

Blind Eye

Emrys Vaughn

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Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, events, and locations herein are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual locales, events, and persons living or dead is entirely coincidental. It's actually starting to get tiresome coming up with these notes to put after the disclaimer. Is anybody even reading these things?

Emrys Vaughn

This one is dedicated to the online readers making my work possible, with the hope that by the time anyone gets around to reading this dedication they might actually exist.

Chapter One

Where are we going again? Snowflake asked me.

I glanced around to make sure there was nobody around. I get enough weird looks without people seeing me talking to a husky. "We're going to see my friend Mohammad," I replied aloud. I've long since given up on pretending that Snowflake doesn't understand English, and talking is easier than telepathy.

I don't know him.

"Nope," I agreed. "You haven't met him. I haven't seen him in years. He teaches at the college I went to."

Oh. What's he want?

"Now *that* is a question," I said. "He was...less than clear over the phone. Whatever it was, it sounded like he wanted to talk to me. Hell if I know why."

So why are you bringing me?

"You're the only thug I could find on short notice," I explained. "And, strangely enough, these days I have a thing about going somewhere based on sketchy phone calls without a thug."

As though to illustrate my point, the bulb of a streetlight exploded above and behind me. Not an explosion in the typical sense, you understand; there was no noticeable heat, very little concussive force. Just a rapidly expanding cloud of shrapnel, which was plenty dangerous on its own.

Snowflake and I both dove forward instantly. That's actually sort of unusual, as people go. Most people, confronted with danger, will spend at least a tiny instant shocked, trying to figure out what's going on. I used to be like that, before my life turned into a roller coaster between "surprisingly happy" and "living hell."

These days, not so much. I'd been exposed to so many assassination attempts—and, by virtue of being near me, so had Snowflake—that violence and destruction no longer came as a surprise. Not even an interruption in routine. Which probably is, itself, the sign of a serious and troubling psychological problem. On the bright side, it meant that I reacted nearly instantly to such events, and usually in a remarkably efficient way. I've gotten good at staying alive.

Which I'm pretty sure is the whole point of the exercise. I liked to think that I was obtaining a certain amount of psychological insight into the person targeting me, and it really did feel almost like a training exercise. Granted it was one which, if I made a mistake, would be more than happy to kill me, but it was still meant to be survivable if I reacted correctly.

In this case, that meant diving away from the source of danger instantly, before I was even aware what had happened. Once I realized what it was, I reached out with a semi-instinctive blast of wind, pushing against the shards of glass and throwing them the other way. The few that got through I caught in a thick layer of condensed air well before they touched us.

It wasn't a perfect defense. Bullets, for example, have too much kinetic energy relative to their size for me to stop that way. I'd done the math once and estimated that, in order to stop the average medium-caliber bullet with my best density of thickened air, I would need almost fifty yards. That, as should be pretty obvious, isn't something I'm terribly likely to have available when somebody's shooting at me.

But for this? Yeah, I could make it work.

I stood up, brushed myself off, and turned to look at the wreckage. There were itty-bitty pieces of glass scattered for about ten yards in all directions from the epicenter, excepting about a ten-degree arc around Snowflake and myself. The shards of glass still hanging in the air were actually kind of pretty, too. Almost like a prism. I relaxed and they dropped, hitting the ground with a gentle tinkling sound.

"Scoreboard," I said, just now feeling the adrenaline rush. "Them: zero. Us: five hundred eighty-two. You know, I think they're really starting to grasp at straws here. That's the third explosion this week."

What? Everybody needs a hobby.

Mohammed met me at the door. He looked...old, and tired, with more lines on his face than the last time I'd seen him. I was betting he hadn't slept in a while; he had the sort of worn, quietly desperate feel I associated with people under stress and near the end of their rope. In spite of that he managed a weary smile when he saw me.

"Winter," he said. "Please, come in. Are you well?"

I stepped across the threshold, hanging my coat and hat on the stand near the door. I didn't really need them, but camouflage is second nature to me. "I am," I said to him. "And yourself?" Mohammed obviously had bigger things preying on his mind, but he wouldn't skip the politenesses. That was the kind of man he was.

He waved one hand dismissively. "A passing flu. It is nothing. Can I get you something? Some tea, perhaps?"

"As tempting as that sounds, perhaps business should come first?"

He nodded gratefully. "Yes, I think that may be the case."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"So what did you need? And why are we here, for that matter?" *Here* being a small, rundown house in the middle of a small, rundown neighborhood. It was scrupulously clean inside, and felt intensely homey, right down to smelling of spice and baking. It was also very definitely not Mohammed's house. He did quite well for himself teaching at the college, and had a nice place not far from it. I had a hard time believing he'd gone from that to living here.

"Ah," he said. "That is where things become...complicated."

I sighed. "Somehow I just knew you were going to say that." I glanced at Snowflake, silently telling her to wait here, and followed Mohammed up the stairs.

Upstairs was more of the same. There were cracks in the walls and the paint was faded, but everything was clean and well-maintained, the flat and colorless carpet scrupulously vacuumed. Mohammed led me down a short hallway and into what was very obviously a young man's bedroom.

Here, the unfailing cleanliness was abandoned. Oh, it wasn't anything like as bad as some rooms of its type; it didn't even smell. But there was a little clutter, things that hadn't been put back in their proper places. Posters on the walls showcased a fondness for extreme sports and classic rock. This room, too, felt homey, comfortable and welcoming. Places really do have an aura of sorts, which I'd been more sensitive to ever since I visited the spirit world, and this home felt well-loved.

There were two things out of place. One was the chair pulled up next to the bed. A woman sat on it, head bowed in prayer. I wasn't sure what language she was whispering in; Arabic or something similar, probably, given that she knew Mohammed. She had the same worn, weary look that he did.

The second was the person on the bed. He looked about seventeen, and this was obviously his room. He was also very obviously the woman's son. He lay atop the covers, fully dressed. It didn't look like he was asleep. It looked more like he was dead. His eyes were closed, his hands folded on his breast. Aside from the faint motion of his breathing, he moved not at all, not even a reflexive twitch or murmur.

While I looked around Mohammed walked over to his mother. He said a few words to her in the same language she'd been using. She nodded stiffly, stood up, and walked out of the room, closing the door gently behind herself. I pretended not to notice the tears in her eyes.

I walked over to stand next to the bed. There was magic present, I noted, human in origin with a touch of bitterness underneath, and strong enough to make my sinuses itch. More like bleach than the normal disinfectant. Interesting.

"Has he been like this long?" I asked Mohammed.

"Nearly a day now," he replied. "Fatima—his mother—she says that yesterday Abdul seemed tired when he returned from school, progressing to dizziness and confusion. About an hour later he collapsed."

"Have you contacted a doctor?" I asked, focusing on sorting out the layers of magic hanging around Abdul.

"Yes, of course," he said. "That was the first thing she thought to do. They could find nothing wrong. They suggested more tests, perhaps a stay in the hospital, or consulting a psychiatrist, but they have no money for such things. And I think not even the doctors thought that it would be of help."

I passed a gentle wave of magic over the boy, raw energy that hadn't been forced by my will into an actual spell. The scent didn't waver or shift in the slightest, and I frowned. "Probably right," I said absently. "How about an exorcist?"

Mohammed smiled without much humor. "That was the second thing," he said. "He seemed to stir and even to cry out, but afterward returned to...this. The imam said that he could feel a presence in the boy, but it didn't seem to respond to the words of the Prophet."

"Interesting," I said absently. "So medicine didn't work, the imam couldn't fix it, you called me...why? Because I'm a werewolf?" It wouldn't be the first time people assumed that somehow, by virtue of not being quite human, I knew everything there was to know about the supernatural. Granted, that wasn't as false of an assumption in my case as some, but still. It's kinda weird to pick a total stranger, based purely on them being a werewolf, and ask them to recommend a good medium. That's just *asking* to be conned.

"You are many things," Mohammed said, a gently chiding note in his voice. "And a werewolf is not, I think, first among them." He regarded me levelly. "I know that you are a man of power, Winter. You do not wish to speak of such things, and I respect this." He nodded at Abdul. "This man needs your help. Please."

I sighed. "Of course, of course. You didn't need to fight dirty, you know." For a man with no real connection to the supernatural world, Mohammed was pretty perceptive, and surprisingly open-minded. I'm pretty sure he knows that a good portion of his students and coworkers alike aren't human by any traditional definition, although he would never say so openly.

"I'll do what I can," I said after a moment. "Although it isn't likely to be much. And...I would appreciate it if you could perhaps...keep this between us?"

"Of course," he assured me.

"Okay," I said. "How well would you say you know Abdul here?"

"Quite well, I would say. Why?"

"Somebody's gotta make some decisions here," I said. "And since Abdul doesn't appear to be at home right now, I figure you're as good a pick as anybody."

"Perhaps his mother should be here."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I shook my head. "I'm not looking for someone to chart his path for him or impose their beliefs on him. Just somebody who knows him well enough to tell me what he'd want, if he were able to choose himself. I trust you for that."

He hesitated, then nodded resignedly. "Very well. Do you think that you can help him?"

"Maybe," I said. "There's magic at work here. Human, I would say, or a very close relative...not werewolf, but...." I shook my head. "Not important right now. From the way that it reacts I think he's almost certainly not exhibiting a developing talent himself, which means that someone else is responsible."

Mohammed's lips tightened. "A curse? Black magic?"

"That's a possibility, yes."

"Can you find the one who did it?"

I shrugged. "Given three or four hours to examine this, a chance to compare it to similar spells cast by the same person, an object bearing their scent, and a healthy dose of luck, maybe. Which means no."

"You said a curse was a possibility," he said after a moment. "What other possibilities are there?"

"Well," I said, "it could always be black magic, like you suggested. Or it could be an accident—sometimes kids, who don't know what they're doing or even that they have magic, can cause problems like this without meaning to. Or, heck, could be something beneficial."

"I fail to see how this," Mohammed gestured vaguely at the boy on the bed, "could possibly be of benefit."

