten here was another topic that wasn't worth worrying about. I've pretty much given up on trying to understand how this mansion works.

I looked the arrangement up and down critically. "Not bad," I said eventually. "Little asymmetric, though. It could use a little more mistletoe on the right."

"I meant," she growled through gritted teeth, "how is it that I get to fight?"

"Oh, right. Sorry. Well, it's not a done deal, so don't get too excited, but I was talking with Sojobo tonight and he said he'd talk to the nine-tails. It sounds like he's on really good terms with your kin, and I'm sure he's got contacts like no other, so I expect he'll be able to convince them."

"You're kidding."

"Actually, for once I'm being entirely serious. You'd better go get packed; I'm expecting this to go down tonight, and we both know how much you'd hate to miss it."

Aiko did not wait for me to tell her twice. I don't know that I'd ever seen her move that quickly.

*What makes you so sure it'll be tonight?* Snowflake asked me.

*Katrin's a vampire, I said by way of explanation. She didn't seem to get it, so I elaborated. That gives her a great deal of power—enough to kill both of us without breaking a sweat, if she's as old and powerful as I think she is. But it comes with a boatload of drawbacks, complications, and weaknesses, and the biggest one is the sunshine thing. All that power won't do her a lick of good in the daytime—in fact, from what I've read, I'm pretty sure she won't even be conscious. She sure won't be able to pull out any cool vampire superpowers.*

*So?*

*So she knows it makes her vulnerable. Her sanctum will be hidden, and protected, and I don't doubt she's got whole swarms of minions, but the fact remains that she's personally helpless during the day. I shook my head. She hates it. You know she does. Especially when she knows there are powerful people actively trying to off her. Now that she's got enough people backing her to get the job done, she'll want the fight over before she has to spend another day with that hanging over her head.*

Snowflake considered that for a while. *Sounds reasonable, she said eventually. But there's one problem with your calculations.*

*Oh? And what's that?*

*You have no idea whether they'll even be able to find the enemy tonight. Or ever, for that matter.*

I chuckled dryly. *That's true, I admitted. But I don't think so.* I stood up and left the room. *Come on, I said. Let's go get a bite to eat and then get ready. Just in case I'm not wrong.*

*You da Boss, she said with a mental shrug. Besides, it ain't hard to convince me of any plan that has "go eat something" as a first step.*

Alexis, as it turned out, was not just obsessed with but skilled at kitcheny things. I knew this, because she'd made steaks fried with fresh onions and mushrooms, couscous with green onions and shallots, spicy black beans, green chili, a large salad composed of vegetables I usually encountered only in the form of pictures, falafel with hummus and tahini, and fettuccine Alfredo with shrimp and chicken.

I stared. It is not often that I am struck literally dumb, but this spectacle managed it. Even more astonishingly, Snowflake was standing next to me, equally speechless, staring at the array of dishes.

Alexis emerged from the walk-in refrigerator (empty-handed, astonishingly enough) and scowled at me. "What?"

"You may not have realized this, since the mansion is so large, but we actually *don't* have swarms of people to feed," I said dryly.

My cousin flushed. "I didn't have a lot to do today, all right?" she said defensively, gesturing vaguely at nothing in particular that I could tell.

"Hey, I'm not complaining. I like food. Just saying." I started grabbing dishes and carrying them out to the dining room—not that there was any reason the kitchen table wouldn't have served, but this seemed an extravagant enough meal that I felt justified in doing so.

It also gave me the opportunity to inspect each dish thoroughly without Alexis knowing about it. Purely a coincidence, of course.

I pulled out a chair and sat, Snowflake resting on the floor beside me. She could have had her own chair, obviously—there was enough room at that dining table to seat twenty times the people who might actually attend, and it's not like I'd get upset about it. She just enjoys...playing to the stereotypes, I suppose.

Alexis insisted on saying grace before eating, which took me by complete surprise as I had no idea people still *did* that. She didn't seem to require my active participation, though, for which I was quite grateful. I had enough to do just keeping my mouth shut, looking at my lap, and trying not to burst out laughing at Snowflake's jokes.

After that odd little anachronism, I managed to avoid eating for a few moments by excusing myself to go grab a glass of iced tea—tea I had brewed myself, a few days before. It didn't usually last that long, but I hadn't been home much recently.

I sat back down and proceeded to eat with much, much more decorum and restraint than I normally exhibited. I only touched things Alexis had already tasted, for one thing, and ate only a small piece of each item to start after that, giving each one plenty of time for any toxins to work. It's hard to poison a werewolf, and any common poison would be slow-acting and reversible in any dose not large enough to alter the flavor noticeably. I only sipped the tea, as well; she'd had all day to tamper with it, and I couldn't be sure that Aiko or Snowflake would have caught her at it.

Of course, given that Alexis was vegetarian, it was harder than it might otherwise have been to not taste anything she hadn't. Out of that entire massive spread, the only things she actually ate were the beans, salad, couscous, and falafel. Given that I'd made it quite clear that I was as enthusiastically carnivorous as they come, it would have been very suspicious for me to restrict myself to the same menu. It wasn't long before I simply had to cross my fingers (metaphorically; I wouldn't dream of giving away that big of a hint openly) and take a bite of steak.

It was delicious, expertly prepared to something a bit shy of medium-rare, seasoned with black pepper and copious amounts of garlic. Snowflake, who, being less obsessively paranoid than I was, had skipped right to the steak, agreed wholeheartedly. She usually ate her meat raw, but had no real

objections to cooked food, especially when it was cooked well. Besides, her steak was a few steps rarer than mine—more warmed than cooked, really.

Aiko walked in a few minutes later, covered head-to-toe by her armor. It was more or less the same design as mine—not unpredictably, given that they were made by the same person—but significantly more friendly and cheery in appearance. The colors were warm golds and crimsons, rather than the stark black-and-white I wore, and her suit was sleek and smooth rather than being covered in ridges and spikes. She had her favorite wakizashi and tanto on her belt, and a military-grade carbine on a strap across her chest. She was carrying a small black backpack, too, which probably contained an assortment of other weapons.

Alexis paled visibly at the sight. I just congratulated her on the quick equipping time and told her to come get some food. Aiko, who was very nearly as obsessed with food as the average werewolf, didn't hesitate. She dropped the bag beside her chair, and her helmet, but otherwise retained the martial aspect as she fell to on the food.

It took me that long to realize I was still wearing most of my own armor, easily visible under the cloak—and I had Tyrfin displayed openly on my belt, to boot. I was getting way too comfortable with this. No wonder Alexis kept glancing my direction.

Less than ten minutes later, there was a sudden pounding on the front door. I heard eight heavy knocks, spaced slowly and evenly. Aiko got up immediately to go to the door, her expression the same as you might expect to see on a prisoner who's just heard word of a letter from the governor but doesn't yet know whether it contains a pardon or a writ of execution.

I had never before heard someone knocking on the door in that mansion.

I couldn't see the entry room from where I was sitting, and I was concerned that going to look would violate some principle of etiquette or other. Normally I wouldn't care, but between Aiko's demeanor and the fact that we were already expecting something of the sort, I was guessing this was kitsune business, and if they were anything like the other supernatural entities I'd encountered they wouldn't care for outsiders sticking their collective nose into their internal affairs. Now, again, that wouldn't normally mean a great deal to me, but in this case it might be detrimental to Aiko's cause, and that was something I didn't want.

So I can't speak, personally, for what might have happened when Aiko went to answer the door. A minute dragged by, then two, then five, and she was still gone. I held Snowflake back when she would have gone to investigate, but privately I was also feeling more than slightly concerned. It didn't help that neither of us could hear anything. Given that I was a werewolf (sorta) and she was a husky (kinda) we should have been able to at least *hear* any conversation. Not make out the words, maybe, but we at least should have been able to hear that they were talking.

I put it down to kitsune magic, which I knew was capable of blocking all sound at significantly closer range than this, and kept eating.

Finally, seven minutes after she left, Aiko walked back into the dining room, clutching a piece of paper like a drowning man's rope and shaking her head. She looked dazed, like she couldn't quite process the information she'd just been given. She collapsed back into her chair, looking around aimlessly. "Unbelievable," she muttered. "A full pardon!" She waved the paper in my face, still clinging to it like a lifeline. I didn't bother trying to read it; I was confident it would say exactly what she had implied.

"A pardon?" Alexis asked, confused. "For what?"

"Oh, you know," Aiko said evasively. "The usual."

I snorted. "Aiding and abetting a convicted criminal. Resisting arrest. Obstruction of justice. Aggravated assault. Attempted murder. Hostage taking. Extortion. Carjacking. Conspiracy to commit murder. Conspiracy to commit all the rest, too, I suppose." I took a small sip of tea, which had so far failed to produce any ill effect. "I sincerely hope that isn't *usual* in any broader company than who's sitting here."

"Don't forget vandalism," she said helpfully.

I frowned. "Actually, I don't *remember* vandalism. Are you sure there was a vandalism involved that time?"

"No, actually, I don't think there was. I just throw that into any list of crimes I commit, because why not? I mean, I've done it enough times." She shrugged. "Of course, I suppose at that rate I also ought to put in burglary. And theft. And larceny, although I've never been quite clear on the difference there. And robbery. And crimes against nature. And arson. And incitement to riot. And—"

"Are you serious?" Alexis asked, sounding slightly horrified.

"Well, I've only done the arson thing around a dozen times. But one of them was a pretty large building, so I think that should count extra, and then there was the time we used explosives, which I think they might prosecute differently—I only have a rudimentary understanding of the legal system, you know."

"Yes, she's serious," I translated. "That's actually a fairly abbreviated list, though. We don't really have the time to discuss every crime she's guilty of." I glanced at Aiko. "Actually, now that you've got that pardon, we should probably head out. I'm not entirely sure how they're planning to contact us if they locate the target, and it'll be easier if we aren't here."

She snorted. "How about you go finish getting dressed, then. I'm going to stay here and eat some more. I haven't had food this good since the last time I was in Italy."

"I also made dessert," Alexis said, sounding like she couldn't decide whether she felt complimented or really, really freaked out. She was starting to look nervous, too, like she was seriously



questioning the wisdom of coming here. "Blueberry pie, chocolate mousse, and Black Forest cake. In the fridge."

"I don't think we have quite that much time."

Aiko gave me a pleading look. "I haven't had good Kirschtorte in a *long* time, Winter."

"It'll keep," I said ruthlessly. Snowflake, who has very little appreciation for such things at the best of time, laughed at the expression on the kitsune's face.

A few minutes later, I walked back into the kitchen. I'd put on the helmet and gauntlets, which took me from a five all the way to maybe an eight or nine on the barfighter's scale of "He looks like he could kick my ass." (Normally I don't make it above a two. The only reason I was at a five before was that I had a broadsword on my hip, and that tends to inspire a certain amount of respect in modern punks, unaccustomed as they tend to be to any edged weapon larger than a paring knife.) I also had my very large, very scary-looking shotgun on its strap across my chest, and I'd grabbed the rest of my toys and trinkets as well. The intimidating effect was, granted, somewhat impaired by the fact that I'd shaped my cloak into a head-to-toe blanket of shadow. Anyone casually glancing in my direction would see little more than a man-sized, ragged-edged moving patch of darkness, which—while spooky as hell—engenders a rather different type of fear.

That actually wasn't as conspicuous as you might think. I know people somehow have this idea that a moving shadow without anything obviously present to cast it would instantly attract their attention, but I honestly have no idea why you would think that. I mean, if you're *looking* for it and it stands out against the background, sure, maybe you'll notice something. But people generally don't look for things like that, in my experience. So long as I avoided brightly lit areas and similarly idiotic actions, my cloak was damn near as good as actual invisibility.

I found Aiko and Snowflake, both fully kitted out for battle, waiting in the throne room. I also found Alexis, who promptly said, "I want to come with you."

I stared, and didn't try to make it a warm stare. "You are aware of what we're doing, yes?"

She flushed slightly and looked away from me. "Yes."

"You are aware," I continued, "that this is an extremely dangerous endeavor, and that while the three of us will do what we can, because violence is intrinsically chaotic and unpredictable, it is quite likely that circumstances will prevent us from helping you? You are, I presume, aware that the three of us are going into this fight aware that we may not be coming back? You are aware that, as you are by a wide measure the most fragile and the least experienced person in this room, it is possible—indeed, probable—that you will be killed or permanently injured?"

Alexis looked frightened—no, not frightened. That's far too mild a word. Alexis looked *terrified*. She had the stiff, desperate appearance of a deer in the headlights. Her voice, though, was relatively even, with only the slightest trace of a stammer, when she said, "If it's that dangerous, shouldn't I come to help?"

"And what conceivable help could you be?" I asked derisively. I had only respect for her attitude, but I wanted to know how she would react to mockery.

She flushed again, but it was with anger this time, and she had no difficulty looking me in the eye. Interesting. "I can shoot," she said sharply.

I couldn't deny that, not after her performance when we came to rescue her. "There's an enormous difference between shooting targets and shooting people. And there's no room for squeamishness in this," I said, more gently. "It's kill or be killed out there. That's the sort of experience that changes you, no matter what happens. It's more than possible you'd have to commit murder—and make no mistake, that's what we're doing, however fine our reasons—just to survive. We've done this before, and sad to say there's enough blood on all three of us that I doubt tonight's activities will add anything much to the stain on our hands." I left unspoken the implication that she couldn't say the same, and given her attitudes I was confident she never wanted to be able to.

She could tell I was working up to a flat refusal. Interestingly, though, rather than relief, it seemed to make her terror worse. Her eyes looked desperate, almost hunted. "Somebody tried to kill me," she said, her voice small and slightly unsteady. "One of the people you're going out to fight."

"Probably," I cautioned. "Occam's razor be damned, I've never yet seen a situation where everything is simple and straightforward."

My cousin continued as though I hadn't spoken at all. "You're putting yourself in danger because of me," she said quietly. "How can I stay here and pretend everything's fine while you're out there risking your lives for me? When I know my presence could make a difference?" She managed a weak, unsteady smile. "Besides, if you do die, how long do you think it will take for them to get me? I can't stay here forever. Better to come with you. At least then I won't have to put up with weeks of waiting for them to catch up to me."

"Are you sure?" I asked.

She nodded, the fear seeming to recede a little.

I sighed. "All right, then," I said reluctantly. "Do you have your pistol?" She nodded again. "Go grab it," I said, "and whatever ammo you have. I'm going to go grab some things."

Alexis took off for the stairs at a near sprint. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" Aiko asked me, sotto voce.

"Not at all," I muttered, starting for the stairs myself. "I just can't think of a better one."

A couple minutes later, I returned to find Alexis already waiting for me. She had that little semiautomatic in a plastic sheath on her nylon belt. Other than that, she was wearing jeans, a black T-shirt, and a black hoodie. I tossed her the leather jacket I was carrying—too simple, heavy, and ugly to be mistaken for anything other than armor, which it was.

She caught it easily enough. "What is this?" she asked.

"Put it on," I told her. She did, having only a modicum of difficulty with the old-fashioned ties. I was on the small side for an adult human male, and she was a bit over average for a female, so my old jacket fit her well enough. She looked up just in time to catch a leather belt with a sheathed knife, flashlight, and med kit on it. "How much ammo are you carrying?"

"Two magazines," she said, wrapping the second belt around her hips. "Fourteen rounds total."

I frowned. "What caliber?"

"Thirty-two." Huh. Guessed right for once. Who'd have thought.

I grunted. "Don't think we have any of those," I said, glancing at Aiko, who shook her head. Both of us tended to use rather heavier rounds than that—a .32 is fine for most self-defense scenarios, but when faced with a charging werewolf it starts to seem a little...inadequate. "Try to save that for a last-ditch, then." I didn't mention that fighting at all would be a last-ditch effort for her, given that her chances of actually contributing to a fight on this level were fairly minimal. She knew that.

I took a certain amount of comfort in seeing the grass-green pendant around her neck. I'd never tried a stored spell quite like it, making it difficult to say for sure whether it would work or not, but it should provide at least a bit of security should worse come to worst.

"Okay, people," I said, turning to the door. "It's go time."

Chapter Thirteen

"Give me a moment," Aiko said as we walked out the door. She stood dead still for several moments, eyes closed, head thrown back in a way reminiscent of a canine taking a scent, then sighed contentedly.

I got the impression maybe she was glad to get out of the house.

"Where are we going?" Alexis asked, as Aiko continued to bask in the pleasure of not being confined.

I shrugged. "Nowhere specific, as yet," I said. "At the moment we're on hold for somebody to get a location on the target. Where do you want to wait?"

I'll never know the answer to that question, because before any of the three of them responded I felt a sudden rush of magic. It was scented with darkness, blood, with hints of some odd piquancy—licorice, perhaps, or aniseed—and a subtle, dry undertone that made me think of feathers. It was also fairly strong—not phenomenally so, but I definitely would have noticed it, even if I wasn't paying attention.

I promptly turned to face the shadowed alley where that scent was emanating from. A few seconds later, Hrafn Gunnarsson stepped out into the street. He was still wearing black, but it no longer looked ridiculous; he'd traded out the velvet and silk for worn black leather, and ditched the cloak entirely. It was a much more martial outfit, and one which looked much more natural on the vampire. He was clearly ready for a fight, too; he was carrying an axe quite openly over his shoulder. It looked like an intermediary step between a Danish bearded axe and an executioner-style bardiche. The haft was around five and a half feet long, and better than an inch thick. The head had a cutting edge more than a foot long. A human would have been hopelessly slow with such a heavy weapon. Even a werewolf would have found it more than slightly cumbersome. Somehow, I thought that Hrafn wouldn't have that difficulty—and if he landed a solid blow with that thing, it would hit with terrifying force.

"Jarl Winter," the vampire said, nodding almost deeply enough to call it a bow. "I hope I find you in good health."

"Indeed," I agreed. "I would say the same, except that I suspect your health ceased to concern you some time ago." The vampire chuckled heartily. I almost had to remind myself that he was an evil spawn of darkness and evil, and a leech on humankind. "You are not here without reason, I presume."

"No, indeed," he said, sobering. "Your timing is quite impeccable. I had just been dispatched to your home to find you. Kikuchi's people have found the lair of these rakshasas. He and his kin are awaiting only our presence to begin their assault."

I frowned. "He and his kin only?"

Hrafn sighed. "Katrin is...well. Your treatment of her pricked her pride. She assisted the yokai in their search, but she will not come to the battle."

"And yourself? Why are you here, if I have offended so gravely?"

"I am a simple man, jarl," he said, heaving another sigh. "I cannot abide the machinations and deceits of political games, nor have I any great ambition. You wish to rule this place? Fine, say I. " He shrugged, the gesture making his axe bob oddly. "In any case, I have never been one to flee from the fight."

I nodded. "And the third that came with you? Natalie, I think her name was?"

Hrafn's face twisted with distaste. "Even if she wanted to come, you would not wish her to. Her talents lie in other areas. In open violence, you would find her to be of little use." His tone made it clear that he regarded that very, very poorly, increasing my suspicion that Hrafn was an old, old vampire. That sort of almost instinctive revulsion towards people who rely on trickery, deception, and wealth to avoid physical combat hasn't been prevalent for quite a long time. It was a small thing, and circumstantial at best, but combined with his...well, his air, for lack of a better word, it made me pretty sure that Hrafn was old. How old was impossible to say, but I was guessing a few hundred years at least, maybe even a thousand. At a guess I would have said he was certainly older than Natalie, and maybe even older than Katrin.

I inclined my head toward him slightly. "Thank you for your honesty," I said seriously. "We'd best not keep them waiting, though. They might start the fight without us, and we couldn't have that."

He laughed at that. "Indeed," he said. "Have you a vehicle?"

"Don't you?" I asked curiously.

"I came a faster way," he said cryptically. "But I cannot take you with me, and it is some distance to our destination."

I was really wondering what that "faster way" was—I'd certainly felt the magic from the vampire's arrival, but it had none of the tones of Otherside travel, and that was seldom faster than a car for such short distances anyway—but this was clearly not the time for that sort of inquiry. Not that I really expected Hrafn to answer me, regardless. "Alexis?" I said, turning to look at her. She was visibly curious about what we were talking about—I'd told her virtually nothing about the events at the meeting or the people involved, which I expect made the conversation rather hard to follow. "Do you have your keys?"

She started, then nodded and started fishing around in her pockets. "Wonderful," I said. "Miraculously, your car is still unstolen, so we do indeed have a vehicle, Hrafn, just down the road a little."

It was a little tricky packing the five of us into Alexis's sedan, but we managed. She drove, by reason of it being her car, and Hrafn was in the passenger seat providing directions, with his axe between his feet. That left me, Aiko, and Snowflake in the backseat. It was a little crowded, but we were all quite friendly, so it wasn't a real problem.

I mostly tuned out the directions Hrafn was giving, and didn't pay a lot of attention to our surroundings, either. I was fairly confident that it was safe enough. Hrafn wanted this fight too much to sell us out before we got there (and if not, well, he was the only one who knew where we were going anyway), and there was not a chance in hell that Alexis could overcome him in any way, should she be less enthusiastic than she claimed. So, because my participation wasn't in any way required, I didn't worry about it. I spent a few minutes scratching Snowflake's ears, checked that all my knives and assorted other tools were in place, and in various other ways tried and failed not to dwell on what was about to happen. I always get like that, in the interval between the last chance to make preparations for a fight and when hostilities actually start.

I started to feel strangely uncomfortable as we traveled. We were down in the south end of the city by this point, in one of the more expensive neighborhoods. We moved off the highway into the hills, along progressively more unnecessarily winding streets.

*Winter?* Snowflake said. *Does this seem familiar to you?*

Yes, I said, staring out the window at very, very expensive houses as we passed. *Yes, it does.*

Hrafn directed Alexis to park at the side of the road. From this angle, I could see a small group of people clustered at the base of a hill, all of them looking up. At the top of the hill, framed against the trees, was a single house. It was a lot smaller than my extradimensional abode, but still quite large enough to qualify as a mansion in this era, three stories and proportionally broad. At the moment the lights were all off in the windows and the moon was mostly obscured by clouds, rendering the building into an ominous, brooding silhouette barely visible against the forest.

If you were shooting a movie, you would have no hesitation in choosing this place as your house of monsters.

"You're kidding," I whispered. "They're *here*?"

Hrafn looked at me with confusion. "Yes. Why? Is there a problem?"

"Not exactly," I said dubiously. "But this is the old pack house. The werewolves based their territory out of here for years." I smiled wryly. "Of course, I expect the rakshasas aren't exactly displeased by *that* statement."

Hrafn chuckled softly. "No, jarl, I expect they are not." He opened the door and got out. I followed suit immediately—I didn't want him to reach the assault team before I did—with Aiko and Alexis following a few moments later.

As it turned out, it was a relatively small group waiting for us. Kikuchi was there—he could hardly afford not to come, politically speaking—flanked by two other tengu, both male in appearance, not that that meant much. All three looked basically human in shape, but were covered in inky black feathers, and had beaks sprouting from their faces. Kikuchi, who I recognized more by scent than sight, was wearing armor not unlike an abbreviated version of my own, while the other two wore only loincloths. All three were carrying the katana-and-wakizashi ensemble that had once been the distinguishing mark of the Japanese samurai.

The tanuki, whose name I couldn't seem to remember, was also there. He was still wearing his biker leathers, and was carrying a massive oak club. It was nearly five feet long, shaped roughly like a baseball bat, and studded with iron at the striking end. Miyazaki—*that* was his name, I knew I'd remember it eventually—handled the thing like it weighed about as much as a rolled-up newspaper.

Sheesh. Between this and Hrafn, I was starting to feel a little insecure. I mean, sure, Tyrfang was easily the equal of any weapon here—for that matter, it was pretty much the equal of any weapon *anywhere*—but sheesh.

Hrafn and I walked over to meet them. I was flanked by Aiko and Snowflake, with Alexis trailing after, looking lost. The vampire stood just far enough away not to look like we were a group. The message was clear.

"Are we about ready to go in?" I said to Kikuchi, making sure to keep my voice respectful, and to make clear that I was asking his opinion rather than stating my own.

"Not quite," the would-be dai-tengu said absently, staring up at the mansion. His words were oddly mangled by the beak. "Matsuda Kimiko is scouting. We will wait for her to return before we move."

I didn't argue, for two reasons. First, this was his mission; I was pretty much just the muscle here, while he was the brains. Second, I'd have to be a freaking moron to say we should charge in blindly without waiting for the scout to report. I'm not *that* dumb.

We all stood around for a few minutes in silence. There didn't seem to be anything to say; we couldn't very well plan strategy until Kimiko came back with the scouting report, and small talk was out of the question.

Fortunately, the kitsune returned before the silence could really settle in, make itself at home, and become an oppressive cloak. She was in fox form, a fennec hardly larger than a big rat with enormous bat-ears. It wasn't hard to see why she'd been assigned to scout out the target; her fur was a pale tan that wouldn't blend into the surroundings particularly well, but she was so small and so agile that it would hardly matter. There was no question that she could get closer than any of the rest of us without being noticed.

She slithered down the hill, detectable only by the faint rustling of grasses as she passed through them—and I only even noticed that because Kikuchi focused on it. She covered the last few

yards in ridiculously long, high bounds, and changed to human form almost before she'd stopped moving. She started strapping on weapons without any sign of modesty, no more conscious of her nudity than if she'd been entirely alone. I looked away, slightly uncomfortable. I don't have much in the way of a nudity taboo—most werewolves don't, mostly because we're no more able to shift in clothing than a kitsune—but there was something intensely awkward about the moment. Maybe it was because of the strangers present, or because we were about to storm the not-entirely-metaphorical castle of a bunch of monsters—or, hell, maybe it had something to do with the fact that my heavily-armed girlfriend and female cousin were both standing *right there*.

I should have known better, of course. Alexis looked away, blushing furiously—but, equally predictably, Aiko leaned over to get a closer look, and peered at the scene with interest. "Not bad," she said appraisingly. "She's been working out since the last time I saw her." She followed the statement up with a wolf whistle, loudly enough that everyone present would hear but not enough so to present a risk of detection.

"Aiko, that's your *cousin*."

"So?" she said reasonably. "I can still appreciate her body on an aesthetic level, can't I? Besides, it isn't like there's any chance of inbreeding, is there, so what's it—wait. Is that a tattoo? *There*? That must have *really* hurt."

*Ooookay then, Snowflake said. This conversation is now officially too disturbing even for me, and I think we all know what that means. Kindly change the subject. Right now.*

Fortunately, I was spared from either having to continue that conversational line any further (because really, that *was* disturbing) or trying to change the topic, because about then Kimiko finished pulling on her biker's leather, belted on the same paired-sword ensemble as the tengu were wearing, picked up a Kalashnikov assault rifle, and gestured for us to come closer.

"They're definitely in there," she said quietly, no trace of levity in her voice. "Hard to say how many, but I'd guess not less than a dozen rakshasas, maybe as many as thirty."

"They'll have human minions with them," I said, remembering the scene Reynard had showed me. Four rakshasas, and fourteen human servants. "Maybe a lot of them."

She nodded. "Probably. They're on a fairly tight lockdown. All of the first-floor windows are boarded over, and the back door. The front door is locked, and I spotted two rakshasas on guard outside. The whole building is warded."

"What kind of wards?" I asked.

"Detection," she said. "That much is certain. There's also a force reversal ward in place, and there might be any number of spell triggers worked into the matrix."



"That presents a problem," Kikuchi said, stroking the hilt of his katana absently. "A detection web will negate any chance of taking them by surprise. And they'll be able to hit us with all sorts of magic while we're delayed by the wards, not to mention the surprises they will be preparing for us as they wait."

I frowned. "I can take down the wards," I said, somewhat surprised by the confidence in my own voice. "But I'll be vulnerable while I do it. We have to take out those guards first, preferably without alerting the ones inside."

Hrafn cleared his throat mildly, making several of us jump—clearly, I wasn't the only one present who found it easy to forget about the presence of the vampire, especially when he wasn't breathing. "I can kill one sentry without causing alarm," he said in a calm, even tone. "And the detection spells will feel nothing."

"Are you sure?" I asked. "Some of those things are really hard to hide from."

The vampire smiled. It might have been just my imagination saying his eyeteeth were more pronounced than was entirely natural, when every other time I'd seen a vampire they looked entirely human—but I doubted it. "Very little sees me when I do not wish to be seen," he said with perfect assurance. "Trust me, Winter jarl. They will not feel my presence."

"That's one of the guards," Kikuchi said. "Matsuda? Do you think you can conceal yourself from the wards as well?"

Kimiko frowned, chewing her lip. "Maybe?" she said tentatively. She paused for a moment, then nodded. "I think so," she said, more decisively.

"Good," he said. "In that case, you and your cousin will approach and remove the other sentry, allowing Wolf to approach and remove the wards. Meanwhile, the four of us—" he indicated the tengu standing to either side of him, and Miyazaki standing a short ways off—"will move around to the back of the house and cause a diversion, hopefully preventing the rakshasas within from interfering with you. You will enter and strike them from the rear, and we will grind them between us. Are there any questions?"

There were not. I wasn't going to say so, but I had to admit being rather impressed with Kikuchi. Granted he must have expected something like this—certainly it would be almost unimaginable for a group of rakshasas, knowing that they were in a state of war, not to erect wards around their stronghold—but the fact remained that, within just a few seconds of learning the extent of those protections, and of his allies' capabilities, he had a workable plan of battle laid out. One that put him in the most dangerous position, no less, and he had no apparent qualms with that idea.

"Very good," he said. "Let's get started, before they send someone out to take us as we stand here. Diversion starts in three minutes, so be ready." He gestured to the other tengu, and the three of them moved off at an angle to the hill, melting almost instantly into the night. Miyazaki waited just long enough to shoot us a thumbs-up and a fierce grin, his blocky teeth startlingly white against the beard,

before following. For all his size, the tanuki made no more noise than the tengu, and vanished just as quickly into the trees.

"We have to get into position," Kimiko said, checking over her rifle. It had the look of ritual to it.

"Right," I said. "Go ahead, you two. Snowflake, you're with me. Hrafn—" I looked around and discovered that the vampire had disappeared. It was impossible to say when he'd left, and equally so to tell where he'd gone. "Right," I muttered. "Because that isn't creepy at all." By the time I looked back, Aiko and Kimiko had also vanished, already on their way to their assigned position.

"Winter?" Alexis asked, once again sounding scared almost out of her wits. "What should I do?"

"Stay behind me," I said. I tried to think of a way to say "Stay out of the way and don't do anything stupid," more politely, without much success. "And shout if anyone tries to sneak up behind us," I finished lamely, well aware that if someone from this crowd *did* sneak up on us Alexis would almost certainly be dead before she knew anything about it. I was fairly confident she knew that, anyway, making it not really worth pointing out.