"Well, it could be that someone felt they needed to incapacitate him for some reason. It's generally considered preferable to put someone out for a day or so than kill them outright. Of course, the fact that it apparently took more than an hour to activate makes that seem unlikely. Or it could be that they were attempting to prevent something worse—like, if they knew that going to school today would get him shot they make sure he can't."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "But you do not think this is the case?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "If I had to guess, I'd say that you were right the first time. Somebody put a curse on him."

"What is to be done about it?"

"Ah," I said. "Now, *that* is where the choices come in. The first thing you could try is another exorcism. This isn't quite what those are meant to deal with, but magic does react to prayer sometimes."

A sufficient concentration of faith and the desire to heal might be enough to deal with this. I'm not sure how big you'd have to get, but definitely a lot more than last time."

"That would be...difficult to arrange," Mohammed said reluctantly.

"I know. That leaves us with a variety of less...palatable options. First off, I could summon a demon and see if it can help him."

Mohammed shook his head vehemently. "No. Absolutely not. Abdul is a very devout young man. He would absolutely not want you to condemn your soul on his behalf."

"What?" Suddenly I realized my mistake and shook my head. "Sorry. Poor wording. I don't really deal with *that* kind of demon. I mean more...it's a nonphysical being which embodies a given concept. *If* I could find one whose nature is of healing and compassion, and *if* the malady afflicting him is spiritual in origin, then that spirit might be able to help him."

Mohammed frowned. "I am...uneasy with this idea."

"Well," I admitted, "it's not a perfect solution. This doesn't really feel like shamanic magic, so it might not accomplish anything. And, even if it does, such beings tend to charge a fee. If we get it to work, I can either pay it myself, or he can. Up to him."

"He would prefer you not indebt yourself for him," Mohammed said, "if it comes to that. But I think perhaps that this is not the best solution."

I snorted. "I'll warn you right now, I don't have a best solution. If I did, I would have just done it instead of talking about it. But okay, let's move on. I could also call up my...mentor, you might call him. He's very skilled, and I can practically guarantee that he would be of some assistance here. However, he is also *very* expensive. I honestly can't say what he might charge, and I can't guarantee that I would be able to cover the expense."

"Perhaps these are not the best ideas either."

"Well, no. That only really leaves one option left, which is that I try and help him myself." I held up one hand to forestall whatever he was going to say. "Now, I have to tell you, this is *not* my specialty. If this was done the way I think it was, I could conceivably fix it, but it isn't something I've ever tried before. There's a very good chance that I would cause more harm than I'd fix, accidentally."

Mohammed and I stood in silence for a few minutes, staring down at Abdul's unconscious form as he thought. "That, I think, is the best choice," he said, finally. "Abdul would prefer to risk his own wellbeing than to put you into danger."

I nodded. I couldn't say I agreed with the attitude, but if Mohammed told me that the boy felt that way, I believed him. "You're aware, of course," I said with a bit of curiosity, "that this is quite likely forbidden by your faith."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Allah teaches that we should endeavor to help our fellow man," Mohammed said firmly. "If that means turning to magic, then that is what must be done."

"Even if the one helping is a heathen?"

Mohammed smiled. "Especially then. Whatever path you follow, Winter, I have known you to be a good man. I do not think that God wishes us to disdain such men simply because they have not yet heard the voice of His prophet."

My lips twitched into a twisted smile. "Thank you for saying that, but I don't think I'm all so good a man as that." I shook my head. "In any case," I said, businesslike once more. "I need privacy for this. I should warn you that, whether or not this works, it's likely to be painful for Abdul. That's inevitable. It would be best for you to wait downstairs."

"What if you require assistance?"

"Unlikely," I said. "However...I suppose, if you really want, you can wait in the hallway. Fatima, however, should probably not be nearby. If things start getting weirder than you think you can handle, leave. And if my dog seems to be trying to tell you something, for God's sake *listen*."

He nodded soberly and left the room.

"So," I said to the empty air. "Here we are. Again. How do I keep getting into these things?"

Alone with Abdul's seemingly lifeless body, the room no longer felt homey. It didn't even feel creepy. That was entirely too small a word for the hostile, sullen atmosphere that seemed to have developed. I have literally been in prisons and torture chambers that didn't have as disturbing or menacing a feel to them on a spiritual level as that bedroom.

"Okay," I said to myself, aloud—'cause, you know, why not? "Don't let it get to you. Let's get to work. Sooner we start, the sooner we get to leave. What's the first thing we need to do?"

"Figure out the extent of the problem," I answered. And yes, I'm aware that this wasn't exactly evidence of my mental stability. That is largely because I have none. "First step is to sort out what needs doing."

Following my own advice, I set to work. The first thing I did was give Abdul a quick but reasonably thorough physical check-over. Heartbeat was slow but strong. Normal pupillary response. Normal reflexes were present, although not very pronounced. He made no deliberate movement this whole time, not even a twitch.

That was, believe it or not, a good sign. The presence of reflexes suggested that he wasn't physically impaired—he hadn't, for example, been given an artificial case of total locked-in syndrome, which is quite possible for some types of witch.

That left, essentially, two possibilities. The first was that he had suffered a spiritual attack. The simplest way to do that would be to isolate him within the spirit world, without an understanding of where he was, what had happened, or how to get out. If that had happened, from his perspective, he would be just fine. He just wouldn't be in his body and, depending on how deep he was into that world, he might not even be aware that he *had* a body. If that was the case, the automatic systems keeping him alive would eventually fail. This would lead to either death or a persistent vegetative state, depending. I could maybe do something about that, but it would be extremely risky for both of us. I'd barely dabbled with spiritual magic at all.

The other possibility was that this was a strictly mental effect, targeting Abdul's mental functions and intellect without interacting with his body at all. I was guessing that was what I was looking at; it was a common trick, and there were a lot more witches running around than shamans capable of trapping someone in the spirit world.

There were a lot of kinds of mental attack, though. In the best case scenario, he might have been hit with an industrial strength sleeping spell, in which case he was probably just fine underneath. That would probably even wear off on its own, unless we were dealing with a Sleeping Beauty-style, high-level curse. Worse than that would be if he had been somehow cut off from his body. In that case he would be perfectly aware, conscious of everything that happened, but unable to affect his body in even the slightest way, as though he were paralyzed. Moderately hellish, but not likely to leave permanent damage.

Worst case, of course, would be if someone had just decided to crush his mind completely. That takes the most effort, but it has the advantage of simplicity. And, of course, permanence. If that had happened the results would be essentially the same as if he'd suffered massive damage to the central nervous system, except that brain scans and such wouldn't detect anything.

"Okay," I said. "That narrows it down a little. Now let's see what we're working with."

I've been getting better at complex, high-level magic, largely due to constant practice. It took me only a few minutes to drop into a relatively deep trance. I blocked out the various physical and mental sensations I was feeling almost absentmindedly, focusing entirely on the magic in the room.

I could detect a rather complex, multilayered spell. The predominant odor was human disinfectant. Under that I could detect bleach, anise, and dust, the combination bitter and unpalatable. The pattern was familiar, but I wasn't sure why or from where. I snagged onto the spell, which felt cold and bitter and tasted like ashes on my metaphysical tongue. And then I found Abdul.

I don't think I can adequately express what I experienced then. Pain, I suppose, but that word seems entirely inadequate to the task of describing what Abdul was feeling. He wasn't just in agony, he was in a whole other realm of suffering.

Just *touching* that storm of pain, of rage and terror, was enough to throw me out of my trance entirely. I came back to myself lying on the floor, eyes closed, panting slightly in reaction.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Okay," I said aloud. "That's just great." Getting Abdul out from under that curse had just jumped a few priority levels. I mean, I'm not above the occasional killing in a reasonably good cause, but that was crossing the line into a fate *literally* worse than death. Being paralyzed, helpless to actually *do* anything, and suffering in that way...yeah, that wasn't something I could tolerate.

After a few minutes of examination, carefully not looking too closely at Abdul himself, I thought I had a pretty good handle on what the spell was intended to do. It was mental in nature, as I'd thought, but the details were a little more interesting. Abdul was aware, conscious, but held separate from his body. It's possible to dissociate your mind without causing any harm, but this particular spell hadn't been set up that way; the kid's mind was being shredded by the way that it was held away from his body.

It was a cruel, ugly bit of magic, but not actually that well-done. I think it actually would have degraded all on its own within, at the most, another couple days; magic just doesn't *like* to behave in an ordered, consistent, purposeful way. Unless it's absolutely flawless or constantly maintained, any given spell will decay back to its original, chaotic state, given enough time.

Of course, Abdul probably didn't have that kind of time. With the strain his mind was under, I figured he had no more than a day before he started to suffer irreparable harm to his psyche.

So I started chipping away at the spell. I wasn't used to working with human minds, but mental magic was still my natural talent, and it was something I could do. This particular application was rather far outside my comfort zone, though, and I had to be extremely delicate with it. A small miscalculation on my part could break the spell in the *wrong* way, splitting Abdul's mind and body apart completely. If that happened, it would take someone a lot more skilled than me to piece him back together again.

Eventually, though, I did have it finished. I checked that everything was ready. Then I checked again. Then, because eventually you have to stop putting the thing off and just do it, I broke the backbone support of the magical structure. It collapsed in on itself almost instantly, the magic degrading back into its chaotic form.

And *that* is when, to put it simply, things got crazy.

I opened my eyes and, about ten seconds later, Abdul opened his. He blinked a few times. Depth and rate of respiration increased as he did, until he was almost hyperventilating and twitching—a long way away from the Sleeping Beauty impression. Then his eyes fixed on me, and what I saw inside them made my heart sink.

Madness. Abdul wasn't sane right now. I could see, too, that he was still in pain, still experiencing that horrific agony I'd touched on before.

And right about then was when he started trying to claw my freaking eyes out.

Luckily he didn't seem to be thinking clearly, or at all for that matter. He lunged at me without bracing himself or even sitting up, and as a result mostly he just flopped onto the floor. He came to his

feet rapidly, though, his face so contorted that I honestly couldn't say whether he was snarling in rage or grimacing in agony.

He rushed me clumsily, stupidly. I sidestepped easily, more occupied with the problem of what the hell was going on than with actually fighting. We repeated that pattern several times. He stumbled twice, and once literally fell on his face, without ever getting close to me.

This could be just the mindless retaliation of someone who had been pushed beyond the bounds of sanity and wanted nothing more than to make the pain go away. Could be, but I didn't think so.

When it did occur to me what was going on, it was so obvious I couldn't believe I'd overlooked it earlier. "Aw, crap," I said. I'd really screwed up.

The next time he charged at me, literally frothing at the mouth now, I tripped him instead of just sidestepping. He fell to the ground, caught totally by surprise, and I immediately dropped to hold him in place. I'm not a terribly good wrestler, but I *do* have a werewolf's strength, and he wasn't going to be getting out anytime soon.

I feel I should clarify something, right now, for all you martial arts aficionados who are screaming that superior strength isn't a guarantor of victory even in a wrestling match, dammit. You are absolutely correct, and I applaud you. Excellent work catching that.

However, you have overlooked one critical fact, which is that *Abdul wasn't fighting rationally*. It's true that skill and experience can make up for a lot of difference in size and strength. However, if the kid even had those things, he wasn't in a sane enough frame of mind to use them. He was just struggling mindlessly, trying to throw me off with main force, and against *that* tactic I was more than good enough to defend.

He switched tactics and started trying to bite me, which was more than slightly creepy even for somebody who's had werewolves and faerie hounds try the same thing. I mean, I expect that from monsters, but people don't generally bite other people.

I fended him off absently and focused on what I was smelling. Yep. Still magic present, more of it than would be accounted for by the remnant of a shattered spell. I'd *really* screwed up, acting without thinking. You'd think someday I'd learn, but *nooo*, I just keep making the same mistake. Honestly, I'd feel pretty dumb except that it seems like everybody else is doing the same damn thing. In my experience, the only terrible mistake more common than acting without thinking is thinking without acting.

"Okay," I said. "Sorry about this, but you've gotta take another nap. You want this the easy way or the hard way?"

His teeth closed a couple inches from my nose, and I flinched back involuntarily. "Okay," I muttered. "That'd be the hard way, then."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I stood up, physically dragging Abdul with me by main force, and tossed him into the corner. Then, before he could stand, I pulled off my sweatshirt. I don't mean that I unzipped it. I simply pulled on it, exercising my will on it as I did, and it split evenly around me, reshaping from a hoodie into a shapeless mass that hung from my hand like an insubstantial blanket.

See, I used to have a rope that I spun from shadows and moonlight. It was useful enough that, when it was destroyed, I'd immediately started thinking about a replacement. But then it occurred to me....

Why stop with just a rope?

My brand-new *cloak* of shadows was without a doubt my most complicated, well-made, and useful creation yet. It defaults to form a simple, literal cloak; however, under the influence of my magic, it can reshape into very nearly any configuration, from an inconspicuous hoodie to a towel. It can provide anywhere from as little insulation as a normal shadow to a reasonably good sleeping bag impression.

When Alexander he saw it, he declared that my time as an apprentice was over. I believe his exact words were actually, "Anybody who can make something good enough that I wish I'd thought of it first had better call himself a journeyman at least, or I'd be insulted. Now get out."

Oh, and the best part, at least for my current purposes? *It still worked as a rope.*

I threw the shapeless mass of shadow at Abdul where he was just now struggling to his feet. As it flew it transformed into a vaguely net-shaped mass of shadow, which affected its flight not in the slightest. That, you see, is the really nice part of using congealed shadow for something like this; having no actual mass or inertia to speak of, it didn't have to deal with things like gravity and air resistance in the same way most things do.

The net caught him just as he was standing and settled into place around him. Then, once again prodded by my will, it shifted around again, loops of netting retracting and twisting into place to form a simple set of restraints. I pushed more power into the shadow, forcing it to congeal to a consistency roughly equivalent to that of duct tape. It was tiring, maintaining that for long—shadows and moonbeams are, after all, not noted for their efficacy at stopping things from moving. I was forcing them to act against their nature, which is always a pretty serious energy drain.

On the other hand, it was also awesome. Not only do I have a literal cloak of shadows, it's actually *useful*. I can think of at least nine fictional assassins who would quite seriously kill for that, purely for the thematic value.

I hefted Abdul, keeping his mouth well away from me, and dumped him on the bed again. A quick twist of magic, another surge of power, and the shadows binding him spun out extensions to wrap around the bedposts. The amount of shadow was fixed, which meant that this spun all of the strands thinner and required even more energy to keep solid, but it would do for a temporary fix.

"Sorry about that," I said, standing the chair back up and sitting down. "Okay. Round two."

As I'd expected, the second section of the curse was easy to find, although somewhat more deeply buried than the first. I didn't have to wonder what it did, either; it was pretty obvious just from basic logic.

See, he was in more suffering than just being conscious but unable to act would account for. That, combined with the feeling of *intrusiveness* that I'd experienced when looking at the ideas and concepts which defined this working, suggested that the curse on Abdul had been specifically *designed* to inflict pain.

Now, this could have been done as a part of the same spell I had already broken. But it hadn't, and I thought I knew why. Whoever had done this had *wanted* that spell to break, wanted Abdul to regain physical volition without in any way ceasing to suffer. Why, I wasn't sure. I could think of quite a few motivations that might inspire that, most of which didn't make a whole lot of sense under the circumstances.

What I did know was that I wasn't about to tolerate it. I found the magic causing the problem, and winced. It reeked of the same bitter, anise-and-dust smell as before, much uglier than the last layer had been. What was more, it was...well. If the last spell had been like a fishhook stuck into the metaphysical fabric of Abdul's mind, this was more like a chain of fishhooks, or maybe barbed wire, strung all through it. Those spikes were what was causing him pain.

To continue the metaphor, I broke off as many of those barbs as I could. Then, since every second they were in there was causing damage and I could feel that my own actions weren't helping, I mentally shrugged and yanked on it.

What? I'm not good at this. I said that already. I mean, if this curse had been laid on an animal or something I could probably have dealt with it quickly and painlessly, but I'm *no* good at mental magic involving humans.

With that done I simply sat for a few minutes, eyes closed, resting and rebuilding my reserves of power. That particular trick was probably the best one Alexander had ever taught me. Then, once I felt up to moving again, I sat up straight and opened my eyes.

Abdul was unconscious again, but without the eerie malevolent feel of before. It looked like he was just sleeping naturally. I couldn't smell magic anymore, and I was pretty sure that I was done here.

I stood up, only slightly unsteady on my feet, and reached out to grab the nearest strand of darkness. With a quick tug and a mental effort, it all pulled loose, then reshaped itself into the hoodie I'd worn in. I must have been working pretty hard, because even that was an effort. I walked out of the room, careful not to make any noise that might wake the boy.

"Is it done?" Mohammed asked. As I'd suggested, he was in the hallway, leaning against the opposite wall.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Hope so," I said wearily. "Think he's sleeping normally now. Should be awake within...nine, maybe ten hours?" I shrugged. "He might need, I don't know, therapy or something. And he should see a doctor, I think. It got a bit...rowdy there for a minute."

He smiled. "Yes, I heard. I will tell Fatima what is to be done. Thank you."

"Didn't do it for you," I said.

His smile grew slightly broader. "I know," he said simply.

I grunted, moving toward the staircase. "Very funny," I told him. "How long was I in there?"

"Slightly more than an hour."

"Really?" I was surprised. It hadn't felt like more than a quarter of that.

Mohammed insisted I have tea and some kind of crunchy baked thing before I left, assisted by Fatima. Being a sucker for good baking, I didn't argue very much. Her accent was basically the same as his, except quite a bit thicker; English was quite clearly neither her first language nor her favorite. She watched me with an expression that mingled wonder, interest, and fear into something a little like awe. I could practically see her adding up all the weird features of my appearance and behavior, and wondering what I really was. I provided no assistance in this regard, and of course neither of them asked.

What? Spreading weird stories about myself is kind of a hobby by now. At least this time it was the good kind of story.

Chapter Two

As it turns out, tea and Middle Eastern baking don't actually make much of a dinner. Given that it was late afternoon—and, more to the point, that I'd just put in a solid hour of hard magical labor—I was hungry.

I am a terrible cook. Actually, that's not quite a serious enough phrasing. I am the kind of cook they tell jokes about in culinary arts classes. I'm the kind of cook you want to have along on long trips, because after a couple of my meals nobody will complain about how hungry they are. That is the kind of cook I am. Even *I* don't like my food.

This is why I'm not even kidding when I say that the best part of the turns my life had taken was that I didn't have to subsist on my own cooking anymore. Business was booming to such an extent that I had not only hired workers, we *still* had to buy stuff premade to keep up. I could afford to eat out more than once a week. Between that and the meals provided by various friends, I hardly even make desserts anymore. It's *great*.

I decided to go to Pryce's, because it was close, it was good food, and I didn't feel like being stared at. Werewolves had been publicly acknowledged long enough to have faded into the background in favor of whatever the celebrities were doing. Given that they still weren't allowed to publically demonstrate anything that couldn't be easily explained, a lot of people had taken to dismissing it as a hoax. However, if I went to the werewolf-themed restaurant run by my friend Kyra, I would very certainly be the object of much attention.

Nobody stares at Pryce's. It's considered rude, and that's a very *very* bad idea there. Granted, most of the people who go there are the misfits of the supernatural world, scavengers and bottomfeeders without the power to really do much, but...well, it isn't something you want to take chances with.

It's never smart taking risks. I wouldn't put it past, say, Loki to go there and *invite* rudeness, just so he could lay an epic smackdown on the responsible party. It would appeal to his twisted sense of humor. And, if he did, it would almost certainly be both disturbingly creative and disproportionate beyond belief.