Snowflake and I moved up the hill, fairly slowly. The last thing I wanted to do was give away the game before the others were ready—and, in any case, I didn't really want to get *that* close to the building anyway. I was pretty sneaky, particularly wearing the cloak, and Snowflake was better—but I knew my limits. Trying to approach an alert rakshasa from dead ahead stealthily was beyond them, and I didn't have the first idea how to hide from the magics they had in place. If I went in before the diversion started, or before the sentries were dead, there was no possibility I would go undetected.

We got to within around ten yards, though, both of us flat on our stomachs in the underbrush. I was feeling pretty grateful that the rakshasas' overweening pride had demanded they make their home in the werewolves' former center of power. The wolves had chosen this place for its privacy and close access to the forest, both of which were currently playing to our advantage. Alexis, whom I had completely dismissed as unimportant at this time, was hanging back a fair ways—pretty much where we'd started, in fact, and well out of the danger zone. Smart. If she could just *stay* there until the fur stopped flying, we'd all be better off for it.

From that vantage, I could see the building fairly clearly. The windows were boarded over, as Kimiko had said, although I thought that a bit of an understatement when there was a sheet of plywood, a set of cross-braced planks, and iron bars over every first-floor window I could see, and the upper ones were barred. The door was flanked by a pair of what I could only presume were rakshasas. They both looked human, although visibility was very poor—even by werewolf standards, it was damned dark out here. I could at least see that both of them were holding weapons, though there wasn't anything like a uniform between them. The one on the left had a halberd planted against the ground and, as nearly as I could tell, was wearing heavy plate armor. The right-side guard had what looked like a scimitar at his hip, was holding a shotgun or rifle of some sort, and had no armor on that I could see.

We sat there, waited, and tried not to think about all the things that could go wrong with this plan.

We were not terribly successful. Even by my standards, this plan was less than solid.

Fortunately it wasn't more than a minute, maybe two, before Kikuchi's diversion started. There was a sudden flash of light on the other side of the building, which I supposed any civilians would mistake for lightning. That impression would be helped along by the thunderous *boom* that followed a moment later, a sound closer to explosions than to gunshots in volume and timber. A moment later I heard the tengu shouting, his voice small in the wake of that artificial thunder but still quite loud enough for me to hear. He spoke mostly in what sounded like Japanese, but with occasional forays into other languages. Judging by the few parts I understood, he was not exactly shouting compliments on the rakshasas defenses.

The two sentries both jerked at the light, then jumped slightly at the following noise. The unarmored one moved as though to go around and investigate. The other reached out and caught his arm, and I didn't have to hear it to imagine the stern lecture on the meaning of "guard this door" and the nature of diversionary tactics.

And that was our moment.

Hrafn appeared, just freaking *appeared* behind the armored, evidently superior guard while he was distracted. That monstrous axe of his came down in a whistling overhand strike that started on the crown of the rakshasa's helm and concluded somewhere in the vicinity of the bottom of his sternum, which I felt pretty much guaranteed we didn't have to worry about that one. The two of them had been standing so close together that I suspected the axe had also caught the second guard, but if so it hadn't been more than a glancing blow. He jerked back, visibly surprised, and I was quite confident he was about to start raising hell.

Kimiko, who had emerged from the trees the moment the light started (her illusions weren't quite as good as whatever Hrafn had done, and I was watching closely enough to catch the slight discrepancy) put her katana through his back, turning the incipient scream into a grunt of pain. A moment later Aiko, whose concealment had been more complete than her cousin's, passed her wakizashi through his throat. He dropped to the ground, sliding off the sword stuck through him, and the kitsune wiped their blades clean and sheathed them.

And as quickly and simply as that, two rakshasas were dead.

I started uphill at a run, Snowflake tight by my side and thrilling with excitement, and called Tyrfinn as I went. I undid the clasp and flicked the scabbard aside, and as always I felt joy and fury rush into me with the drawing of the sword.

Aiko and Kimiko had taken up a position to one side of the door, with Hrafn watching the other. All three were keeping close watch on the surroundings—it was not impossible that this entire thing was

a setup, luring us into an ambush—and I noticed that Hrafn was standing in such a manner that he could easily take a swing at anyone coming through the door.

I had to slow down a little as I approached, for fear that the combination of poor lighting, uncertain footing, and Tyrfin's attendant bad luck would put me flat on my face. That was unacceptable—it would make me vulnerable to the rakshasas, and it would make me look weak and stupid in front of Hrafn and Kimiko, neither of which was something I could afford.

I pulled up short in front of the door and closed my eyes, already examining the structure of the warding spells. They smelled much like the rakshasa I'd encountered earlier that night. I could easily discern multiple individual signatures in the magic, making me think that it had been established by a cooperative effort of multiple rakshasas.

As I'd hoped, the wards were static in nature, solid and locked rather than flowing. It's sort of hard to explain what I mean by that—you can't really *get* it unless you have the senses to perceive it for yourself, in which case you hardly need an explanation—but a metaphor might help to convey something of what I was perceiving. Think of the type of ward they were using as a crystal. Everything was locked into a precise, orderly form, with no flexibility to it, no room for variation, no movement. Some wards, in contrast, were more like fountains. The overall shape was consistent, but within that boundary the energy itself was free to move around, shifting and flowing.

There were benefits to the kind of ward the rakshasas had used. It was more stable, for one thing, which gave it a longer shelf life. Any long-term magic has to be repaired periodically unless its construction was absolutely flawless, but a fluid format is much more susceptible to leakage and power loss to the environment. This type of construction was simpler, too, and you could get more bang for your buck with less skill. Its stability made it more resistant to meddling, interference, and hacks of all sorts.

But it has disadvantages, as well—obviously, or it would be the only thing anyone used, ever. Such rigidity made it incapable of adapting. A more fluid design would level itself out, so to speak, so that you couldn't substantially weaken one part of it without taking on the whole thing. There wasn't enough freedom of movement in the energy making up these spells' structure to allow that sort of correction. Like diamond, it was strong, durable, incredibly hard—yet brittle, and easily fractured by the right sort of blow.

A fluid ward is susceptible to clever tactics, cunning tricks, and subtle maneuvers. A crystalline ward, on the other hand, is easily defeated by a sufficient amount of brute force, skillfully applied. That's why I, like any good paranoiac, used a mixture of both.

I opened my eyes, took a deep breath, let it out, and opened a long, shallow cut on my wrist with Tyrfin. The sword's mirrored blade swallowed the blood without a mark, as always, but it flowed freely down my arm, dripping off the back of my hand to the ground.

I gathered my magic. I reached, through the medium of my blood, for the power of my life, power I could convert to magic at need, and held it ready. And then I slashed viciously at the door with Tyrfing.

When Tyrfing collided with the ward, the ward tried to keep it out. The magic attempted to turn the force impacting it back on itself, send the sword flying back at my face with extra velocity thrown in. Had it been an ordinary sword, or a battering ram for that matter, I don't doubt it would have been quite adequate for the task. I mean, there's a reason that a force-reversing spell is the bread-and-butter standard issue warding spell. It was the equivalent of an assault rifle—simple, versatile, and capable of dealing with an incredibly wide range of opponents.

The problem wasn't with the ward. The problem was that, to continue the analogy, Tyrfing was the equivalent of a mainline battle tank. Standard issue equipment wasn't up to handling that sort of thing. If you want to shoot a tank, you need anti-materiel weapons with armor-piercing ammunition, and even then it's going to be rather chancy. Likewise, if you want Tyrfing not to cut you, a standard warding spell, or even a set of them, wasn't enough. You need....

Actually, I wasn't sure what you'd need. I had yet to encounter something Tyrfing couldn't cut through, given a little time, with the exception of the personal weapons of the champions of the Sidhe Courts.

So, long story short, when the ward's magic tried to latch onto Tyrfing, it failed to find a hold on it. Tyrfing, on the other hand, had no such difficulty with slicing into the ward, which didn't fare nearly so well from their encounter. The sword slowed only slightly as it passed through, and bit into the door deeply.

The damage to the ward's structure was enough, though, to trigger the next line of defense. Embedded within the base layer of magic were more...proactive defenses. The principles involved were actually the same as those of a stored spell. A small trigger—in this case, the feedback of the ward's own shattered magic—acted to release a much larger amount of energy that had been appropriately shaped beforehand. In this case, I was pretty sure it was a combination of kinetic force and lightning, which would cause distinct problems if it hit me. The force wasn't an enormous problem—the armor would mitigate some of the damage, and I could probably heal the rest—but I had no real defenses in place against electricity, and there was enough of it here to be quite definitely lethal.

Which is why, at the exact moment it started to trigger, I hit the ward with all the power I'd been holding. It was a brutally simple tactic. As the structure of the spell started to collapse I smashed it with raw, undifferentiated magical energy.

I have no real talent with either kinetic energy or electricity. But this *wasn't* either of those things, not yet. I caught it in the split second between when it started to release the stored power and when that power took on a physical form. I wasn't exactly skilled at purely energetic stuff either, preferring more tangible magics—but, then again, this wasn't exactly finesse work. It was a contest of

brute strength, more or less, and I was prepared, relatively fresh, and using blood magic to supplement my natural power.

I was skilled enough for that.

Oh, don't get me wrong. It wasn't perfect. I took a hit roughly as hard as a strong tackle, sending me staggering backward, and a miniature lightning bolt that hurt like hell and set my muscles to twitching furiously. Between these two things, it should come as no great surprise that I wound up on my ass, and probably would have banged my head painfully off a rock if I weren't wearing a helmet.

But significantly more of the power backlashed into the ward itself. When I managed to sit up and look around, slightly dizzily, the door was hanging drunkenly open from one hinge, there were burn marks spread over a dozen feet of wall, and it took only moments for me to see that the ward's structural integrity had been too badly damaged for it to continue functioning at all. There was no further impediment to entry through this door.

"We're good," I croaked, pushing myself to my feet and recalling Tyrfin to hand. Aiko, Kimiko (who was looking at me with newfound respect, and maybe a hint of fear) and Snowflake slipped into the darkened building at once. Hrafn stayed to give me a hand up, and made no move to follow me inside.

"Aren't you coming?" I asked as I limped over the threshold, every sense alert for enemies on the other side.

"I cannot enter a home uninvited," the vampire said, his expression one of icy calm which I felt strangely confident belied a terrible frustration. "I will go assist the yokai with their distraction." Hrafn vanished, so fast that I couldn't really say whether he'd teleported or was simply that fast, leaving only a lingering scent of vampire and raven.

Well, great. So much for our heavy hitter. I had magic and was better equipped, but there was no doubt that Hrafn was stronger, faster, and more durable than me. I'd been counting on his assistance inside, and felt significantly more vulnerable now that I knew I wouldn't be getting it.

I also felt more than slightly stupid for not even considering that this might happen beforehand, of course. But that didn't really have much bearing on the situation.

The house was dark, even to my eyes, and I was relying more on hearing and my awareness of how the air flowed over and around objects than on my largely useless vision. Even with those advantages, it was hard to understand what was going on. There was nothing for it but to continue, though, so I walked into the madhouse.

The rakshasas seemed to have been gathered in the large, hollow room that made up most of the first floor of the house. I smelled alcohol and roasted meat. They were still clearly trying to react to the surprise and figure out what was going on. In the confusion, we had gained the advantage. The smell of blood was vivid, and I could see at least two enemies on the ground, dead or dying.

Aiko and Snowflake, who'd both had quite a while to learn to work together, were standing to my right as I entered the room. The kitsune had her wakizashi in one hand and a tanto in the other—clearly, she'd decided that, between the dark, the confusion, and the proximity, the blades were a better choice than gunfire. She was fighting something like a dozen opponents at once, and making it look easy. They were human slaves, judging from the wooden movements. They were armed with an eclectic mix of baseball bats, knives, and clumsier improvised weapons—but they were still just humans, and unskilled, poorly motivated humans hampered by the rakshasas' mental controls at that. Aiko was simply out of their league. She dodged everything they threw at her, and retaliated with unbelievable precision and skill.

As I watched, trying to make sense of what was happening, one of them finally got into a position behind her, and raised a club of some sort—only to be taken out at the knees by Snowflake. I don't know whether she dealt him a lethal blow while he was down, or he was trampled by his own allies, but that slave fell, and did not rise again.

They were skilled, experienced, had taken the enemy by surprise, and were mowing them down like a combine harvester. The fact remained that it was only a matter of time before the weight of numbers told, and everyone knew it. The rakshasas weren't getting involved, because they didn't *have* to. They could let their minions absorb the brunt of the attack, and then move in to mop things up.

To my left, Kimiko was faring even worse. She had her back against the wall, and was fending off nearly as many attackers as Aiko and Snowflake. She had her katana in both hands, and it rapidly became apparent that while she was very, very good, she lacked the pragmatism and experience that elevated Aiko from a skilled fighter to a nearly superhuman one. Kimiko cut down three people with as many strokes as I watched, but the third took the sword with her as she fell.

She reacted almost before I could register what happened, springing away in a ridiculous, ceiling-scraping leap. She even pulled a frontflip in midair, landing in a crouch a few steps from Aiko. She immediately straightened and opened fire with her AK-47.

The assault rifle put out a few dozen rounds in the space of a couple seconds.

They accomplished more or less exactly nothing.

Oh, don't get me wrong. People died. Maybe a half-dozen slaves in the front rows dropped to the ground, dead or dying or just injured too grievously to stand. But the bullets never made it past that to threaten the rakshasas. They hit some invisible barrier in the air, just beyond the first rank of minions, and ricocheted away harmlessly.

Well, harmless to the *rakshasas*, at least. Several of the ricochets hit the humans from behind, inflicting additional injury on them. One particularly unlucky bounce hit Kimiko in the arm, just as she stopped firing—no doubt she had realized too late the uselessness of her action. A number of others flew in the general direction of Aiko and Snowflake. One bullet skipped off my helmet, making me flinch away. My armor was good, but there's a wealth of difference between the small-caliber weapons I'd

encountered earlier and a military-grade firearm such as this. If that shot had hit me directly rather than merely glancing off, there was a very good chance it would have gone through—and a bullet to the head is almost certainly beyond even a werewolf's ability to heal.

Which mattered very little at the moment. Because another round had zinged right past my shoulder—and was promptly followed by an almost-silent grunt of pain from just behind me, the first audible indication of damage I'd heard from the enemy in this fight.

I couldn't be absolutely sure I'd heard it, of course. I mean, it was damn near silent, and Kimiko had just opened fire with an assault rifle less than fifteen feet away. My ears were ringing pretty well—moderately superhuman hearing acuity isn't always a blessing, after all. But it was enough to get me to focus my senses on that rather than keep trying to sort out what was going on in front of me.

What I found was another group of people creeping up behind me. Some of them came from the short hallway leading to the back door, where they'd presumably been awaiting Kikuchi's entrance once he managed to get through the wards. Others came down the stairs from the second floor. Some moved with the clumsy, almost wooden manner common to the human slaves. Others were shaped like something not-quite-human and moved with the oily agility of a greased leopard, and were presumably rakshasas. As nearly as I could tell, all of them were armed.

Their plan suddenly made a great deal more sense. They hadn't just been wearing us down by throwing waves of minions at us. They'd been bogging us down, forcing us to commit, so that when the reserves hit we'd be surrounded and helpless. They'd cut us down in seconds. Sure, it would cost them terribly—how many of their slaves had died already, just to set this up?—but they probably wouldn't care. From a rakshasa's perspective—at least, according to what I'd read—human lives were more a property issue than anything. They had a certain amount of value, granted, and occasionally you might come across one you liked enough to keep, but by and large they were replaceable. They probably thought of this tactic more in terms of expending ammunition than sacrificing lives.