Remember Prometheus? Yeah, he was actually real, the way I hear it. And, if you were to wander the Otherside long enough, you might find him. Still hanging upon his mountain, all these thousands or millions of years later, that eagle still flying overhead. That's how he spends his days, in agony and secure in the knowledge that the agony is just going to continue, until the end of time itself as I understand it, never letting up or slowing down...yeah, that's the kind of image that puts a person off brawling.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

It was a slow time of day, between lunch and dinner. There were only a few people there, most of them regular customers. I recognized most of them. We weren't friends, but longtime patrons of Pryce's tend to develop an us-vs.-them attitude to some extent.

I sat at a table made from maple in my favorite dimly-lit corner and ate my hamburger and fries in peace. The iced tea was, as usual, quite strong, enough so that you could only dimly see through the glass. This is the sign of good iced tea. Also, never trust someone who adds sugar. If you wanted a sweet drink, you should have just ordered lemonade or something, that's what I say.

I ate steadily, but slowly, taking my time and enjoying it. It was nice to be able to come here just because I wanted to. Not to meet with somebody, not on a tight schedule, nothing unusually bad happening at all. I didn't even have to go back to work; Doug was more than capable of keeping things under control for the rest of the day. Even Kris, although not as experienced as he was, was a good worker. She didn't enjoy it so much, and I doubted she'd keep working for me in the long-term, but for now the two of them were pretty decent employees.

When I'd just about finished eating, everybody stopped talking and turned to look at the door. Being sane, aware of the existence of monsters, and therefore quite sensibly paranoid, I did the same.

Two people had just walked in, framed by the setting sun. They were a study in contrasts. One was a man, maybe five two and portly. He had the "jolly businessman" look down to a tee, including an expensive-looking pinstriped suit, and a fringe of dark hair around a bald head so shiny I had to wonder whether he polished it. All he needed was a Cuban cigar to truly complete the look.

Behind him was a tall, harsh-looking woman. She had to be better than six feet tall, and muscular. Her face was angular, all harsh planes and sunken cheeks, and you just knew that if she was a guy she would have had a five-o'clock shadow at any time of day or night. Where he beamed at the scant crowd, she had an expression of disinterest so profound that it was scarier than any snarl of fury. An angry person might kill you, but he does so with intent, he cares about what he's doing, he knows and cares who you are. She looked like the sort of person who might kill you and be bored doing it, yawning even.

I've seen that expression on a few other people. High-end professional killers, mostly. Such people tend to be rather dangerous.

It probably didn't help that she was wearing a cloak, dull red-brown like dried blood. Or rust, I suppose, but that doesn't sound nearly as dramatic. She had a sword belted on over it, and a pistol. It's hard to really look friendly dressed like that. The belt draped across her chest, and was centered by a large medallion of what looked like Damascus steel. I didn't get a close look, but I could see that it depicted a sword. Cheery.

The man looked around and then (of course) fixated on me. He stumped over to my corner, still beaming, while the woman in the red cloak drifted behind him like an exceptionally malevolent, shadow. "Mr. Wolf!" he said in a jovial tone which I immediately dismissed as an act. My instincts said

he was just as dangerous as his companion, and I trusted that a lot more than him. "Just the man I'm looking for."

I glowered at him, making no effort to be friendly. "What do you want?" I asked bluntly, shoving one hand into a pocket to touch a small, hollow glass marble.

He smiled broadly, showing off a prominently placed gold tooth. Of course. He probably had a pinkie ring and a pocket watch too, just to fit with the image. "We'd quite like to have a word with you," he said with even more cheer than before. He glanced around, indicating the people watching. "Elsewhere."

"Why?" I said, endeavoring to sound dismissive but probably not succeeding beyond hostile.

The woman spoke for the first time. "Come with us," she said flatly, her voice as disinterested and grim as the rest of her. "Easier that way."

I considered it for maybe as much as a quarter of a second. "Screw you," I decided, going back to finishing the food.

The bald man was still smiling, but it didn't look very friendly now. "Last chance, Wolf. Let's not make this harder than it has to be." His hands were, very slightly, crooked into claws, and I saw that the woman had one hand conveniently near the hilt of her sword.

I also became aware that they were more than they looked like. Unless maybe they weren't; I mean, she at least looked pretty scary.

In any case, they were mages. The scent of magic around them was intimidatingly potent, especially given that they hadn't actually *done* anything with it. Aside from Alexander they were probably the strongest human mages I'd ever met. Not that I've met many, but it was still pretty impressive.

I was trying to decide what to say—and, more importantly, what to do once I had, because it would almost certainly start a fight—when we all heard Pryce clear his throat. It was a fairly small sound, but somehow we could hear it even though we were on the other side of the room from him. None of the three of us looked away, but you could tell that all of us were aware of what was going on as Pryce walked out around the bar.

"This is neutral ground," the big man said. His deep voice wasn't any louder than usual, or more piercing, but it was somehow...*bigger*. Like it had somehow expanded to fill all the available air. It seemed to vibrate in my bones, although I could feel that it was a purely mental effect.

The man reacted immediately, turning to face Pryce. "No trespass is meant on thy ground, Barkeeper," he said, making the word sound like a term of respect. Or a title.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Pryce stopped in the dead center of the room, feet planted like he intended to move the world. "You threaten one of mine," he rumbled in the same voice. I was pretty sure there were glasses literally shaking behind the bar.

"With all due respect, Barkeeper, this one is not yours. He does not serve you, nor does he bear your mark."

"I say otherwise. That's all that matters." Pryce smiled in an exceptionally unfriendly way, flexing his fingers by his sides. "This is my bar, Watchers. And I say you aren't welcome here. Get out."

The woman in the cloak smiled, an expression which was creepy just because of how very...inappropriate it was. I mean, snarls, grimaces, growls, predatory grins that expose lots and lots of very sharp teeth...I could have seen any of those. A blank, absent smile like a girl looking at wildflowers, not so much. Her fingers caressed the hilt of her sword in the same gentle, almost tender way. It was enormously disturbing.

The man, though, just plastered his jovial expression more firmly into place. "That's quite all right, good sir. I'm sure we can have our little chat some other time." He glanced at me with hard brown eyes. "Good day, Mr. Wolf. We'll be...seeing you soon." He bowed, stiff and shallow, to Pryce, followed after a moment by the woman.

Then the two of them left, as precipitously and with as little explanation as they'd come in with. I waited a moment to be sure they were gone, then nodded to Pryce. "Thanks," I said.

Pryce grunted. "Business," he said, in a tone returned to normal. He looked at me, then the door. Looked very significantly.

"Could I give them a minute to clear out?" I asked.

He considered that, then shrugged and grunted an affirmative, going back behind his bar. The ebb and flow of the bar returned to its normal, sedate patterns.

Okay. I had a few minutes, which meant I had to think. One of the things I'd learned from past experience in hairy situations is that a minute spent thinking is often more valuable than an hour of activity. Given that, once the fur started flying, I would have very little leisure for thinking, I figured the wise thing to do was get as much of it done as I could now.

The first priority was, for obvious reasons, the two mages. They'd been powerful, looking for me specifically, and not especially friendly. Now, all of that was bad. It was very bad. But there was something else, something maybe worse, which was that Pryce had referred to them as Watchers.

I didn't know what that meant. I didn't have even a clue. However, I *had* heard it once before. When there'd been a psycho-killer mage going around slaughtering people to boost his own power, Alexander had been...concerned. And one of the things he'd said was that, if the situation was allowed to continue, the mage clans would send people. They would send *Watchers*.

Now, it wasn't impossible that there would be more than one major supernatural group referred to as Watchers. I mean, it wasn't like an exotic word or one that wouldn't apply to all kinds of people. However, my rule of thumb is "when in doubt, assume conspiracy," and it's usually served me well. This seemed just that little bit more likely than most such cases. There were powerful mages who operated in an organized manner called Watchers. There was a group called Watchers who dealt with dangerous mages. Seemed like a no-brainer that the two were connected.

Which meant that, theoretically, I had a lead on figuring out who the hell these people were and what they wanted with me.

The only problem was that I couldn't take it.

See, the other rule of thumb (I have a bunch of them) is that you *always* assume your opposition is at least as motivated, resourceful, and cunning as you are. That's basic common sense. And, while these Watchers might not be my *enemies*, they sure didn't seem like my friends either.

So the first thing I had to do was think through things from their perspective. They knew my name and hangouts, which meant that they'd done at least a little research. I naturally assumed the worst, which was that they had functionally unlimited access to information about me.

There were only a few logical steps for them to take right now, if that was the case. Number one would be to do the same thing I was doing—figure out what the opposition was capable of, and if possible shutting it down.

I was therefore quite confident that my house would be under observation. So would my friends—Kyra, for example, was almost certainly being watched. If I tried to run to her for help I would probably be caught long before I made it. The same thing applied to Alexander, Jimmy and his little gang, and anywhere else I was known to use as a sanctuary. Aiko would probably be safe, just because she was such hard quarry. If I knew her at all, and I did, she would be taking malicious pleasure in leading them on a wild goose chase.

So, I said to myself. It's well known that you chum around with her. Assume they're aware of the difficulty involved in keeping tabs on her. What have they done about it?

Nothing, as far as I could tell. I mean, they were willing to just walk away from me here, rather than start something, which suggested that they weren't too worried about me making contact with my allies. Although, come to think of it....

How had they found me here?

Don't get me wrong. Pryce's is a good place to find me. But I'm not there every day. Especially at this time of day, I would have said you would have more luck looking either at the shop or my home. Had they just been waiting? It seemed unlikely. The man had been too...*assured* of finding me here.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Then it all clicked into place, and I grinned. Of course, and that was why they hadn't been too concerned about me calling Aiko—had, in fact, been herding me toward it, although it was entirely possible I was just reading too much into it.

They had a tracking spell of some kind running on me. That can be done, although it's something I don't have more than the most rudimentary knowledge of. It's not something that falls within my talents.

Assuming that I was right about what was going on, that made my next moves pretty simple.

Pryce looked at me again, and nodded toward the door. I nodded respectfully, got up, and left, bringing Snowflake with me. We had now entered the "race against time" portion of the daily program, bound for the one place I could think of where I wouldn't be vulnerable to observation which they might not have thought to put under surveillance.

Snowflake and I left through the front door—inevitable, really, considering that Pryce's doesn't have a back door. I didn't think that we had enough time to wait for a friend to get there with a vehicle, so we just took off running.

Assuming that they had a tracking spell on me, I didn't bother being sneaky or taking a circuitous route. It wouldn't matter how strange or hard to follow my trail was, because they didn't have to follow my trail; they could skip straight to my current position instead.

So speed was our friend, and the dog and I poured it on. We were both on that level of physical performance where you can't *quite* say that it's impossible, because really high-level athletes (or sled dogs, I guess, for her) could match it. On the other hand you *also* can't quite say it's natural, because it really shouldn't be.

So, long story short, we ran fast. Faster than anybody but a serious runner could have kept pace with, and even they would have been given a real run for their money. And, because we didn't have to stick to the roads or obey traffic laws, we quite possibly made it *faster* than you could have driven it.

Fortunately, our destination wasn't all that far away—three or four miles, tops. I judged we were moving a little under the pace of a sprinter, almost twenty miles per hour. Within about fifteen minutes we had made it to the bad part of town, where we had to slow down a bit. Running through the ghetto is generally considered to be not the smartest thing a person can do. There are too many people who might be inclined to chase you.

My lab was smack in the middle of the closest thing Colorado Springs had to a truly awful neighborhood. It wasn't as bad as, say, Detroit, or Mexico City. That goes without saying. But it still wasn't the kind of place you loiter without a good reason.

At the lab I unlocked the outer door, which was so covered in graffiti that you couldn't see the door itself, and we ducked inside. I shut and locked it behind us, then lowered the extensive warding patterns on the inner wall of the antechamber. Over the past several months, I'd beefed the wards up significantly.

Once they were down, I took out another key and unlocked the inner door, and we went the rest of the way into the lab proper. I locked the door and reactivated the wards behind us, and only then did I collapse onto a stool. That had been a wild few minutes.

See, the lab had a nice special feature which, so far as I knew about, nobody else knew about. The inner wards were my own work, and as a result were relatively crude. The outer layer, though, predated my acquisition of the building. They'd been put in place by...someone else, probably one of the Sidhe. And they were designed for a totally different purpose.

My wards had been built to keep things out. And...that was it, really. If you tried to force the door they would blast you, but that was basically the whole operating system. They wouldn't do jack to keep you from trying in the first place. That just wasn't something I was capable of.

The faerie wards, on the other hand, were totally oriented around that. Instead of brute force they were designed to be subtle, taking advantage of misdirection. Looking at the house you would find your eyes sliding right over it, burglars and such would walk by without ever even thinking about it, and it was so utterly forgettable you could forget it *while still looking at it*. And, on the same theme, trying to view it with magic would display an empty lot, and if you were to walk by afterward you'd never even notice the incongruousness of that fact. The same thing should, if I understood it right, apply to somebody trying to establish a connection with something inside for, say, a tracking spell.

That was the part I wanted right now. They had *probably* already tracked me to this part of town, but I was hoping they didn't have anything more precise than that. If so, I had at least a short while here before I had to worry. If not, well, I expected that things would get very exciting very soon.

"That," I said to Snowflake, "was entirely too close."

Yeah. I take it you know them?

"Not even a little bit," I said cheerfully. "Except that they were mages. Speaking of which....Legion! Wake up!" I tossed a peppermint into the corner of the room, bouncing it off the skull of the skeleton leaning against the wall.

Dull, somehow oily black fog oozed out of the vaguely canine bones. "Yeth, mathter?" Legion said in his strange, inhuman voice. He doesn't really have a lisp, you understand. He just has a strange fondness for imitating Igor sometimes. He can even reshape the smokelike substance of his body into a hunch.

"We've got trouble."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"That's funny," the demon said brightly. "I wouldn't have thought you could tell the difference."

I glowered at him. "I'm not in trouble *all* the time," I said, possibly in a slightly petulant tone.

"Really? Because statistically speaking, in the time I've been around you, more than seventy-five percent of your days have included some form of violence or accident."

"That's because I started letting Aiko hang around the lab," I pointed out. "Not my fault."

"Yeah, keep telling yourself that, boss."

Could we please get this on topic? Snowflake asked exasperatedly.

"Didn't anybody ever teach you manners?" Legion jeered. "It isn't polite to interrupt your vocalizing conversational partners."

I sighed. Legion wasn't as *evil* as I had expected from a demon embodying the dark side of natural selection and the portion of the life cycle between death and rebirth, but he was still an asshole. Aiko was possibly the only person I knew who he *didn't* grate on, and that was just because she was crazier and more prone to random behavior than he was. I think he looks up to her.

"Legion," I chided. "There's work to do."

"Hey," he said unrepentantly. "You da boss, Herr Wolf. I'm just the flunky here. Not my fault you didn't tell me what to do."

I pulled a notebook out of one of the drawers and laid it on the table next to a pencil. "Two mages cornered us at Pryce's today. Said they wanted a talk. Pryce called them Watchers."

"Watchers?" Legion said excitedly. "And you *killed* them? Way to go, man. Always knew you had it in you."

"Sorry, no. I declined and they decided to leave rather than start a fracas with Pryce."

"Oh," he said, disappointed. "Well, that's almost as good, I guess. Being on the lam isn't as much fun as a fracas, but it beats nothing."

"I take it," I said dryly, "you know who they were."

"Well sure. I mean not specifically, I wasn't there, but you just said they were Watchers." The silence stretched for a remarkably long moment before he caught on. "Oh. Oh, man. You don't know who the Watchers are?"

"Beyond a vague suspicion that they have something to do with the mage clans? Not a clue."

He whistled. "Damn. Hoffman totally screwed you on that, then. I mean, *damn*."

The peppermint was followed by a dog biscuit, which bounced off Legion's head and rolled over to end up suspiciously near where Snowflake's head was resting on the floor. "Less editorial, more explanation."

"Okay, boss, you got it. Um. Well, they work for the Conclave—"

"What Conclave?" I interrupted.

"You don't—damn. Okay. You know about the clans, at least, right? Tell me you know about the clans."

"You mean the mage clans?" I asked. "Yeah, I know about them."

"Right. Well, the Conclave is them. All of them."

I frowned. "I thought the clans were autonomous."

Legion sighed without breathing. "There's the official story, and then there's the reality. They ain't always the same. Especially where the Conclave's concerned. Officially, the clans all have self-governance privileges, and the Conclave is just a meeting every nine years to make sure relations remain smooth."

I started to get the picture. "But unofficially, if all the clans are working together, they might as well be one clan."

"Bingo. They spend a lot of time squabbling, though. The Conclave only acts as a governing body for a couple of issues they have a common stance on."

I whistled. Individually, the clans were scary. Any one of them could crush me and everyone I knew without that much effort. They weren't that much of a threat to most people, because they were too busy causing trouble for each other, but avoiding pissing a mage clan off was still an important part of surviving in the supernatural world.

Taken all together? That was a threat on an entirely different level. A *global* level.

"And the Watchers work for them?"

"Well," Legion said in an exceptionally dry voice, "it depends on your definition. Officially, the Conclave has no formal existence and therefore doesn't employ anyone. The Watchers are a volunteer group composed of representatives from all of the clans. You know, Neighborhood Watch kinda thing."

"Right," I drawled. "Let me guess. The Guards are too."

"Good guess. How'd you know?"

"Educated guess based on something Alexander said. What do they actually *do*?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"The Guards are the military branch," he informed me. "About, oh, two hundred or so mages with a fair bit of skill in a fight. They deal with anyone who threatens the clans. Generally speaking they're the people the Conclave sends to interact with anyone who isn't a mage."

I jotted down a few notes. "Okay. The Guards deal with external threats. That makes the Watchers...secret police?"

"Hey, you're good at this," he said happily. "Although technically, no. The Watchers tend to be quite open about what they do. But yeah, police is a good starting point. They also do a lot of information gathering, and they take out mages who threaten the status quo."

"Yeah, I think I get the picture," I said dryly. "Let me guess. The Watchers get to say what represents a threat."

"Um. Sort of. It's a very complicated situation. The Watchers have a lot of latitude, but they have to answer for what they do. The clans *do* still have a lot of independent influence, after all. And then there are a few people who get to tell them what to do—people respected by the Conclave as a whole. The Prophet, the Guide, the Arbiter...they tend to get really flowery titles."

"Great," I muttered. "What's their usual M.O.?"

"Intimidation and investigation," he replied promptly. "They aren't combat specialists. Watchers tend to be...scouts, trackers, assassins, that kind of thing. They find the problem, determine the extent. If they decide that violence is the best solution, they either send their own hit squad or call in the Guards."

"That fits," I said slowly. "Tracking spells?"

"Obviously," he said scornfully. "They're mages hunting other mages. They don't believe in a fair fight."

"Of course not," I muttered. "Oh no, that'd be too easy. Why are they after me, you reckon?"

Legion gave the impression of a shrug without actually *moving* at all. I've been trying to break him of the habit, with only a modicum of success. "They must think you're guilty of something." He paused. "Granted, they're probably right on that count...."

"That's less than helpful," I pointed out. "What kinds of things would get them after me? We talking...murder, arson, jaywalking, what?"

"Oh," he said. "*That's* what you mean. They only have a handful of hard rules, and you couldn't break most of them if you tried. The necromancy ban is the only one I can think of that you might have to worry about. They disapprove of high-profile magical activity, too, especially when the person involved isn't a clan mage."

Well, *that* was interesting. I was pretty sure they weren't after me for necromancy, given that I'd never touched the stuff. I mean, I guess theoretically it was the kind of magic I *could* have been good at, but it was too squicky for my tastes. Besides which, the only things I could probably have raised were predatory animals, and I *like* them.

On the other hand, high-profile activity wasn't something I could honestly claim to have avoided. I'd been involved in some...slightly infamous activities. And I *definitely* wasn't a clan mage.