All of which, of course, was quite inconsequential at the moment.

My first impulse, upon discovering the flankers, was to turn and fight, keep them off my allies' backs. I dismissed that impulse as a moronic one. They still outnumbered us enormously—and, even if they didn't, we hadn't even *fought* the rakshasas themselves yet. It seemed reasonable to assume that if the four of us could handle all of them, they wouldn't *be* here in the first place.

That's why you make battle plans *before* the fighting starts, and stick to them. When you were in the thick of things, it was easy to be swayed by details which, although incredibly significant on a personal level, were tactically unimportant. That's a weakness which is easily exploitable by pretty much anybody. You can't afford that sort of weakness.

In other words, I had a job to do here. The fact that it wasn't the job I *wanted* to be doing had no real bearing on the situation. It didn't make that job any less necessary.



Chapter Fourteen

I turned abruptly and thrust with Tyrfing. It wasn't a great move—it's difficult to translate the sort of rough image I had of my surroundings into the kind of detailed information you need to fight effectively—but I caught the man behind me by surprise and, well, let's be honest here. When you're a werewolf carrying one of the most powerful and destructive weapons ever wielded by mortal hands, and you're fighting untrained, unarmored humans whose capacities seemed to be in some way damaged by the rakshasas' control over them, you don't *need* perfection.

Tyrfing bit deeply into the man, somewhere in the abdominal area. There was another quiet sound of surprise, but still no indication of pain, and I wondered idly if they no longer had the capacity for it. That seemed like something a rakshasa would do.

I wrenched the sword back out and bolted for the back door, shouldering my way through the people between it and me. I didn't bother trying to fight them; it wasn't worth the time it would take. I caught the first several totally by surprise—they'd had no reason to think that their surprise had been ruined, after all—and sent them sprawling without difficulty. Then one of them, a fellow more than six feet tall, muscled like a grizzly bear and armed with a woodcutter's axe, planted himself solidly directly in front of me. He swept the axe in a short, vicious stroke at my head, growling incoherently under his breath.

I stepped into the attack, bring Tyrfing up to parry. Well, parry is probably a bit of a misleading term to use. The sword cut cleanly through the fiberglass handle of the axe, as I'd anticipated, leaving him holding around a foot or two of handle and nothing else. He staggered, thrown off balance by the sudden removal of half his weapon. I continued the momentum of my swing, bringing the sword around and into a cut that took his right leg off at the knee. A simple thrusting kick knocked him over backward, and I proceeded over him. I had a clear shot at the door now.

I had just about made it to the door when I felt something grab my arm and heard claws grating against my armor. I half-turned and slashed at my assailant. Their armor must have been exceptionally fine, because it actually slowed Tyrfing down a little bit. It didn't matter, though. I still cut clear through their arm. They shrieked in pain, marking them as a rakshasa rather than another slave, and fell away from me. I turned to consider the door.

It had been blocked every bit as thoroughly as the windows. By which I mean that they'd literally bricked it up. It was hard to say for sure, but going off my memories of the building's layout I thought they'd laid two or three feet of wall over the door. I could hack through it—Tyrfing can cut through almost anything given time—but time was the one thing I most assuredly did not have. Besides, even if I got the bricks out of the way, there would still be the wards to contend with. I might have been able to break them as I'd broken those over the front door, or figure out some clever way to circumvent them, but that would also take time.

Besides. I'd just about had it with subtlety. Petty, but true.

I dropped one hand into my cloak, feeling around. The object I was looking for was small, but I had designed the cloak with such things in mind. It was capable of moving objects through its substance in response to my will. Just a few seconds later I withdrew my hand, holding a very dangerous weapon.

It didn't look like much. The silver ball was tiny, no larger than a pea, but there was so much magic packed into it that even that tiny amount of silver, even through an armored gauntlet, burned painfully. This was a stored spell of significantly more power than I could manage. It had cost me a great deal. I'd tried, initially, to replicate it, until I realized that it was not something I could manage safely and—with surprising wisdom—gave up on the project.

Just now I concentrated on it, drawing a bit of power up and focusing it on the ball. "Trial by fire," I whispered, and immediately tossed it at the barricade. Then I turned and sprinted away, moving as fast as I could. I ran straight into the rakshasa I'd just maimed, and the two of us went into a tumble. But it was a tumble away from the door, so that was okay.

Exactly three seconds after I'd said the trigger phrase, there was an explosion behind me. Well, okay, that isn't entirely accurate. What happened was this.

There was a sudden light behind me, so bright that it was painful and I wasn't even *looking* at it. The light had a strange golden tone, a bit like dusk sunlight, and brought with it almost unbearable heat. I instinctively drew on the ice inherent in my jotun blood, chilling the air around me and coating my armor with a thin layer of frost that almost immediately melted. It was still very, very uncomfortable, and I was going to have some mild burns, but I wasn't dead or on fire, and that was a victory under the circumstances. The spell had never been meant for use at such close quarters.

A moment later there was a *boom* that quite literally shook the earth. It was unbelievably loud. Not "rock concert" loud, or even "gunshots" loud. No, this was an entirely different kind of loud, the sort of sound you would expect from a car bomb. The screams of distress and pain that echoed in the following silence sounded tiny, strangely muffled. Tiny bits of something hard, propelled at a speed uncomfortable to contemplate, hit my back and went through the armor like a paper screen, engendering small but bright sparks of pain in several places.

I took advantage of the rakshasa's evident shock to elbow him viciously across the face. The ridged metal left bloody cuts on his face, and between that and the force behind the blow it took the fight right out of him. He slumped to the ground, and I pushed myself away and stood. I turned, dizzy but ambulatory, to examine the results of my little toy.

There was a sphere, nine feet in diameter, that was simply gone. The bricks were gone. The door was gone. The walls were gone. The ceiling was gone. The floor was gone. The earth itself was cratered, the shallow pit lined with glass from the sheer heat of the not-explosion. At least as importantly, the wards were gone.

When I'd battered my way through them, I'd left them too damaged and disordered to function as intended. In the wake of this far greater power, though, they were simply *gone*. Eradicated. Demolished entirely.

Damn. I was feeling pretty good about my decision not to experiment with that thing.

"Door's open," I called, not particularly caring whether anyone heard—Kazuhiro was surely clever enough to figure that out, and even if he weren't I expected Miyazaki or Hrafn could. My voice sounded odd, simultaneously too loud and peculiarly flat. I realized suddenly that I was only hearing out of my left ear, my right presumably damaged by the noise of the explosion.

That freaked me out more than just a little bit. I mean, sure, it was *probably* nothing my preternatural healing couldn't cope with given a little time, but what if it *wasn't*? That would suck so utterly.

Several small fires had been started in the hallway, and they provided more than adequate light as I made my dizzy, unsteady way back to the main room. I passed a number of slaves and two strange, twisted shapes that had to be rakshasas as I went. They were not dead, for the most part, but they were badly burned, peppered by shrapnel, and clearly even whatever the rakshasas had done to them wasn't enough to overcome this degree of damage. Some of them tried to crawl, where to I don't think even they knew. Most, though, weren't capable even of that. They lay still, or curled up, whimpering, moaning, and sobbing to themselves. The air was thick with the scent of burned meat, a vile stench if ever I smelled one. It was a scene from Hell's nightmares.

I strode down it unflinchingly, numb and dazed and half-deaf and horrified and haunted by what I'd done—by the fact that, given the chance to try over, I wasn't sure I could or would do anything differently.

I seemed to hear Loki's delighted laughter in the back of my head. Optimistically, I wrote it off as a stress-induced hallucination.

The rakshasas were equally devastated. Both of them looked strange, wrong, like wax statues of a human being left too long in the sun. Their shapes were warped, unnatural. Their arms were twisted, their faces looked like some strange blend of a human and a cat without any hair whatsoever, their proportions disturbingly off-kilter. One was seven feet tall and freakishly thin, with bizarrely tiny arms that made me think of a tyrannosaur. The other was maybe half that height, must have weighed nearly two hundred pounds, and had such long apish arms that I expected it was more comfortable with quadrupedal locomotion than any form of human transport. Both had long, sharp claws that seemed an intermediary step between unkempt human fingernails and a raptor's talons.

Neither of them moved. I beheaded them both anyway, just in case they were faking it. When in doubt, you can never go wrong with decapitation. I didn't have the leisure to burn them, unfortunately. That would have been ideal. But cutting their heads off with Tyrfinn was a solid second best.

Back in the central room, things had worsened considerably. Kimiko was down, near the front door. She didn't look good. I couldn't see what was wrong, and hardly had the leisure to check, but the air reeked of fresh blood, and odds were good some of it was hers. Alexis was standing outside, her posture making it plain she didn't have the first idea of what to do. She had that gun out, but her hands were shaking too badly to use it, even if she could have figured out whom to shoot.

Aiko and Snowflake were still standing, but clearly in dire straits. They had been pressed back nearly to Kimiko's position. Snowflake was limping badly, her left foreleg held clear of the floor, and her snarls held both desperate rage and a sort of resigned fatalism. Aiko had lost her dagger somewhere, but it hardly seemed to matter; her left arm hung limp at her side, and it wasn't hard to see that she wouldn't have gotten much use out of it anyway. She still moved with the same ferocity, but she was slowing down, getting clumsy. It wouldn't take long before they wore her down, and Snowflake could never hope to stand them all off with her injuries. She might possibly have been able to flee, but I knew without even considering it that she wouldn't do so. It wasn't in her nature.

The ground was littered with corpses—how many was difficult to tell, because the fires' hellish light wasn't strong this far from ground zero, and the madly dancing shadows it cast were almost worse than unsullied darkness—but the rakshasas themselves were still unharmed, and the advantage of surprise that had let us pull off a charge on such a numerically superior foe was played out. It was only a matter of time now, and everyone knew it.

Of course, that was before I hit them from behind.

I probably should have charged the rakshasas, knowing that they were the real threat here. I did not. Tactics be damned, I wasn't going to watch Aiko and Snowflake die knowing I could have prevented it. I was *not*.

I hit the thralls from behind, and I hit them hard and fast. I could say that I did something fancy, some extravagant bit of swordplay that was as beautiful as it was deadly, that astounded even as it killed. But that would be a lie. That would be an absolute lie.

The truth is that fancy maneuvers are things meant for the practice hall. They are designed for formal matches with rules of right of way, target areas, and fair tactics. They are very occasionally useful when fighting someone equally as skilled as you are.

They are no good for battle. When you're fighting for your life, or your friends' lives, you don't want something fancy and impressive and honorable. There is little room for honor in real violence, and less for glory. When life is on the line, you seize every advantage you have, or you die. That is the truth. Anything else is either a beautiful lie designed to convince the youth to throw away their lives in service to a cause they hardly even understand, or based on situations not relevant to ninety-nine percent of conflicts.

In my case, the advantages were fourfold. First, surprise—because they surely would not expect anything to have survived the conflagration I had just set off. They would assume it had been a suicide

attack, meant to trade my life—all our lives, probably—in return for a tactical advantage. Second, position. I was standing right behind the enemy, and there's a reason that description is the basis for all kinds of metaphors describing an unfair advantage. Third, I was a werewolf. That made me almost certainly stronger and faster than any of the people in this room, excepting the rakshasas. Fourth, I had Tyrfin. What that meant in this context was that I could disregard certain rules and restrictions that govern ordinary fighters.

If I were an ordinary person, with an ordinary sword, the best I could do would be to kill one opponent, maybe two, before they figured out I was there. I would have tried to reduce the weight of numbers against myself a little bit, an ultimately futile endeavor—they were simply too numerous for that to matter, in the long run.

Instead, I focused on simply removing people from the fight. As many of them as I could.

My first attack beheaded two enemies and removed the arm from a third. Two of them dropped, while the last staggered away, fountaining blood, still not screaming. I stepped into the hole I'd made and swung again, capitalizing on the chaos my arrival had spread. This attack was a long diagonal slash from upper right to lower left, and left five people on the ground in pieces of varying shape and size.

A few steps later, I was standing next to Aiko. She was panting heavily, making a little pained noise on every exhale. I'd left nearly a dozen enemies maimed or dead, and when they turned to face me she'd attacked again, killing several more. Most of the slaves were dead now, with the exception of a small clump gathered around the rakshasas where they still stood on the sidelines. That group seemed a little better armed than the rest, a little less impaired. They also seemed reluctant to attack; presumably the rakshasas wanted them nearby.

"Took you long enough," Aiko muttered, wincing slightly. That, combined with the way she moved, suggested that she had ribs which were bruised, cracked, or fractured. It was hard to guess which.

A broken rib can kill you, if you get unlucky. The sharp, splintered end goes into your heart, and you drop dead. Or it punctures a lung, and you drown slowly on your own blood. Or, if you get *really* unlucky, it punches through the wall of your stomach or intestine, and the wound starts pouring toxins and bacteria into your bloodstream, and you die over the course of weeks from septic shock. It's a bad way to go. Not that there are many good ones, I suppose, but that's worse than most.

I tried not to think about that too much. Aiko wouldn't appreciate it, no more than I would accept her keeping me out of the fight to protect me. We all knew the risks here.

"What were you doing, anyway?" she asked, stretching her working arm in a way that suggested it was mildly injured as well, maybe a strain or pulled muscle or something. This hadn't been a good fight for her; usually she got off the lightest of any of us. I suppose everyone has bad days.

"Wait for it," I murmured, keeping close watch on the room. No one had come to attack us, and the rakshasas were conversing urgently in that unintelligible language of theirs. I was guessing they were debating whether to take the field personally now that we were properly softened up.

Suddenly, the room was plunged back into darkness, the fires gone out all at once. "There we go," I said in satisfaction. The rakshasas' muttering cut off with a short sound of confusion that transcended language barriers.

Aiko and Snowflake both started to ask what I meant, and what was going on. The others would have joined in, presumably, except that Kimiko looked like she might pass out if I breathed on her too hard and Alexis was pretty clearly in shock. Before I could reply, though, their questions were answered.

Miyazaki emerged from the hallway, and redirected the flames he'd stolen. It was directed away from us, but I still felt the wash of heat against my face, even through the cloak and helmet. I realized for the first time that my face was also burned, just enough to be irritating, and the cloak of shadows would need some serious repairs.

For the other team, the tanuki's magic trick was significantly more threatening.

It lasted only a moment, but fire flooded orange-and-crimson from his outstretched hands, pouring over the rakshasas and their few remaining slaves. I looked away. If pressed, I could always just say that the fire's brightness was painful to my eyes. It would not be a lie, in the technical sense, although it would also not be the truth.

There was screaming, this time, the sort of high-pitched, desperate screaming you seldom hear these days. I tried my best to tune it out. It wasn't too hard, since I could only hear it in one ear anyway. Once again, the air filled with the stench of burning flesh. I gagged, and hoped nobody was looking to catch me being squeamish. It wouldn't do for them to think me squeamish.

The fire died, plunging the room back into merciful darkness. I could not see at all, my eyes too abused by this rapid shuffling between painfully intense light and total blackness. But I could feel shapes moving too fast through the air, and knew that Kikuchi and his kin had followed close on the fire. Miyazaki's opening salvo had been to deal with the humans; now the tengu would finish the job.

I slumped the ground in exhaustion. The yokai would stab me in the back or stick to the deal; it hardly mattered at this point. I wasn't up to doing anything about it in any case, and I seriously doubted I could contribute anything useful to the fight at this point. Aiko sat down beside me a moment later, and Snowflake hop-limped her way over to collapse near us, panting. It occurred to me that I should probably check on her; it takes a fairly serious injury to make Snowflake take notice. I'd never seen her hopping like that. I couldn't seem to make my body move to actually do it, though, and after a moment I lost interest.

The battle lasted only a few minutes. There was still no light, and I couldn't seem to concentrate enough to feel the movement of the air that might have told me something about what was going on, so I know very little about how that fight went. It was fairly quiet as battles go, which isn't really saying all

that much. There was the clanging of metal on metal, the softer, wetter sounds of metal on flesh, the occasional scream of pain or ululating war cry.

Eventually, the sounds of fighting died away. I heard heavy, clomping footsteps coming closer, and briefly debated standing up to defend us. I dismissed it as the ridiculous notion it was.

Miyazaki spoke a single word in a deep, resonant voice, accompanying it with a thump of his club on the floor. A moment later, the room was filled with a gentle golden radiance. It had no evident source, and cast no shadows—which, believe me, is a *lot* creepier than you might think.

The rakshasas were dead. Very, very dead. The largest piece I could see was a forearm. The tengu hadn't been satisfied with just beheading, it seemed. One of them was standing guard, in a position where he could watch both doors. Another was methodically executing all of the incapacitated-but-alive slaves. I might have found it repugnant or immoral, except that it was so clearly an act of mercy. The degree of injury necessary to subdue them had been far beyond what a human could reasonably expect to recover from.

Kikuchi himself was walking over to stand by Miyazaki. He had that katana held in a ready position so calm and casual I wondered whether he was even aware he was doing it. It was dripping blood, literally. He considered me for a moment, and I wondered if I was about to die for my high-handed treatment of him. If there was an emotion on that alien corvine face, I couldn't read it.

"Are you well?" he said eventually. His voice was still mangled by the beak, making it a little hard to understand, but I thought it actually sounded concerned.

It occurred to me that he was talking to me. It occurred further that I should probably answer him. But I couldn't think of a good reason to do so, nor did I have the faintest idea what I might say. I mean, what the hell kind of question was that? Was I *well*? How on earth could *anyone* be well right now? Furthermore, if I *was* well, would I really just be sitting here staring into space like a lunatic?

"He's in shock," Aiko explained, sounding very tired. "His injuries aren't too serious, though. He should be fine."

Shock. Well, that explained a lot. I wondered idly whether it was physical, emotional, or magical in cause. I could make a pretty strong case for all three, which struck me as a very indicting statement about the kind of life I'd been leading.

"We still have those bastards upstairs," Miyazaki said. The tanuki no longer seemed so comedic. There were a number of holes—bullet holes, it looked like—in his vest, along with a number of burns, and his exposed arms were so bloody it showed through the hair. But he was just as huge and solid as ever, the injuries not seeming to bother him at all, and that massive club was thoroughly bloodied. There were bits of...*things* I had no desire to contemplate further stuck between the iron studs.

Kikuchi hesitated. "Go on," Aiko said. "We aren't going to be much help anyway. We'll stay here and make sure nobody comes up behind you." What an absurd statement. Snowflake was lamed, Aiko

had one working arm and injured ribs, Kimiko was unconscious, Alexis was completely raw, and I was loopier than a racetrack, and fairly injured myself. I was pretty sure the only way we could stop toddlers was if they came one at a time.

"Are you sure that's smart?" I mumbled. The words were mushy, but intelligible. Score one for the home team; I was not going to be a mute. "There's only four of you." Hrafn, of course, still couldn't come inside. I was starting to understand why the vampires, for all their terrifying power, hadn't driven out the competitors. They had too many weaknesses, and those weaknesses were too well known.

"Rakshasas are schemers," Miyazaki said dismissively. "They go down easy enough in a fair fight." He started for the stairs, drawing the rest along with him more or less by default.

I watched them go. Then I suddenly blinked, and seemed to come awake. "Hey," I said to Snowflake. "Are you okay?"

*The ankle's broken, she said dispassionately. Not seriously. I can't put weight on it, but it isn't terrible, and it should heal all right. There's a cut on my side that's going to need stitches. One of my ears is going to be pretty well notched, and there's a nick on my chin that will probably leave a real nice scar. Quite a few bruises, of course. Other than that I'm fine.*

"Oh," I said. "I suppose it could be worse." I frowned. "Do we need to set the ankle?"

She hesitated. *Not yet?* she said tentatively. *I don't really know. I can get around all right for now. We can see about the actual medicining later.*

"Okay. What about you?" I asked Aiko.

She grimaced. "This arm's useless. Some bastard hit me with a hammer. I don't *think* the shoulder's broken, but I'm not going to be juggling any time soon." She concluded with a liberal sprinkling of pejoratives and obscenities in a multitude of languages, which I couldn't really parse at all.

"Are your ribs all right?"

She started to shrug, winced, and made an ambivalent sound instead. "Sore. Nasty bruises. Maybe cracked. Oh, and I sprained my good wrist, I think."

I sighed with relief. "Oh good," I said. "I was worried there was something serious."

She snorted, then nudged me with her elbow. "What about *you*? I mean, shit, Winter, you don't look so good."

I took inventory. "Mild burns on my face, arms, back, and legs," I said after a moment's thought. "Shrapnel wounds on my back. I think it was the bricks exploding that did it. I must have taken a hit or two I didn't notice, because my right hip doesn't seem to want to work right, and the ankle is sore enough I think it might be sprained. I'm fine otherwise." I frowned. "What happened to Kimiko?"



"She got overrun when they hit us from the rear," Aiko said. "They just swarmed her. She must have taken out half a dozen of the bastards, but they just kept coming. It was like they didn't even care." She shivered slightly. "That was some creepy shit. Anyway, they took her down and got a few hits in, but we managed to clear them out. Snowflake held 'em off—that's where she broke the ankle, some jackass with a bat lying on the ground—and I dragged her out."

"How serious are her injuries?"

Aiko shrugged helplessly. "Enough?" she said. "I don't know medicine. We got most of the bleeding stopped. She's still breathing. That's about what I'm good for."

"Right," I said. Then, "You think he's going to win this?"

Aiko didn't pretend not to understand what I meant. "Probably. This is totally Kikuchi's kind of fight. I mean, shit, look at how easily he went through those guys," she said, nodding at the pile of dismembered corpses in the middle of the room.

"Those were the weakest of the gang," I said. "The stronger ones will be upstairs."

"True," she said. "But he's got two other tengu and an old tanuki with him." She shrugged. "Eh. Doesn't much matter. I don't think we can run fast enough right now to get away from 'em regardless."

"Good point," I admitted with a wry grin. "I reckon we're pretty much all in now, and the dice are cast. Nothing to do but play it out."

"How are you people so calm?" Alexis asked suddenly, sounding nearly hysterical. I started a little at the sound of her voice; I 'd nearly forgotten my cousin was there at all. A dangerous habit to get into.

"It isn't worth getting worked up over," Aiko said with another abortive shrug. "Besides, we've both been hurt worse than this before."

I grinned. "Yeah we have. Remember that time you got shot in the guts with a poisoned arrow? I thought that was gonna be the end of it."

She laughed, although it looked slightly painful and trailed off into coughing. "Yeah," she said after a moment to catch her breath. "Then there was that time right after we met, when you were in a coma for a week. I *still* don't know how you aren't dead."

"And the time you personally insulted the Dragon King and implied his security was incompetent? When he's your own freaking uncle? I wouldn't be surprised if he up and killed you one of these days."

"Well, at least I didn't stab myself with my own magic sword right after. Besides, you tried to run a con on Loki. That's, like, a bazillion times worse. You should *pray* that all he does is kill you."

"In all fairness, I should point out that he thought it was hilarious. And given that you once tried to frame Erica as a drug runner, I don't think you've got a leg to stand on when it comes to accusations of willfully pissing people off."

"What are you two doing?" Alexis asked with a sort of horrified fascination.

"Don't mind us," I told her. "We tend to react to stress with inappropriate humor. It isn't acceptable in most social situations, but I find that it's actually very good for making you feel better. Maybe you should give it a try sometime."

My cousin looked at me like I was crazed—which, in all fairness, was not entirely unlikely, nor without justification.

It took nearly half an hour for Kikuchi and his cohorts to finish their grim business. To my surprise, there was no interference or interruption. Clearly someone had arranged for the police to be occupied elsewhere, or otherwise kept them away. I amused myself for a while trying to guess who, but was eventually forced to conclude that there were so many possible parties that trying to figure it out was a hopeless venture.

I checked on Kimiko after a few minutes. My brain was clearly still addled, or I would have done that first thing. She had some fairly serious injuries—hellacious bruises, lacerations, a few broken bones, that sort of thing—but she was still alive, and likely to stay that way for the foreseeable future. She remained unconscious throughout, probably due to head trauma—there was a sizeable bruise on the side of her head, and it didn't take a genius to guess that somebody had thought to club her about the face while she was on the ground. Head injuries are notoriously unreliable, and it wasn't impossible that it would kill her, or make her wish it had. Unfortunately, they're also notoriously difficult both to examine and to fix. It was well beyond my rudimentary first aid skills.

Finally the yokai came back down the stairs. We'd heard ominous noises, periodically—you know, screams of terror and agony, explosions, that sort of thing—but they actually looked fairly healthy. Kikuchi's right arm was visibly broken, but he seemed quite capable with his left. One of the other tengu had some nasty burns on his face (and, believe me, the only thing weirder than a tengu's real face was a tengu's real face without feathers). Miyazaki had acquired even more burns, gunshot wounds, and a few slashes, but still seemed to be just too tough to faze.

"Is it done?" I asked, my voice flat and tired.

"It is," Kikuchi said, his tone equally grim.

"Did any of the humans make it?"

"They wouldn't surrender," the tengu said, unreadable now. "We tried to take a few alive, but they killed themselves when they saw their masters die."

Was he telling the truth, I wondered? Had it been truly necessary to kill them, or had he simply not looked for an alternative? If he hadn't, did it even matter? Would I have done any better? *Had* I done any better?

"Truly, tonight's has been a bitter business," Kikuchi said, walking out into the middle of the room. He looked around at the various corpses, and I almost thought his expression looked haunted. But that was probably just me projecting. "But it's over now."

"I don't know that I would go *that* far," said a deep, unfamiliar voice. I turned to look at what was going on, just in time to see the uninjured tengu reach over and slice his kinsman's throat out with his sword.

The traitor turned enough for me to see his face, and I nearly pissed myself.

The skinwalker's baleful yellow eyes looked out at me from the tengu's face.

Chapter Fifteen

I never saw the skinwalker move. I was watching, too. As far as I could tell, he moved from the bottom steps of the staircase to the middle of the room without actually crossing the intervening space. He discarded his disguise as he moved, and arrived in the center of the room as the same Native American man I'd seen before. He'd traded his expensive suit for hunting leathers, and was wearing a cloak of feathers that reminded me uncomfortably of the garment I'd once seen Loki wearing. These feathers were all black, though. It wasn't hard to guess where they'd come from.

He wasn't visibly armed, having dropped the tengu's sword as he moved. I wished that I could believe that would matter. I wasn't capable of beating this thing—he didn't deserve the title of person—at my best. In my current condition, I wouldn't even be a speed bump.

"I must say, you did an excellent job," the skinwalker said, his voice supremely confident. "I expected you to make a decent showing, of course, but I never would have guessed this gambit would pay off *this* well. You not only removed the greatest obstacle to my gaining dominance over this pathetic cesspool of a city, every remaining inconvenience is in the same room! And you're half dead already, I shouldn't doubt. Really, my friends, you've outdone yourselves this time." His voice was almost friendly, which made it all even creepier.

"What about the vampires?" I said, hating the way fear made my voice shake.

"They don't matter," he said dismissively. "They can't oppose me, and they'll flee rather than face me regardless. No, I don't have to worry about the vampires."

Kikuchi hissed, an eerie inhuman sound. "You speak too soon, abomination," he said in a cold voice. He only had one hand with which to wield his katana, but it didn't look any less deadly.

The skinwalker didn't even look at him. He just flicked his fingers, and a blast of magical force hit the tengu like a speeding bus. He flew across the room, not dropping noticeably over the course of fifteen feet, and slammed into the wall with terrible force.

The tengu dropped limply to the ground. His sword clattered on the floor as it fell from his hand.

"Always with the distractions," the skinwalker said, hardly even sounding annoyed. "Where was I? Ah, yes. Mr. Wolf, this battle is over. You've lost. But, as I think I've conveyed to you already, I hold you in no particular contempt. I admire your determination, your indomitability. I have only respect for you on a personal level."

"Gosh thanks," I growled, shifting around slightly where I sat.

"There's no need to be snide," he said disapprovingly. "As I was saying, I have no reason to wish you ill. It isn't too late for you to leave this room alive."

"Let me guess," I sneered at him. "All I have to do is abandon any ideals or principles I might, by some miracle, still have, betray and kill my friends and allies, and swear eternal service to you and your evil masters."

"Nothing so ridiculous," the skinwalker said. "No, I think killing one of them should suffice. The dog or the kitsune. It shouldn't be too difficult for you. You and the survivor would be free to go. You are, of course, welcome to remain here and serve me, but frankly I think it would be better for all of us if you didn't."

Damn, I was starting to really hate this jackass. I mean, it's one thing to be a bad guy. It's bad enough to be manipulated, defeated, tormented, and eventually killed. But for it to happen at the hands of a villain who was so damned *cliché*, well, that was just over the top.

I pretended to consider it, shifting around uncomfortably, looking at Aiko and Snowflake in turn. There was no way my face could be seen behind the cloak and the helmet, but I kept it properly horrified anyway. I must have done a fairly good job, because Alexis looked like she was about to be sick with terror, and Miyazaki—who was standing a safe distance away from the skinwalker, clutching his club, and trying to pretend he hadn't been dismissed from this conversation like he wasn't even there—growled a little.

I opened my mouth to answer. The skinwalker leaned closer, sadistic pleasure writ large in every line of his body. He was enjoying this, exulting in our suffering, getting off on watching me damn myself. It seemed for a moment that the whole world was holding its breath, waiting to see what I would do.

And then I pulled the trigger of my shotgun.

People with a certain amount of knowledge of the supernatural tend to be fairly down on guns. Now, there are entirely valid reasons for that. A lot of critters—vampires spring to mind, but there are others—aren't even inconvenienced by bullets. More than that, though, people get the idea that magic is better than a firearm. That's broadly true. Even a minor mage such as myself can typically come up with a counter to a gun. I can't stop bullets. But that doesn't mean other mages can't—they can. Easily. And even for me, stopping the person *shooting* the gun is a relatively trivial task. For a stronger and more experienced mage, it wasn't even that.

But all of that assumes that the mage *knows* about the gun. It's hard to stop what you don't know is there. It can be done—for example, some mages never leave the house without a full set of magical protections that protect from that sort of thing, while *especially* paranoid mages never put themselves in a position where a gunman could conceivably be present without their knowledge at all. But it's much, much more difficult.

The skinwalker had no way of knowing that I was even *carrying* a gun. Circumstances during the fight hadn't been conducive for me actually using it, and it was concealed beneath the cloak. All that shifting around had let me get it aligned properly without being obvious about it, removing the instant of warning he might otherwise have had. And, at that moment, he was so fixated upon what I was about

to say, so absorbed by the pleasure he was getting from our suffering, that he wasn't expecting an attack at all.