"Maybe you should tell me about it," Legion suggested. "I might be able to give you a better idea of what's going on."

I shrugged and laid it out in terse, simple sentences. Snowflake contributed a number of details that I hadn't noticed—the male had smelled like cologne, for example, or that the female had a military haircut and was carrying grenades.

When it was finished, Legion made a sort of...whistling sound. "Ouch. That's bad, Winter. The hardass approach means they were pretty sure you were guilty of something. Now that you ditched them, they'll be sure of it."

"What?" I said indignantly. "Just because I didn't want to be threatened into going somewhere alone with them? What kind of crazy bastards are these people?"

"The scary kind," he said seriously. "Although on this occasion, they have a reasonable amount of justification. I mean, when somebody refuses to talk to the police, you naturally assume they have something to hide. Otherwise, why bother?"

"That's different," I protested. "The police *tell* you who they are and why they want to talk."

"So did they. You're just too much of a dumbass to *know* it." I stared blankly, and Legion sighed. "The medallion, Winter. The medallion says they're a Watcher on assignment. The sword in plain sight says they mean business and they suspect you of something."

I sighed. This was the kind of thing I *really* would have liked to know, say, yesterday. That was the problem with Legion. He was undeniably an invaluable asset, but he was also a real pain to deal with. I could count on him to provide me (eventually, once he got through being a cruel and unusual wiseass) with whatever help I requested, assuming that he was capable of it.

On the other hand, he wouldn't go an inch past that, either. So, for example, saying "Tell me about the mage clans," probably wouldn't have elicited any of this information, because he considered that a different subject than the Conclave or the Watchers. He sure wouldn't volunteer his help unasked, not with this or anything else, not even if he knew that my actions would otherwise lead to my death.

Part of that's the standard shtick for supernatural critters. Mostly, though, it's his nature. Legion, as useful and mostly-not-evil as he seems, is still and always will be a force of destruction and entropy. He is the wolf that takes the hindmost, the hand that culls the herd, the suffering which makes stronger

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

those it does not kill. Mercy is not a part of his nature, and from his perspective if I'm not clever enough to ask for assistance and not strong enough to get by without it, I don't deserve to live. I could resent that fact, or I could just learn to accept it and make use of his services as he was. The latter seemed a lot more practical.

"Okay," I said. "No point crying about it." I thought about it for a minute. "There has to be a reason they're after me now, when they weren't before. I haven't done anything special recently, either."

"Sounds reasonable."

"On the other hand," I continued, "there are plenty of people who have a vested interest in screwing up my life." I even knew who a couple of them were. "Is it possible that one of them, I don't know, bribed them or something? Seems like setting a bunch of organized ninja-mages at someone makes a pretty decent revenge mechanism."

"Yep," he agreed. "Although I don't know how practical that would be. I haven't dealt with the Conclave for a long time."

I nodded glumly. That was the usual story with Legion; he usually had *some* information about any given subject, but he almost never had *all* of it. "Think they'll be coming for me again?"

"Most definitely," he assured me. "And you were right about the surveillance, by the way. The Watchers tend to be quite thorough. There aren't more than, oh, about a hundred-odd of them, but they're very good at what they do."

"Great. Just great. Any suggestions for how to deal with this one?"

"Run like hell?" he said brightly. "Rampage all over their faces? Seppuku? The kitsune can probably help with that last one."

I sighed. "What about you?" I asked Snowflake. Better advice most of the time, and she doesn't give me nearly as much crap about it. "Any bright ideas?"

The dog considered that for a moment. *Why did they leave when Pryce asked them?* she asked after a moment.

"Yeah, that was bothering me too. Legion?"

"How would I know?" he said irritably. "I've never even *met* the man."

"But you know how the Watchers operate."

"Well, sure. It might have just been politeness, but probably not on a mission that serious. That means that it's either formally recognized neutral territory and they didn't want to cause an incident, or else they were afraid of him."

You remember that Conn was disturbed when you mentioned Pryce's name? Snowflake asked suddenly. *Perhaps this would be a good time to follow up on that.*

"Oh, yeah. I'd forgotten that." The really funny thing? *She hadn't even been there.* I swear, that husky is smarter than I am. Has a better memory, at the very least. Very little escapes either Snowflake's attention or her recollection.

Conn answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

"Pryce," I said without preamble. "You know something about him, correct?"

"And how are you doing today, Winter?" he said chidingly.

"Khan," I said, packing as much respect into my voice as I could, "I'm working on a deadline. I would be glad to exchange pleasantries another time, but right now I don't have time."

"Is this something I can help with?" he asked immediately.

I shuddered. The last thing I wanted was to introduce the Khan into a conflict with the mage clans. That was just *begging* for a diplomatic incident. "Just the info, please. I can't think of anything else."

"All right. Let me know if that changes. What information do you need?"

"Pryce," I said again. "Some time ago, you mentioned how wrong it was what he'd done to himself. What did that mean?"

"Ah," he said, his tone suggesting very faintly that he was uncomfortable with the topic. Given how seldom he showed genuine emotion, that was saying something. "That. He is...unnatural. More so than us."

"Could you tell me anything specific?" I said impatiently.

"Have you ever seen him outside that bar?"

I thought about it for a minute. "Um...now that you mention it, I guess I haven't."

"I'm not surprised," he said. "He *is* the bar, you see, as much as the walls and floor."

"I don't get it," I said after a moment. "Are you saying that he doesn't exist?"

"Oh, no," Conn assured me. "He exists. It's simply that...he is the bar, and the bar is him. He is its embodiment. It is his body."

"Oh," I said, comprehension starting to dawn. "Sort of like a genius loci."

"Sort of," Conn said dryly, "except that he's the exact opposite. A genius loci develops naturally when the spiritual aspect of a location is provided with enough power to manifest as a distinct

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

personality. Pryce went about it from the other direction. He started out as a person, then *became* the place as well."

"Oh. Um. Wow. So...the reason he doesn't leave is because he...."

"He can't," Conn confirmed. "Not for any significant length of time, at any rate."

"Well. That's...very, very creepy, actually. *Why* on earth would someone *do* that to themselves?"

"It's not all downsides," Conn said dryly. "He can't stay away from that bar. On the other hand, within its walls, the man is like a tiny god. And, of course, there's the part where it makes you impossible to kill."

"Wait a second," I interrupted. "Are you telling me that Pryce is *immortal*?"

"So long as those walls stand," he confirmed. "He has...become an *idea* more than a *person*, you see, and so long as that idea exists so will he."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "I think I get it. So how do *you* know about this? I *live* here, and I've never heard about this."

"Pryce is hardly the first to think that tradeoff is worthwhile." Conn paused thoughtfully. "Although, actually, he's done a better job than most. I met someone, oh, maybe seven hundred years ago who tried that trick with a prison. That didn't work out very well."

I thought about how Pryce had always struck me as being the perfect bartender, almost as if someone had thought about what characteristics the ideal barkeep should have and then just created one to fit. Given that it was starting to sound like that was literally what had happened, I figured Conn was probably understating the case. I *do not* want to meet the ideal prison guard. Ever.

I thanked Conn and said goodbye, and then sat staring gloomily around the lab.

I was, like, so totally screwed. I mean, don't get me wrong, I've been in bad situations before. But those had all had one very important thing in common, which was that the person after me had been...*unofficial*, you might say.

For the most part I'd been acting with the backing of at least the Pack, and occasionally other people too. Worst case I'd been tacitly acknowledged and unofficially approved of, and the person I'd been fighting had been a renegade nobody missed.

Now, though...well, the tables had turned. The Watchers were coming after me, it seemed, with the full approval of their superiors, and *that* changes everything. This time around *I* was the renegade, and I had a sudden and pointless insight into how those people must have felt knowing that everybody and his dog wanted them dead.

It sucked. It sucked ass.

I did briefly consider just turning myself in. Then I shook myself out of it. "Screw that," I said aloud. They might well win this round, but I wouldn't be giving it up.

So what if they had me outsmarted, outgunned, outmaneuvered, outnumbered, outplanned, and outpositioned. That was no excuse to stop being a stubborn bastard. I mean, I wouldn't recognize myself if I weren't a stubborn bastard.

Twenty minutes later there was a sort of scratching sound at the front door. It was also, incidentally, the only door; the building *had* a back door, but it had been bricked up from the inside before I ever acquired the building, as had all the windows.

I opened the door a crack, just wide enough to let in a smallish red-furred fox. She darted past me, and I immediately closed and locked the door again. The entire process had taken only a second or two.

Inside the lab, the fox morphed into a young-looking Japanese woman slightly shorter than average. It took less time than blinking, and she never even broke stride.

You'd have had to work pretty hard to identify her apparent nationality, though. Aiko was...actually, I'm not sure quite what word applies here. She wasn't vain, exactly. She took pride in her appearance, I suppose, but mostly just in the sense of making it as odd and perturbing as physically possible.

What that meant today was that her black hair was streaked a deep scarlet and tipped with violet, and all her nails were painted a weird shade of metallic neon green. I've always been a little surprised that Aiko never got any tattoos, although I didn't mention it for fear of giving her ideas. She doesn't need my help in that regard.

"What's up, Shrike?" she asked me, throwing on some clothes from the cabinet in the corner. Like most shapechangers, Aiko has little regard for nudity taboos, but she's willing to humor me.

"Shrike?" I asked her.

She shrugged. "I decided I need a pet name for you."

"Okay, I can go there, but seriously. Shrike? Don't you think that's a wee bit *too* creepy?"

"Why?" she asked reasonably. "What's wrong with shrikes? Just because they're carnivores, that's no reason to get all up in their beaks. Not like you have much room for criticism there."

"Well, sure. But I don't *impale things*, in case you've forgotten."

"First time for everything. If you're interested, I know a guy who can hook you up with some stakes real cheap. Used, but still.... "

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Now that," I said, "is a disturbing image. Can we please move on now?"

"Whatever you say, Shrike. So what's so fascinating you wouldn't talk about it over the phone?"

"You ever heard of the Watchers?"