I'd loaded the shotgun with custom ammunition roughly based off my anti-nasty dust, a mix of iron, silver, and rock salt imbued with magical energy and blessed. As far as I knew, skinwalkers weren't vulnerable to any of those things, but I didn't reckon it could hurt.

The skinwalker flinched away, a number of holes opening on his face and chest, blood spraying out the exit wounds, but didn't fall. I worked the pump, but before I could get off a second shot some unseen force snatched the shotgun from my hands, overcoming my attempts to hold onto it as easily as if I were a two year old.

Miyazaki took advantage of the skinwalker's momentary distraction to attack. He charged, uncannily fast for such an enormous guy, whipping the huge club in an overhead strike that could have crushed a cinderblock to dust. The skinwalker saw it coming too late to dodge, and lifted one hand in an instinctive, futile attempt to parry. I felt like cheering.

The spiked head of the club smashed into the skinwalker's hand...and, contrary to all logic and reason, stopped dead. The tanuki crashed to a sudden halt, almost thrown from his feet just by the aborted momentum of his attack, but the skinwalker didn't even sway on his feet. He flicked his wrist, the sort of motion you might use to shoo away a fly, and several hundred pounds of tanuki flew through the air to land on the ground several feet away.

Bloody hell. How strong *was* this thing?

The skinwalker turned back towards me, easily snatching my shotgun from where it floated in midair next to him. I noticed he wasn't bleeding; every one of the holes from the shotgun blast had healed already. He didn't even seem to have *noticed* it. "Well, I suppose I can take that as your answer," he said. His smile showed many, many pointed teeth, and his yellow eyes glittered with almost sexual excitement. "A pity. I would have enjoyed working with you, Mr. Wolf. But I'm afraid now it's time for you to die." He leveled the shotgun at my head.

If you're going to be a supervillain, here's a piece of advice that might be worth considering. Don't indulge in evil gloating. If you absolutely *must* indulge, wait until the enemy's already dead. If for some reason you can't, never *ever* hand the universe a straight line like that one. It can't resist.

"Hey, stupid," a voice called from the front door.

I don't know who in that room was the most surprised. I think me, but it might have been Snowflake, or even the skinwalker. Certainly we all turned to look.

Brick walked into the room. He was dressed in a robe of some soft grey fabric, complete with hood, and carried a tall staff of some pale wood in his left hand. His right held a rod maybe eighteen inches long and one and a half thick made from polished granite. His blue eyes were almost as cold as

Snowflake's, and I thought that he'd never looked so much like a mage, or so little like the rest of the Inquisition.

And on his chest, hung from a simple silver chain, was an oval of Damascus steel with the image of a serpent on it. The mark, I knew, of a Watcher on assignment (although the significance of the serpent, rather than the flaming sword or all-seeing eye I'd seen other Watchers use as emblems, eluded me). Brick, a Watcher. I'd never really considered the possibility before, but it made a certain amount of sense. If nothing else, I would never have guessed it, and that was the kind of person the Watchers liked best.

"Did you really think I wouldn't figure out who was sending those constructs?" the man said coldly, walking into the room. His staff clicked against the floor with every step, as did his hard-soled boots.

"Ah," the skinwalker sighed, sounding more satisfied than upset. "You must be Nobody's protégé. This night just gets better and better." He tossed my shotgun aside to clatter on the floor, spreading his hands out to the side. They filled with putrid yellow fire, reeking of sulfur and corruption and magic.

"Alexis my darling," the skinwalker said, not looking away from Brick. "Be a dear and kill your cousin for me, won't you?"

She didn't answer.

"Come now," he chided. "You've come this far already. Surely you know there's no going back after you've already done me such fine service. Do this one thing, and you're free. You'll never hear from me again. I swear it." He sounded sincere, and I thought he might be—if nothing else, most people from my side of things are very hesitant to break a sworn oath. Of course, given that it was a *skinwalker* talking, I wasn't sure how much that meant.

I wasn't sure what Alexis was going to answer, and I didn't wait to find out. I focused a quick spike of magic at her. A moment later, there was a flash of intense green light behind me.

A second after that, Alexis hit the floor. She fell badly; it's hard to do otherwise when there's nobody home in your body. I'd never tried shunting someone *else* into an animal's mind, but it seemed to have worked, and I was pretty sure Snowflake would be able to keep her busy long enough to ensure that she wasn't a threat. If nothing else, the wolf that shared her mind had plenty of practice with this sort of thing.

The skinwalker smiled at me. "Well played," he said. "Most people are too trusting to ever see such an attack coming, let alone prepare for it intelligently." Without even looking, or pausing in his speech, he flicked one of those handfuls of fire at Brick, clearly hoping to take the mage off guard.

He failed. Brick lifted his right hand, and the stone rod it held, and spoke a single word. I wasn't sure what he did, exactly, but the fire splashed against an invisible barrier a foot from his face. A moment later it dissipated. Brick never even moved his feet.

"Not bad," the skinwalker said, turning to face Brick directly. "Not bad at all. Slightly unimaginative, but then that's to be expected."

Brick didn't rise to the provocation, just pointed that rod at the skinwalker like a gun. He said one word, and a surge of earth-scented magic rose. A tennis-ball sized sphere of brown-and-green light flew from the end of the rod, moving about as fast as a major-league pitch.

The skinwalker made a curious rolling gesture with his now-empty hand and murmured a phrase in a language I didn't recognize, even vaguely. Flickers of yellow light mingled with the brown and green, and the ball of light curved in the air. It struck the wall, and a circle three feet in diameter began to melt and run like wax. Then he tossed the other handful of flame to the floor, where it began to spread hungrily. The reek of the skinwalker's magic rose higher in the room, making me gag.

Brick spoke a half-dozen words of what sounded like archaic German and thumped his staff on the ground once, and the fires died away. But he'd lost the initiative, and given the skinwalker another chance to attack. He seized it.

This bit of magic was harder to understand—although the others had been plenty hard enough, even for me. The skinwalker made a gesture that vaguely resembled someone plucking feathers, speaking a few more words in whatever language he was using. A moment later Brick stiffened, his muscles clenching without any apparent volition on his part. His face was frozen in a rictus of fury, and his cheek was twitching.

Apparently the skinwalker's spell didn't have as much of an effect as he'd hoped, though, because Brick still managed to riposte. He raised that rod to point forward, shaking but not stopped. He snarled an almost incomprehensible word. The magic that he sent against the skinwalker next was hard to see, visible only as a slight, rippling distortion of the air. It moved *fast*, too, fast enough that I wasn't sure whether I'd seen it at all.

Any suspicion I might have had that it was a trick of the mind, though, was dismissed when it struck the skinwalker. The blast of kinetic force was no kinder to him than his had been to Kikuchi in the opening stages of this bizarre little encounter; the skinwalker was tossed across the room. The strange stiffness lifted from Brick's limbs at once, and he immediately lifted his staff to point at the monster and snapped another word. Frost instantly began to form over the skinwalker's body, like watching a time-lapse video of crystal growth.

The skinwalker murmured another phrase and yellow flames washed over him, wiping the frost away. He pushed himself easily to his feet, seeming totally unharmed. He didn't even look fatigued, and I could see that Brick was leaning heavily on his staff just to stay standing.



"Not bad," the skinwalker said, sounding quite calm and pleasant. Now that I was starting to get an idea of the vileness behind those yellow eyes, that pleasant everyman's voice crept me out a *lot*. "Really, you have a great deal of potential. Quite skilled in your application of varied elements, especially for a sorcerer."

Brick's reply was another blast of force. The skinwalker turned it away easily, and it blasted a hole in the ceiling.

"Unfortunately," the skinwalker continued as though he hadn't been interrupted, "you're still acting like a clan mage. That's a terrible weakness. You're thinking in two dimensions." He gestured slightly.

My shotgun went off again. This time, controlled by the skinwalker's telekinesis, it was pointed directly at Brick's back.

I didn't smell any blood, so I didn't think the pellets had penetrated his robe—it must have had some kind of magic in it, reinforcing it until it was bulletproof. But the force involved was still considerable, and it knocked Brick over onto his face. He grunted, trying to get his staff under him and stand.

He was too slow. The skinwalker ambled over and picked him up by the throat with one hand. Brick was a tall guy, significantly taller than the skinwalker, but he seemed to have no difficulty lifting the mage over his own head, until his toes were dangling an inch above the floor. "You see," the skinwalker said conversationally, as Brick clawed at his fingers, "you limited your perceptions to fit your expectations. Flexibility of thought, young man, is one of the most important determining factors in any magical conflict, and it is the rigidity of thought engendered by centuries of tradition which is in many ways the greatest weakness of the clans. In order to effectively take advantage of your surroundings, it is imperative that you are aware of them at all times."

I enjoyed what happened next. I probably shouldn't, but I'm convinced that irony has a personal vendetta against me, and it's always nice to see your enemies indulging in a little friendly fire.

At the same time as the skinwalker was giving his little lecture on the virtues of awareness, a shadow dropped from the hole he'd knocked in the ceiling. It landed with perfect grace, in perfect silence, and straightened from its crouch. It took two silent steps forward and rammed a long knife home in the skinwalker's back.

He immediately dropped Brick, who looked semiconscious at best, and turned to face the new assailant, seeming only mildly inconvenienced by the knife sticking out of his back. His features twisted with rage when he saw the latest attacker, the first real emotion I'd seen on his face. "You!" he snarled.

"Me," Reynard agreed with a wicked grin, drawing a gladius-style sword from his belt. He had another knife in his left hand. He spun the knife idly in his hand as he and the skinwalker began to circle each other.

"Traitor," the skinwalker spat, wrenching the knife out of his own back with no signs of pain. "You should never have come here. I will tear your flesh and break your bones."

Reynard just smiled more. "Big words for a little man," he said mockingly. "Tell me, abhorrence, did you ever find her? You didn't, did you?" His smile broadened, sharpened, gained a note of cruelty. "How apropos. All the sacrifices you've made, and you never found her. Not that she'd want you to by now. How she must loathe you!"

I didn't know what Reynard was talking about. It was an inside reference of some sort, that was clear, but I had no idea what he was referring to. It was just as clear that the two of them knew each other, but I couldn't have guessed how.

What I do know is that hearing that drove the skinwalker mad with rage and hate. He threw himself at Reynard, his face twisted into a grimace that made him look almost as monstrous as he really was, slashing with his appropriated knife again and again. His other hand burned with a yellow radiance too bright to look at directly, and I didn't doubt it was a weapon every bit as deadly as the knife, if not more so. For his part, Reynard danced away from every blow, occasionally parrying with dagger or sword. He laughed the whole time, a cruel and evil laugh.

And that was my moment.

For the entire fight up to that point, the skinwalker had been calm, collected, in control. He never let himself get too focused on one thing. But even monsters have buttons, and Reynard knew just which ones to push to drive the skinwalker out of his head.

For the first time, the skinwalker wasn't paying any attention to me.

I was hurt, and terrified, and exhausted. But those were all familiar states for me, almost comfortable. And, end of the day, I was just too damn stubborn to give up now. I got to my feet and crept up behind the skinwalker. Reynard, clearly aware of my intentions, moved straight backward now, keeping the skinwalker from turning and seeing me. He could only do so for a few moments, but that was all the time I would need. Any sounds I might have made were easily covered by Reynard's ongoing mad laughter. I got into position, sent off a quick and silent prayer to any benevolent deity who might happen to be listening, and lunged.

The skinwalker, by chance or intent, moved unexpectedly at the last moment, and Tyrfin took him in the right hip rather than dead center of the back as I'd intended. The skinwalker shrieked, and for the first time sounded like he was in pain. He tried to spin and do something nasty to me, but evidently Tyrfin's magic was stronger than whatever vile power had protected him from every injury up 'til now. He stumbled when his weight fell on the newly crippled leg.

Reynard took advantage of his distraction to slash at the magic-wielding hand with his gladius. Two fingers dropped to the floor, foul-smelling blood welled up, and the urine-yellow light of magic faded.

I twisted Tyrfing and wrenched it back out.

Kikuchi, who'd been biding his time since he was batted away when the skinwalker first revealed himself, sprang to his feet, and then at the skinwalker's back. He had only one arm with which to swing his katana, but it still bit deeply into the thing's shoulder. The tengu pulled it out and readied for another strike.

The skinwalker had finally had enough. His face contorted now with pain and fear rather than anger, he jumped. Propelled by muscles that were disturbingly strong even to me, he easily cleared six feet of vertical leap from a standing start. As he neared the apex of his leap, he screamed another word in that strange language. His shape seemed to blur and twist, and then a deformed-looking crow flapped awkwardly through the hole in the ceiling.

Kikuchi moved as though to follow—though how he planned to follow a flying enemy, and what he planned to do to it when he got there in his condition, I don't know. Reynard put his hand on the tengu's good shoulder, stopping him. "Let him go," he said quietly.

"We have him," the tengu said, angrily shaking the hand off. "Now's the time to finish it."

Reynard shook his head. "No," he said, not perturbed at all by the younger being's anger. "Better not to. Chase him now and he'll become desperate. That one's got a fair bit of fight in him yet, if you drive him to it, and you'd not be the only one to suffer for it." His lips twitched into a wry smile. "Besides, I doubt you'll need to worry about him anymore. I daresay it's been some time since a fight went so badly against him so fast, and he won't want to face you again anytime soon."

Privately, I thought that a rather optimistic prediction. It seemed likelier to me that the skinwalker would be looking to redress the insult to his pride. He wasn't the sort to take it philosophically. But now wasn't the time for such grim discussion, so I let it go.

"See to your people," Reynard said softly. Kikuchi still looked like he wanted to argue, but he bowed to the voice of reason and went to do as Reynard had suggested.

"Hell of a fighter," I murmured, watching the tengu walk away.

"He is at that," Reynard agreed. "A touch hotheaded, perhaps, but he'll grow out of it." He glanced at me. "Sojobo said to tell you that de Sousa got away. Realized that the water here was rather hotter than she liked, most likely."

I nodded in resignation. I'd sort of expected that. "She can't hide forever," I said. I wasn't entirely sure—I mean, evidence suggested she sort of *could*—but this wasn't a time for pessimism, either. Reynard nodded, and I got the impression he knew exactly what I meant.

After all the other surprises and confusions, I almost didn't think it remarkable when we found Anna locked in the pack's old safe room. Maybe the skinwalker had been working with the rakshasas

before we eliminated them for him. Maybe he just found it amusing. It hardly mattered, and I honestly did not want to understand that monster's motivations any better than I already did.

As I'd expected, the skinwalker had already started abusing Anna. She had a number of bruises, several relatively minor lacerations, three broken fingers, a mild concussion, and was missing the smallest two toes of her left foot. She was conscious, though, and as much pissed as scared. She took a not inconsiderable amount of pleasure in our recounting of how we'd shown the bastard up and driven him off, although she was rather disappointed to learn that he was still alive. I didn't blame her, and privately resolved that if I ever got a chance, that skinwalker was a dead man. I might even hand him over to Loki to entertain himself with. If ever there was a being that deserved a slow and painful death, he was it.

I don't normally think in terms like that. I am hesitant to use absolutes, because so little in this world is absolute. But that bastard had the distinction of being the most truly, purely evil being I had ever encountered. He had looked into the heart of darkness, had seen clearly all the evil humanity is heir to, and had embraced it wholeheartedly. Born into a twisted, cruel world, he had devoted himself to making it worse in a million tiny ways, for no other reason than that he could.

No, I had no compunctions there.

A few minutes later, I found myself sitting on the floor next to Anna, slumped against the wall in abject exhaustion. Kikuchi had gathered his people, living and dead, and departed. I hadn't seen Hrafn since before I went into the building. Reynard had disappeared somewhere along the way, without my noticing, as had Brick. That left just the two of us, Aiko and Snowflake asleep nearby, and Alexis. I'd made it clear to my cousin that she was to wait by the door until we were ready to leave. Maybe it was guilt, or the anger in my voice, or the fact that I was still wearing blood-soaked armor and carrying a shitload of weaponry, but she didn't argue.

"I'm sorry," I said finally, not looking at Anna. "I'm so sorry."

"It wasn't your fault," she said softly.

"Wasn't it?" I asked. "I don't know. You were only targeted because of me. If I hadn't been so damned *arrogant*, this would never have happened."

"How could you have known what would happen?"

"Maybe with five seconds' worth of actual *thought*?" I snarled. A moment later, I sighed. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't take this out on you."

"It's all right."

"No. No, it isn't," I said bleakly, staring off into space. I took a deep breath and sighed. "I'm endangering you," I said eventually. "Just by being around you. As long as I'm around, people like this will target you to get at me."

Anna didn't deny it.

"You know," I said conversationally, a few breaths later, "I always wondered. Why on earth did you want to be around me? It baffled me. I mean, don't get me wrong, I'm grateful—you've been a good friend, and I'm lucky to have you. I don't deserve such a good friend."

"You're too hard on yourself," she said, not meeting my eyes.

I sighed. "Maybe. But if not me, who else?" She didn't have an answer. "Anyway," I said after a moment. "I always wondered. You and your brother both. I never quite understood why people like you would be friends with a person like me. Well, now I know why Enrico was there. He figured out what I was, or a part of it anyway, and he thought it made me a danger he had to keep an eye on."

"It wasn't all that," she said quickly. "He *was* your friend."

"Maybe eventually," I agreed. "But at first? He wasn't in it for friendship. Anyhow, what I've been thinking is this. You're every bit as smart as your brother was. And I know how close you were. And I just can't imagine him having these suspicions all those years and you not knowing it." I shook my head. "That wouldn't happen. And then, when you found out for sure, it didn't bother you. You didn't freak out. You weren't even *surprised*. And you've been spending time around werewolves since then. You know them well enough that you recognize them when you see them."

She didn't respond. She didn't really need to.

"Enrico was scared of werewolves," I said quietly. "But you aren't, are you? Rather the opposite, I think."

Anna was silent for a long moment. "Yes," she said finally. It had the tone of a confession. "I remember when I was a kid, I always got the others—you know, vampires, ghosts, Frankenstein's monster, sure, those are monsters. I got that. But I never quite understood werewolves. I never got why they were monsters, why they called it a curse. It didn't make sense. I remember thinking it sounded more like a blessing to me. I didn't phrase it like that at the time, of course."

"A blessing," I murmured. My lips twitched into a bitter smile. "Yes, I suppose it could be at that." I didn't tell her that I was thinking of older, darker gods than the one she was, the kind of gods whose blessings were so often worse than their curses, when you could even figure out which was which.

"What's this have to do with what we were talking about?" Anna asked, clearly uncomfortable with the turn the conversation had taken.

"Everything," I said. "This is an important question. Do you want to be a werewolf?"

She was quiet for a few minutes, thinking about it. I didn't interrupt. Better to think it through. "Yes," she said at last. "I mean, there are definitely some aspects to it that I don't like. But on the whole, yeah. I guess I do."

I nodded, and tried to pretend it didn't hurt to learn that my only real human friend had been more interested in what I was than who I was. I think I did a fairly good job. "I think you could do it," I said. "It's always hard to tell, of course, and I'm hardly an expert, but I think you can. I think you would do quite well as a werewolf. Now, to get back to what we were talking about earlier, here's what I'm getting at. I can't protect you. I think that's abundantly clear by now. If you were a werewolf, with a pack, that would give people pause before they tried another stunt like this. If you want, I can arrange an introduction and sponsor your bid to undertake the change."

"What if it doesn't work?"

I sighed. "You die. That's how it works, how the system functions. You become a werewolf, or you die. Once you *are* a werewolf, you have to learn to control your new urges, or you die. You obey your Alpha and the pack laws, or you die. There's no middle ground." I shrugged. "But I think you can do it, or I wouldn't even offer this. With ideal circumstances, which is what you'd have, you have about an even chance of surviving the first step and becoming a werewolf. You've got a strong personality, you're smart, and your personality is well suited to it, so I give you maybe three in four of surviving the next step. After that, well, it's pretty much up to you."

"Those aren't very good odds," she noted.

"No," I agreed. "They aren't. But they're all I can offer. The truth is that most people don't make it as a werewolf. You have better odds than most."

"Why?"

I frowned. "You remember when Enrico was changed? How unhappy he was? How it always seemed like he was trying to fight himself?" She nodded. "That's because he was a terrible candidate for it. No one in their right mind would have recommended him for this, until there wasn't a choice anymore. That's fairly common with people who have it happen by accident, by surviving an attack or some such. Most of the time, if they can establish control at all, they tear themselves apart fighting between who they were and what they've become. Suicide is pretty common." I shrugged again. "That's not you. You don't consider this a curse. That makes an enormous difference."

"Oh," she said. I knew she was thinking about her brother, who was pretty much the poster child for what I'd just described. Technically he hadn't killed himself because he couldn't accept the wolf, not exactly, but I knew that was in large part to blame for his death.

Of course, he'd only become a werewolf in the first place because of me. The guilt fell squarely on my shoulders.

"You don't have to decide right now," I said quietly. "Honestly, I'd worry if you did. At the very least you should learn more about what the rules are you'd be expected to follow. And it will be at least a few weeks, probably a few months before you're ready to actually do it. Survival rates are higher if you're healthy before you try it." I frowned, and tried to ignore how bitter the next words tasted.

"Regardless of what you settle on, I'd recommend that you leave the city."

"Do you really think I'll be any safer somewhere else?" she said dryly.

"I think you could hardly be *less* safe," I countered. "And...well, it looks like I'm going to be an important person around here. More important, at any rate. There's going to be a lot of details to work out, but it's safe to say that there are going to be a lot of people in the area with a grudge against me. It would be safer for you to be far away from them; at least then they'd have to work a little to get at you." My lips twitched. "Besides, if you *do* decide to try for the change you'd definitely have to move. There are no werewolves here anymore, except me, and I don't count."

"Where should I go?" she asked. She sounded very lost, and I reminded myself that she'd been out of the skinwalker's hands for less than an hour.

"Wherever you want to," I said with a shrug. "Although if you want to be a werewolf, unless you really dislike the idea, I'd recommend a pack in northern Wyoming. Kyra's there, and a few of her old pack, so you'd have at least a few friends. And I know the Alpha. He's a decent guy." I stood up and offered her a hand. "Come on," I said. "You'll feel better after a little rest. I have a spare bedroom where you can stay—it'll be a lot safer than your apartment."

"Right," she said, taking my hand and standing. "And Winter? Thanks."

Returning home was a bit difficult. Fortunately, of the five of us, four were too tired to care much. Aiko, Snowflake, and Anna were all snoring within minutes of sitting down again. I would gladly have done the same, but someone had to stay up and keep an eye on things.

Back home, I got Anna settled in on the opposite side of the building from Alexis's room and let my cousin know that I would take it very, very badly if she tried to get away or otherwise do stupid things while I was asleep. I probably should have sat down and talked it out with her right then, but I was simply too exhausted. That was going to be a very delicate conversation, and this wasn't the right frame of mind to approach it from. For now I stuck her in her room and left it for morning.

That task taken care of, I went upstairs, where I found Aiko and Snowflake already very firmly asleep. We'd already determined, to the best of our abilities, that neither of them needed immediate medical attention beyond what they'd already received, so I saw no harm in letting them sleep.

I didn't need to worry, of course. If I can stand, I don't need medical attention.

That doesn't mean I feel *good*, of course, a fact of which I was reminded forcefully of when I peeled cloak, armor, and clothing off, taking a little skin with it. It was less than pleasant. Worse was the shower; hot water and soap is pleasant, but not when you've got first-degree burns over a significant portion of your skin. I didn't have to worry about it—dehydration wouldn't be too hard to manage, and infection was no risk to me—but between exertion and other injuries I hadn't even started fixing them yet. Any touch on the damaged skin was painful.

I scrubbed the burns clean anyway. It had to be done.

That unpleasant task over with, I toweled dry and limped back out. I hadn't dressed, because why bother? It would just hurt a great deal in order to conceal my nudity from people who wouldn't care and had seen it all before. That didn't strike me as a terribly good trade right now.

As it turned out, that was a fortunate decision. Aiko was awake again, and willing to tend to my injuries, which in this case meant digging shrapnel out of my back. It was a little like extracting bullets, except even less fun, because the projectiles were irregularly shaped. There were almost twenty holes in my back and legs. They were all fairly shallow—the armor hadn't stopped them, but had certainly slowed them down rather a lot—but it was still pure dumb luck that none of them had hit anything vital. Which isn't to say that they weren't painful and bloody, because they were. Very much so.

But that, too, had to be done. I didn't want to start healing with bits of brick and wood still embedded in my flesh. That was a bad idea.

Finally, necessary tasks done with, I dragged my bruised, burned, bleeding, battered body to bed. One of the main bright sides of being almost too exhausted to stand is that you seldom have trouble falling asleep, and in my experience you don't need to worry much about unpleasant dreams, either. Certainly that was the case this time.

The next thing I was aware of was waking up the next morning. As always, my unnatural healing had done its work while I slept. I wasn't bleeding, the bruises were starting to fade, my burned skin had gone from excruciating to merely very tender, while my hip still hurt I was no longer limping noticeably, and my hearing had returned to normal. Yay, me.

I dressed slowly and carefully in light, loose clothes which wouldn't agitate the burns too much, and which I didn't have to strain my back to put on. Aiko and Snowflake were already gone, which didn't surprise me too much when I saw that the clock read noon.

I found Alexis still in her room. She was sitting on the chair, dressed in a somber outfit that I recognized as belonging to Aiko, and had an expression appropriate to a condemned criminal facing the prospect of hanging at dawn. "Good morning," I said to her.

"Hey," she said dully. Her eyes were sunken and haunted, and I wondered whether she had slept at all. "Aiko said to tell you she and Snowflake went to talk to a nurse friend of yours."

That meant Mac. Good. She was probably the best suited person in the city for the task, and it would go more smoothly if I wasn't there. Mac and I haven't ever really got on. I doubted that would change now that she'd grown even more pacifistic and I'd become a politician and embraced even more closely moral compromise and the use of violence as a solution to problems.

"Thank you," I said to Alexis. "Come and sit with me. We have some things to talk about."

It was not a question. She nodded anyway.



A few minutes later, I relaxed into a comfortable chair by the fireplace in the sitting room (unless maybe it was a studio, or a drawing room, or a living room, or some other sort of room indistinguishable from one of those), put my feet up on a padded footstool, and set my large glass of iced tea on a table. Alexis, who still looked drawn and anxious, sat on a hard-backed chair across the table from me and proceeded to not meet my eyes. The result had an almost surreal resemblance to a student awaiting discipline, and I had to suppress an inappropriate chuckle.

"So," I said pleasantly. "I suppose there's something you want to tell me?"

"Why should I?" she said bitterly. "You clearly already know."

"I *suspected*," I corrected. "I don't *know* most anything. I mean, I'd figured out that you had some kind of prior relationship with the skinwalker, and it wasn't hard to guess that you were a plant providing information to the enemy."

"But...if you didn't know, why...?"

"Did I give you a trapped amulet?" I shrugged. "I had strong enough suspicions to justify a certain degree of preemptive action. It was inert until activated, and even if someone else had figured out how to trigger it they couldn't have used to actually hurt you, so I thought it was a safe risk to take. Had you been on the level, the magic would have faded within a few days, and you would never have learned what the real function of the spell was." I shrugged. "A little excessive on my part, maybe, but I'd rather be safe than sorry. And, in all fairness, it must be acknowledged that your behavior was suspicious enough to justify a certain amount of prejudice."

"What are you talking about?"

I snorted. "You want a list?" She nodded hesitantly. "First, the immediate question of why in hell you *came* here. We've never been all that close, and I found it difficult to believe that changed overnight. For you to show up just in time to partake in this went far beyond what could reasonably be attributed to coincidence—I mean, hell, you contacted me the same *day* as the skinwalker did. You accepted the existence of magic without any argument or disbelief, which normal people do not. The logical conclusion was that you had some degree of prior exposure to this world; if so, you did not mention it. You seemed confident that I was a werewolf, yet in the brief time I spent around you, I never gave you a clear reason to think so—in fact, if anything, I would have expected you to realize I didn't feel cold normally first. That was also long enough ago that, if you remembered it at all, you should have attributed to a childish fantasy. That you did not is further evidence that I was not the only supernatural thing you had encountered. You left that first meeting abruptly and without apparent reason, and since that time have avoided any mention of why, where I would expect an ordinary person to inform me as soon as possible to prevent my drawing unfortunate or embarrassing conclusions."

Alexis looked rather upset. I didn't stop. "Later, when you called me to come rescue you, you said that you knew there was a problem because you saw the magical taint of the constructs. However, when I got there, they hadn't even arrived yet. It's possible to detect a presence at that distance, but

unlikely unless you have some degree of training or familiarity with that specific signature, neither of which you indicated to me. Furthermore, you apparently immediately concluded that it was a lethal danger, where I would expect most inexperienced people to write it off as a hallucination or irrational fear. The timing of that entire incident—my arriving just in time to watch them approach, then getting to your door just as they were entering—was too perfect to be coincidence. The constructs were prevented from entering by a barricade of furniture, which I find unlikely, but entered just in time to be too late for me to save you, while allowing me to see the action. This struck me as the sort of psychological torment a skinwalker would enjoy. You are clearly opposed to violence, philosophically, yet you shot them without any hesitation, and expressed no guilt over their deaths, which suggests that you were already aware of what they were."

She started to say something. I talked over her. "Once you arrived here, your behavior became even more suspicious. You took the presence of this mansion, which makes absolutely no sense under normal natural laws, in stride, implying that it is not your first experience with other realities. You had no difficulty with the concept that you had magic, and no difficulty describing the pattern of events which told me that you *did* have magic, whereas I expect most people would have problems seeing the connections between them. You went to seemingly unnecessary lengths to stick close to me, most obviously during Reynard's little jaunt. Afterwards, there's the matter of the skinwalker's ransom letter. There are certainly beings who can come and go as they please here, but I don't know that he's one of them. It made much more sense if you'd been given the note. I brought you here, bypassing the various defenses, and then you waited for Aiko and I to be out of the room before dropping it. It makes sense, and certainly you didn't seem too surprised to see it. And...no, actually, I think that's about it."

She stared at me, a bizarre mix of chagrin, shame, and annoyance in her face. I laughed. "Don't feel bad," I said, still chuckling. "You've not done this sort of thing before."

"Then...you're not upset?"

"Of course I am," I said cheerfully. "You endangered my life. You threatened the lives of my friends. You deceived me in order to do so—the fact that your deception was comically inept notwithstanding. You worked with one of the most purely evil beings it has ever been my displeasure to encounter." I took a drink of tea and smiled reassuringly. I must not have done a very good job, because Alexis went a shade paler and scooted away from me slightly in her chair. "I am *very* upset," I concluded, still in that light and friendly tone. "I have, in fact, killed people with whom I was less upset than I am with you right now, and gladly. I just think I should maybe hear the whole story before I jump to conclusions or do something rash, because your behavior also suggests that you weren't with the skinwalker willingly, and that you weren't glad about doing harm to us." I winked conspiratorially. "That's your cue, by the way."