"Sure," she said. "Which ones? Hockey, rugby, billiards, what?"

"*Conclave* Watchers," I clarified.

"Oh. *Those* Watchers. Yeah, I've heard a thing or two."

"I think they're after me, and I have no idea why."

She winced. "Oh. That's not good. I take it that's why you told me to park five blocks away and come the rest of the way in fur?"

I shrugged. "A fox attracts less attention around here than a person. I don't *think* they have me localized to this building, but I can't say for sure."

"And you're sure you didn't do anything to earn it? Watchers aren't known for being the most stable folks around, but they don't have the resources to throw them away for no good reason."

"Sounds like you know more about them than I do," I said dryly. "Why don't you take a guess?"

"Well," she drawled, "I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say that you're a bit of a disruptive influence. I mean, what with the prison escapes. And the way you did Jon a while ago. The forest fire we started with that one probably didn't help your case much either...."

I sighed. "I get it, I get it. Although, technically, I'm pretty sure Jon wasn't their favorite kind of people, either."

"And if they'd told you to whack him, that'd be great. Given that you did it as a vigilante job, though, it makes it look like you're out killing mages just 'cause you can. They don't like that." She pursed her lips. "How about Fuzzball? It might suit you a little better. I mean, impalement aside, you are undoubtedly fuzzy."

"I get the impression you aren't taking this very seriously."

She shrugged. "What's the hurry? You just said they don't know where you are for sure. Even if they did, this place is pretty heavily warded. If all else fails, we can probably wait this one out until they get bored."

I stared at her for a moment. "You realize who we're talking about, right? These people are the *mages' secret police*. It is *not* safe to assume they don't know where we are. And the wards won't stop them if they get impatient."

"You think?" she said doubtfully. "I'm pretty sure they're trying to *avoid* attention."

"Yes," I said patiently. "Which is why they'll probably just set the building on fire."

"I thought you did something about that. You know, after the fireworks thing? Didn't you fireproof the place?"

I shrugged. "Well, sure. But that was supposed to stop *accidents*. So, if you mean 'Will it stop a Bunsen burner from scarring the walls?', then the answer is yes. If you mean 'Will it prevent someone from starting a fire using kindling, gasoline, and magic?', the answer is scornful laughter." I shrugged again. "If nothing else, even if they don't know where we are exactly, they can always just torch the whole neighborhood. Once a fire gets that kind of momentum, nothing I could do would just *stop* it."

"Oh," she said, staring uncomfortably at the walls. "I suddenly feel much smaller and more vulnerable. Thanks a bunch."

"You needed it," I said smugly.

"So what's the plan? We kill them or something?"

I shook my head. "Bad idea. Even if we could take out two Watchers, and that's a big if, it wouldn't solve the problem in the long term. Right now it's just business, but if we kill their people the next hundred or so guys have a real good reason to want to watch us scream."

I don't know what she would have said to that, because my phone chose that time to ring. I pulled it out of my pocket. It was a number I didn't recognize, and I frowned.

"You gonna answer that?"

"I don't know," I said. "I mean, theoretically, it could be a coincidence that somebody's calling me right now, on top of all the rest of the crap going on. But it's probably not, and given that I don't trust anybody involved talking to them probably wouldn't be worthwhile. On the other hand, I'd hate to let it ring and then it turns out to be some enigmatic figure with a cryptic warning which will, somehow, still turn out to be of critical importance. So yeah."

"—IIIIIT!" somebody screamed. I winced and jerked the phone away from my ear. Sensitive hearing is awesome and all, but *ow*. "Winter could you get your ass down here, we—shit!"

Great. The masculine voice was irritatingly familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. "What's going on?"

In the background there was a sound of splintering wood, followed by another shouted expletive. "No time, man."

There, that did it. It was Robert, a werewolf I knew only very vaguely. He struck me as a solid fellow, though, and I liked him well enough. "Where and why?"

"Pack house," he said. "And hurry, we—" There was a crunching-crackling sort of sound, followed by silence.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I sighed. "Why me?" I said to no one in particular. "I mean, all I really want here is to go two months without a crisis of some sort. Just two months. I'd even be happy if they'd just come one at a time. Is that really so much to ask?"

"Actually," Legion chirped, "most of the time they *do* come one at a time. It's just that your crises come complete with a bunch of minor but irritating problems playing backup."

"Yeah," I said, glowering, "and you're one of them. So let's see. We've got an extremely suspicious phone call from someone I hardly know asking me to go somewhere across town posthaste without much of any logical support at all."

"Gee," Aiko said dryly. "A suspicious person might think that's a setup of some kind. And, wow, you have a bunch of sneaky types on your tail, don't you? Gosh."

Nah, Snowflake said confidently. They'd do a better job. They could at least fake Kyra's voice.

I grinned. "So what you're saying is, it's obviously a trap and can therefore be trusted? Nice logic there."

"Ah," Aiko said. "However, you have a well-justified reputation for paranoia. If they're sufficiently cunning, they could be counting on you saying that, whereas if someone you actually trusted were to call it would be a realistic threat, and therefore you wouldn't answer."

"True," I said sourly. "On the other hand, they *also* might be counting on us spending so long debating this that they get their opportunity while we stand around." I shook my head. "I say we move on it. Robert wouldn't call me without a good reason. And, if it was someone imitating him, I think I'd like to have a few words with him. Besides. It's not like we can stay here, is it?"

"Wonderful. Of course, there remains the little problem of getting past the Watchers out there," the kitsune pointed out. "Think you can stop them tracking you?"

"Not a chance. I don't know anything about that kind of magic."

She pursed her lips. "Okay, then. I guess we just have to get...*creative* about this."

I looked at the little wax model dubiously. "You sure about this?"

"Not at all," Aiko said brightly. "You gonna do it or not?"

I shrugged and nicked one palm with the knife. "Why not," I muttered, rolling the voodoo doll around in the blood that welled up almost instantly. Given that I was a variety of werewolf—and, like any intelligent person, I'd intentionally made the cut as shallow as possible—it took only half a second or so's worth of effort to seal it.

"Hair, too," Aiko reminded me.

I grunted and pulled a few from my head, tying them neatly around the model's waist. "Remind me, what good is this doing again?"

"Well," she said, "tracking spells are targeted with blood or hair, right?"

"Not necessarily, no. That's the simplest way of establishing the right kind of connection with somebody, but not the only one."

"Whatever," she said with admirable carelessness. "So, theoretically, it should point them right at this. Right?"

"Maybe," I said dubiously. "Except that there's, you know, a lot more blood in *me* than on that thing. And, um, I'd kinda like to keep it that way, if you don't mind. Not to cramp your style or anything, but...."

"That's why you're going to go all wolfy before we leave."

I blinked. "Gaining us...what?"

"Well," she said, "I don't know about the blood, but I can say from experience that your hair is significantly different when you're four-footed."

"Hey. I already get crap from Kyra, Snowflake, and Legion. I don't need it from you." I paused. "Will that really work?"

"Beats me," she said cheerily. "Aren't you supposed to be the magic guy?"

"True," I admitted. "Legion!"

"No need ta shout, Boss," he grouched. "I'm right here."

"Will it work?"

He did that shrugging-without-moving thing again. "Maybe. *If* Loony's right about how they're targeting you, and *if* they don't think to account for that trick, then it *might* work." He paused. "Of course, the wards will still prevent a standard-issue tracking spell from finding it."

"Oh. Crap." Aiko scowled. "I hate it when that happens. I mean, I had this wonderful, needlessly complicated plot going, and you just *had* to rain on my parade. Thanks a bunch."

"Actually," I said, "I think this might work." I skinned out of my shirt and tossed it into the corner. I don't like leaving clutter around the lab, but I was willing to make an exception under the circumstances.

"Really?"

"Absolutely," I confirmed. "Grab the duct tape, and that remote control car from the cabinet, and get ready to run."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

As she went to get the stuff, I dumped the rest of my clothes in the corner and started changing.

A werewolf doesn't change in the same way as a kitsune. When Aiko goes from human to fox, or vice versa, it happens faster than the human eye can track. If you weren't watching very, very closely, you could be forgiven for thinking that she simply vanished, and a representative of another species just happened to be standing where she had been.

Human shapeshifters do more work to accomplish the same kind of goal, but from the outside it looks the same to anyone but a mage. Kris, for example, takes almost a minute building up the magic to work the change, but it *activates* so fast she can start a dive as a hawk, and land on two feet.

Werewolves, on the other hand, get a version of the ability that has a few...drawbacks. It takes the average werewolf about fifteen minutes to change forms, for one thing. For another...well. You can probably guess, at least a little bit, how it feels to spend twenty minutes with bones breaking and shifting and reforming under your skin, muscles ripping loose and reattaching, and your whole body generally tearing itself apart before fitting back together in a new configuration.

If you ask me, the worst part is the joints. Not just because of the pain, although it is intense. No, the worst part is the sickly, gristly little noises the cartilage and stuff make. No matter how many times I hear it, it always makes me feel a little bit ill. Kind of strange, really, given that the rest of it doesn't bother me much anymore. In fact, I've come to see it as a really macabre kind of beautiful.

The thing to remember, though, is that I'm not exactly a werewolf. As far as I know, I'm not *exactly* anything. I'm a lot like a werewolf, enough so that I can pass for one even to supernatural entities. But, according to the utterly unreliable source which is a god of hunger and destruction, I've never actually *been* a werewolf at all.

In any case, there's a lot of admixture there. I have a good bit of human-style magic, for example, plus an unknown ancestry which might involve the Fenris Wolf and something related to cold and ice.

So, basically, what it comes down to is that I fall somewhere in between. Which is to say, it hurts me a *lot* more than Aiko to transform, but I can do it in less than five minutes when I want to badly enough. Accelerating the process takes a moderate amount of power, and makes the pain and intrusive feeling of *wrongness* more intense, but that's a reasonable trade-off under the right circumstances.

I was feeling pretty motivated. By the time Aiko had found the RC car and the tape, I was heaving myself back to four shaky feet.