She swallowed. "Okay. Um. Where should I start?"

"At the beginning, I should think. You might start with what *really* happened when you found out you had magic."

"Okay," she said hesitatingly. "Well. It was almost three years ago that this all started. I started seeing things. I thought at first I was just going crazy, but then the things I saw started to come true." She frowned. "Not like I was seeing the future or anything. I don't know how to explain it."

"You had insights about people and things," I said helpfully. "Insights which, although inexplicable and baseless, turned out to be weirdly accurate. It provided you with information about people's character and personality which you had no way of knowing."

"Right. That's it exactly. And then there was the lightning stuff. It was confusing, and for a long time I didn't really believe it, but eventually I just figured either the world was crazy or I was, and either way I might as well just go with it."

Practical answer. I liked her thinking.

"Anyway, I started trying to learn about it. I didn't get very far, but I found some other people like me. And then the...the skinwalker found us." She swallowed, looking almost ill. "He started...teaching us things."

Lovely. Was it just me, or had I heard this story before?

"How long did it take for it to go wrong?" I asked, morbidly interested.

"Almost a year," she said in a small voice. "It started small. Harmless. He'd encourage us to break the rules. It was...fun, almost. Exciting. Like being a rebel. But it started to get worse. David and Charles—they were two of the guys in our group—started robbing people. Muggings, you know? I didn't like it, but I didn't want to argue. I mean, they were my only friends. Then somebody died. They said the guy fought back, and they didn't have a choice, but I wasn't sure."

Damn, this skinwalker was a cliché bastard. I could have finished the story from here without even a drop of imagination.

"Then David killed Charles," Alexis whispered. "Said it was self-defense, that Charles attacked him and he didn't have a choice. I don't know if that was true—Charles was on drugs by then, and he could be irrational, violent. I wanted out, but David wouldn't let me leave. He had proof that I'd been involved in some of the crimes, and he told me he'd give it to the police if I didn't do what he said, and they'd throw me in prison." She frowned. "I don't think he would have, though. He didn't want to let us go."

"Let me guess," I said. "Right about then, it started to be you guys dying."

She nodded bleakly. "We disappeared. One at a time. And David was getting stronger, at the same time." She was silent for a long moment. "When we started, there were almost twenty of us. But by the time we caught on, there were just six of us left, and David. We knew what had to happen, then, and we all agreed to attack him before he killed us." She swallowed, and the haunted look in her eyes became even more pronounced. "We lost."

"And the skinwalker came back into play," I said. I was guessing, but I don't think that she realized that.

She nodded again. "David had us all tied up on the ground. He was ranting. I couldn't even follow what he was saying from one moment to the next. Then the skinwalker walked up behind him and broke his neck. I was sure we'd been saved. He hadn't been around for a while, and I somehow convinced myself that he hadn't known what was happening."

She was quiet for a long time. "I was wrong, of course," she said finally. "Dead wrong. He laughed at us, told us we were weak. And then he started killing us. It took him a long, long time." Alexis looked like she was about to be sick just thinking of it. I didn't ask what the skinwalker had done to them. I didn't want to know. I already knew more than I wanted to of his atrocities.

"Eventually, I think a day or two later, I was the only one left. I thought sure he was about to kill me, but he just cut my ropes off and asked if I was okay. He was so...so friendly. It made me want to puke."

I could sympathize with that sentiment.

"He offered me a deal," she said. "I could help him, and he'd let me live. I could be stronger than David ever was. Or I could say no." She swallowed. "And he'd kill everyone I'd ever met, slowly and painfully. I'd just watched him torture my best friend to death right in front of me. I believed him. I took the deal."

I didn't blame her. I'd made my own deals with the devil, and with less justification than she'd had.

"That went on for almost a year. Then he brought me out here," she said. "And I thought of you. I was hoping you could help me get free. I'd have done anything, to get away from that monster." She frowned. "I know I haven't given you a lot of reason to trust me, Winter. But I swear to God, I didn't help him willingly. It's true I knew more than I told you, and I recognized his constructs—he uses them a lot. But I didn't betray you. I didn't tell him anything. I'd already escaped."

"No, you didn't." She started to protest, and I held up my hand, cutting her off. "I believe you. But you didn't escape. Trust me, if that man wanted to keep you prisoner, you couldn't have got away. He let you go, probably specifically so you would come to me for help." I frowned. "Actually, that was probably his design all along. He didn't spare you because he liked you; it was because you were my cousin."

"But...why?"

"Well," I said, "he claims he knew my mother, which frankly takes the cake for liaisons of hers I disapprove of intensely, so that might have something to do with it. But if I had to guess, I'd say it was to cause me suffering." She looked confused, and I sighed. "At the end," I said. "He told you to kill me."

She nodded. "I wasn't going to. Even before you paralyzed me."

"It wouldn't have mattered," I said calmly. "The skinwalker is a smart guy, Alexis. He'd have known I'd be prepared, and—no offense—you don't really represent a serious threat to me. He didn't expect you to hurt me. He just wanted to make me kill my own cousin."

"Oh. That's horrible."

"Yep," I agreed. "Makes it pretty easy to believe from him, doesn't it." She smiled. It was weak and unsteady, but hey. Small steps. "Feel better now that you have that off your chest?"

"Yeah," she said. "Thanks."

"No problem," I said. "So now that we've got *that* out of the way, there's a few things we need to talk about. Namely, you need to start making choices."

"What sort of choices?"

"Well, basically, you need to decide what to do with your life." I shrugged. "You've got magic, Alexis. What do you want to do with it?"

"Do I have to do anything with it?" she asked. I didn't have to ask to know that she was thinking of the skinwalker right now, and that her opinion of magic had been forever sullied by her experiences.

"You don't *have* to do anything at all," I pointed out. "But like I said, it's hard to have magic and live like you don't. Now, if you *really* hate your power, there are ways to get rid of it, permanently. I can't do it, but I know people, and if you want I can probably arrange it. It's traumatic, and you'll never be quite the same again, but it can be done." I shrugged. "Or you can go on as is. *Having* magic isn't the same as *using* it. You can be just a normal person. Honestly, the bigger problem for interacting with normal people is just knowing that this stuff exists, and removing memories is *extremely* traumatic. Or you can learn to use it. It's up to you."

"What happens if I decide to learn?"

"Up to you," I repeated. "I don't know what you'll be able to do. I don't have the first idea what you'll decide to do with that ability. Magic's a tool, Alexis. Just a tool. It doesn't make you into a paragon of evil. It won't turn you into a saint. At the end of the day, all magic can do is make you more of what you already are."

"You use magic to help people."

"Some," I agreed. "But let me tell you something. If you *do* want to learn this, one of the first lessons you need to learn is this. There is no room for self-deception in this world. Lie to your enemy, sure, that's just good tactics. Lie to your friends, if you have to. I'd ask that you not lie to me in the future, but I'm not so naive I actually believe you won't. But never, ever lie to yourself."

"I'm not a good person, Alexis. I try, I really do, but I fail on a regular basis. Good people don't do the things I do. I mean, sure, you can say it's why you do it that matters, but at some point you have to acknowledge that there is something deeply, truly wrong with you. Good people don't play the game when the rules are this sick, good people don't run *towards* the gunman, good people don't get hungry when they smell blood, good people don't smile while someone dies. I'm not a good person. I regularly have to burn my clothes because there's too much blood on them to ever come clean. I couldn't tell you how many people I've killed. I think it's triple digits, but I can't even remember anymore who half of them were, and most of them didn't deserve it."

"But you help people," she said stubbornly. "You *do*. You saved my life."

I sighed, and all the passion seemed to run out of me, leaving little more than weary desolation. "Maybe I do. I don't know. I've had a long time to gaze into the abyss, Alexis."

"I don't understand."

"Doesn't matter," I said dismissively. "Anyway, sorry to have derailed the conversation. What I'm trying to say is this. If you want, I will be glad to teach you. If you agree, you have to understand something. There is no room for mistakes in this business. If you slip up, I probably won't be able to save you, and if it's because of your own stupidity I might not want to. One mistake could kill you. If you get unlucky, it can be worse than that. A lot worse."

She was quiet for a long time. "Winter," she said finally, "I know you think you're a bad person. How do you think I feel? When push came to shove, I caved."

"You didn't have much choice with the skinwalker," I pointed out. "Denying him would have been just as bad as accepting."

"That isn't what I'm talking about," she said. "Before that, when we were first starting. I knew what we were doing was wrong, and I did it anyway, because I didn't want to give up my friends, and because it was exciting. You can hang whatever fancy words you want on it. It doesn't change the fact that I caved. You say there's no room for self-deception here? Well, honesty says that I let fear and greed convince me to do things I knew to be wrong. People died because of it, and it's pure luck that you and I aren't both among them." She shook her head. "If I take this power, I can use it to make up for that. I can make it so that people don't have to suffer what I did."

I smiled. "I think that's a very good reason."

It wouldn't work, of course. It never does. But I had to respect her for trying.

Epilogue

That evening, almost exactly at sundown, there came a knocking on the door. Whoever it was knocked nine times, heavy and regular as a death knell. I opened it, expecting the worst by both logic and habit.

What I got was Skrímir sweeping in like a one-man avalanche and enfolding me in a bear hug that would have made a grizzly cry mercy. "Excellent work, my boy," he boomed, almost loud enough to deafen me all over again. "A king's blood in your veins! And not shy to show it, either. Most excellent."

He unwrapped me, and I almost fell over. "Ah...thank you, Your Majesty."

He laughed. "There's no need for that between family, lad!" He nodded. "Truly, though, you've done a fine job. My brother will complain, of course, but don't doubt he's proud of you as well. I've put out the notices, and as fast as your star ascends it won't be long before folk are volunteering, I wager."

I paused, a tiny voice in my head warning me very, very loudly. "Uh. Volunteering for *what*, exactly?"

"Why, a place in your court, naturally. I expect there will be some very stiff competition for places among your housecarls, although of course the final decision is yours and yours alone."

"Um...Skrímir, I wasn't actually, ah, planning on *having* a court."

"You're a jarl now," he said, as though confused. "A jarl has to have a court. It wouldn't be right, otherwise."

"Well, okay, but I wasn't going to *stay* the jarl. I only claimed the title to serve a purpose, and it's sort of done now. I figured I'd just give the city to Kikuchi, or maybe the vampires—they seemed reasonable enough. Or I suppose I might invite a werewolf pack in and let them take over the territory."

"Nonsense!" the jotun king thundered, loud enough to make me literally and physically wince. "This land is yours, rightfully claimed and honorably earned. It's *yours*. Besides, you know as well as I that you shall make a fine jarl, and any who say otherwise can say it to my axe." He winked broadly. "Come now, son. I spoke to your lady, the other day. Don't you think she'd enjoy a bit of power to abuse?"

Never refuse the command of a god. Never, never, never ever. Even if they like you. Even if they don't seem to care a great deal. Even if the command is implicit, rather than explicitly stated. It never ends well. *Never*.

Skrímir wasn't a god, but given that he reputedly duped, mocked, and insulted them and got away scot free, I was pretty sure the same applied to him—especially given that, technically, I had declared myself a member of his court, and thus subject to his orders. Thus, rather than protest that I

didn't *want* to be a jarl, I bowed my head. "As you say, then," I said, wincing internally. I'd known there would be a price for my little bit of political maneuvering, but I'd been *really* hoping it might not look like this.

"Glad to hear it," he said with another infectious grin. "Come on, then, and bring Miss Miyake. I think a celebration's in order, for the family's newest jarl!"

As I should probably have guessed, Skrímir's idea of a "celebration" was what I would have called a "bar crawl." I'm not sure how, but he seemed to know where every single drinking establishment in town was, and was determined to patronize every one. As you might imagine in a city the size of Colorado Springs, that took rather a lot of doing. About fourteen hours' worth, in fact, which is why it wasn't too surprising that my memory of the event is slightly fuzzed—I can't, for example, quite recall *how* we got from one bar to the next.

I managed not to get quite as wasted as the last time I'd seen Skrímir, largely because I was drinking alcohol meant for human rather than jotun consumption. Aiko, who seemed just as inclined to "celebration" as Skrímir did (although, I suspect, for different reasons; the kitsune had not taken at all well to her prolonged Otherside house arrest, and given that this was her first chance in a long time to party in her preferred world it probably isn't surprising that she went to excess), seemed determined to match him drink for drink.

It was inevitably a losing proposition, of course, because this was freaking *Skrímir* we were talking about, and he showed so little ill effect from the superhuman quantities of booze he was downing that bartenders and other patrons were looking at him with awe verging on reverence. But it still had the effect of producing a very, very tipsy kitsune. There were, nigh-miraculously, no serious incidents or criminal activities, although a number of amusing events did result. My favorite was when Aiko picked a fight with a two-hundred-and-fifty pound biker. He took offense, and then found himself looking *up* at Skrímir. The giant casually picked him up and threw him bodily out of the bar.

Through the wall. Fortunately—ridiculously so, even—no one was injured.

The next clear memory I have is of walking up a familiar street, while the sun came up behind us. I was all but carrying Aiko, who was holding an empty bottle of schnapps and humming the tune to "Schnappi, das kleine Krokodil." It was most likely not a coincidence.

"What are we doing here?" I mumbled. From the way Aiko giggled, I was guessing it was not the first time I'd asked.

"I have something to show you," Skrymir said cheerily. He seemed none the worse for wear. "Come along, now."

The streets started getting more familiar. I sighed; even in my current condition I could figure out where I was, and in *any* condition I would have found it ridiculous.



A few minutes later, the pack house came into view. I don't know how, but it had been repaired—completely—since I saw it last. The walls were pristine. The doors were present. The windows were not only unshattered, they weren't boarded over, although the bars were still there. It was like the rakshasas had never been there.

"Welcome," Skrímir said with a grandiose gesture, "to your new hall, jarl."

I sighed. I wasn't even surprised. Disgusted, but not surprised.

Inside, the main room had been redecorated again. The comfortable, cozy lounge feel was gone. Instead, the room was dominated by a flare-backed throne on a large dais. It was constructed from black iron, with no decoration whatsoever. The result was a rather grim look.

The walls were covered in artwork, ranging from tapestries to hanging scrolls. They exhibited the same themes of wolves, winter, and death that everything I owned seemed determined to fall in line with, although there was a lot of variation within that theme.

The dominant position, though, was very definitely held by the massive coat of arms on the wall behind the throne—mine, apparently, although I hadn't heard a word about such a thing before. Loki's doing, I supposed, although it might also have been Fenris's, or Skrímir's, or even Blaise's. The shield was black, with a ragged-edged wolf's head on it in white, and was flanked by a pair of rampant wolves in black. The wolves were standing on what looked like a sheet of ice. The shield was mantled, shockingly enough, in black and white. The appearance as a whole was somber, stark and cold. The scroll underneath bore the motto *Grimmir ok Svalbrjóstaðir* in ornate lettering. I had no idea what it meant, and only guesses as to what *language* it was, although finding out was definitely high on my list of things to do. Bad enough to have a formal motto, and much worse not to have chosen it myself; the idea of not even *knowing* what my motto was was rather upsetting.

Maybe it was fatigue—or, you know, the fact that I was more than a tiny bit drunk—but something about the whole thing struck me as incredibly absurd. I stood there, and looked at the latest twist my life had taken, and I laughed. They looked at me funny, but I didn't care. I just laughed and laughed and laughed.