The shocky, stabbing pains in my knees and ankles when I put weight on them were unpleasant. But, honestly, once you've experienced enough pain, it doesn't scare you so much anymore. It's like that one guy said. I'd experienced bad things before, and lived through them. This, too, would pass.

Ready? I asked Snowflake. One of the nice things about telepathic communication is that you can talk at the table without being rude. Plus, it doesn't matter what the configuration of your mouth is, which is also nice.

The dog yipped once and then turned to Aiko, who glowered at both of us. "For the record," she said grimly, "just because I was bragging about how absurd *my* plan was doesn't mean you were supposed to top it." Still glowering, she draped a heavy sack on my back and improvised a crude backpack with a handful of straps. I couldn't carry everything of value, but the pack would let me bring a handful of useful things, including a handful of knives and my armor.

Aiko checked that the pack was secure, glowered some more, and scooped the husky up into her arms. Snowflake's smart, and she's both tougher and stronger than she was any right to be. But, end of the day, she's still a husky, and I'm not even sure she's fully grown yet. She couldn't have weighed more than forty or, at the very most, fifty pounds. Now, Aiko's no werewolf, but she's still a good bit stronger than a human of her build should probably be. Fifty pounds wouldn't slow her down that much.

Let me tell you, though, they made a pretty funny picture. *Especially* when Aiko picked up the control-thingy to the remote car and shoved it into the crook of her arm next to Snowflake's head.

Like I said. That dog is entirely smarter than any normal animal. Smart enough, for example, to use a remote control with her mouth and paws. It helped that some time ago I'd taped a cheap camera to the car and rigged it to display on my phone, giving her at least some kind of view of what the thing was doing.

We gave the RC car about a minute head start, sending it straight away from where Aiko's car was parked. Then we bolted. Aiko spun a decently convincing illusion of invisibility around us as we went, which was pretty impressive that she was simultaneously sprinting flat-out and trying not to jostle the dog that she was carrying.

Snowflake, who didn't have to worry about running, was free to focus on controlling the decoy. Given that she was an avid huntress herself, I had no doubt that it would be running the Watchers a fine chase. A bunch of tight turns and narrow cracks followed by a storm drain was my guess.

Fortunately, we took only about forty seconds or so to get to the car. Aiko dumped Snowflake unceremoniously into the back, still directing that ridiculous car, and I scrambled in beside her.

I'd like to say that Aiko drove dangerously quickly on the way to the pack house, but I honestly can't. We took the Interstate, for obvious reasons, and you'd pretty much need one of those Formula One cars to stand out to any appreciable extent. So sure, she was doing eighty, but given that we were *still* getting passed I didn't feel too concerned.

It helped that, less than a minute after we started driving, Snowflake growled softly. *Looks like...shit*, she said to me. *Our decoy is now officially gone.*

Wow. They'd caught it in...less than three minutes? Wow. That was pretty good.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

About ten or twelve minutes later we had arrived in the classy, very expensive neighborhood near the Broadmoor. After another three or four minutes, and one wrong turn, we made our way down the narrow and ridiculously indirect road leading to the pack house.

I had, very obviously, missed the action. Three windows were broken that I could see, one on the second floor and two on the first. One of the lower level windows had a couch stuck halfway through it. The plain white curtains flapped in the breeze, and I found the sight strangely absurd.

Less amusing was the front door hanging open drunkenly from one hinge, and the easily visible bloodstains on it.

Aiko killed the engine, staring at the door. "Well," she said. "That's just flippin' great. What do you say, Fuzzball? We going in?"

I made the vague hunching motion that was as close as a werewolf in fur could come to humanlike shrugging, and whined affirmatively. You'd think that a quasi-lupine body would be a serious obstacle to communication, but with a little practice and some creativity it's a surprisingly easy barrier to overcome. Oh, it's not good for highly detailed or technical conversation, but as far as basic concepts go you can do all right.

"How'd I know," she muttered bitterly. "Can I borrow your sword, then? 'Cause I forgot to grab mine and, you know, you don't have any hands currently?" She opened the door—I could have got it, but claws and upholstery are a bad match—and we tumbled out onto the dirt.

I concentrated on my need for Tyrfing (and believe me, convincing yourself that you desperately require something you can't even *hold* at the moment takes a bit of practice). A moment later, a soft *thump* behind me announced that I had been successful.

Aiko picked up the ancient, heavily-cursed, probably-evil sword and bounced it in her hand a couple times. Then she quickly undid the clasp holding it in place and flicked the scabbard aside, almost like she wanted to do it fast before her nerve failed. Like a Band-Aid, right?

The kitsune grimaced, and for a moment the sword wavered in her grip. I knew why; Tyrfing's relentless thirst for blood and devastation catches you off guard, at first. Then her grasp firmed, and she took a couple practice swings. "Weight's a little off," she commented. "But I guess it'll work."

Being the most durable, I led the way inside, followed by Aiko and then Snowflake. Everything seemed quiet right now, but we were all on guard anyway.

I mean, come on. We've all seen horror movies.

The main room of the house, a big lounge-style operation, looked like a frigging war zone. There was furniture overturned, or broken in some cases, including that couch which was hanging half-in, half-out of the window.

Two werewolves were lying on the ground, apparently unconscious. One of them was Robert; he was bleeding from a shoulder wound which, while visually impressive, probably wouldn't be lethal to a werewolf. (Few things are, really; it has to be the kind of catastrophic damage that kills almost instantly, or the super-healing kicks in. Realistically speaking, the only ways to manage it in a fight are severe trauma to the central nervous system and opening multiple arteries.) Granted, he'd be pissed when he woke up and he might be sore for a while, but I didn't need to start planning the funeral yet. He had obviously been responsible for the blood on the door. It looked like a messy puncture wound of some kind.

The other was Enrico. He showed no obvious damage, but he wasn't moving either.

Kyra was standing over his unconscious body. She was holding his pistol in both hands, and breathing heavily.

The gun was pointed directly at the former cop's head.

Chapter Three

"Okay," Aiko said in the tone most often reserved for strange and unfriendly-looking dogs. "Wow. Is this a bad time?"

Kyra reacted instantly to the noise, throwing herself sideways. She didn't look all that impressive, but she was an Alpha werewolf who'd been involved in a number of my violent messes. She covered seven feet in the air, and rolled instantly to her feet with the gun aimed in our direction.

A moment later, the tension ran out of her like the power draining from an interrupted spell, and she lowered the gun. "Man," she said. "Am I glad to see you guys."

"What the hell happened here?" Aiko asked, proceeding further into the room. She didn't put the sword away, I noticed.

Kyra sighed and collapsed onto one of the intact couches, wincing slightly. "Beats the shit out of me," she said. "Enrico just went postal. Started trying to kill everything in sight."

"Enrico? You gotta be kidding me. He's, like, the goodiest-two-shoes we even *have*. I don't think he knows *how* to go crazy."

"I know, right?" Kyra said. "Some of the wolves, sure, I could see that. But he's never had any problems."

"Was there anyone else here?" Aiko asked.

Kyra shook her head. "No, just the three of us. Enrico was staying in the guest room. Said he didn't feel well. First thing I knew that there was anything wrong was when I heard Robert shouting something downstairs."

I started to get a sick little feeling in the pit of my stomach. Ignoring the ongoing conversation, I padded over and sniffed around Enrico's unconscious form.

The obvious scent was, no shit, werewolf. Physically a werewolf's scent is hard to distinguish from human when they're in human form, even for me. Magically, though, it's pretty obvious. Enrico's magic was stronger than the average human's, and smelled of classical werewolf, all musk and lavender. It was pretty much the most easily distinguished magical signature going, as far as I was concerned.

Underneath that was what I had just *known* I would find.

Magic. Magic that stank like bleach and anise.

Fortunately for me, that whole shtick about how you need precise gestures and Words of Power to control magic is, to be charitable, an inaccurate view. Most of the time chanting and waving your arms around has about the same relationship to getting serious magic done as a cheerleading squad

does on a football game. Granted they're occasionally a helpful concentration aid, but even that's more a matter of convenience and habit than anything else.

So no, I didn't need to transform before I could do anything. In fact, the hardest part of the process was getting Aiko and Kyra to be quiet so I could concentrate.

It was, needless to say, the same thing I'd encountered earlier. There was no sleep spell involved this time, but the curse of torment was exactly the same structure as what had been laid out on Abdul. I did a little better dealing with it this time, partially because of recent and very applicable experience, and mostly because I'm just a lot better at working with werewolves than pure humans. It's a matter of similarity, basically; to do witchcraft-style magic on somebody, you have to make a connection with them first.

Now, ideally, I'd be making that connection with a natural, predatory animal. That's the easiest thing for me to connect with, and therefore the easiest thing for me to affect magically. But werewolves are pretty close, close enough that I've been faking it most of my life.

It took me about fifteen minutes, all told, to degrade the spell to the point that it snapped. Then another ten minutes or so to revert to my normal, mostly-human-ish shape. I hate being unable to participate in an important conversation.

"Okay," Kyra said as I stood and grabbed some spare clothes from the dresser. No, they weren't mine, but everyone who changes shape on a regular basis and doesn't have the kind of magic it takes to bring inanimate objects along keeps extra clothing around. The cheap jeans and Wal-Mart quality T-shirt were both humorously large on me, and I really didn't need them anyway, but that wasn't the point. Aiko tossed me my cloak, which she'd folded into a single extremely dense shadow and stuffed into her pocket.

"So what was that all about?" Kyra asked. "You know what's going on?"

"Maybe," I said, sprawling on a beanbag. Snowflake promptly jumped up and stretched herself out across my lap. "Somebody put a curse on Enrico. Near as I can tell it served no purpose except causing pain." I frowned. "Although now that I think about it, the way he responded is a little odd. Maybe there was a secondary mental effect involved to amplify violent emotional reactions...."

"Wait, what?" Aiko broke in. "They *curse* him? *Why*? I mean, he's a great guy and all, but he's not that important. Who would go to that much effort just for that?"

"Heck if I know. Weirder is that I just ran into somebody else got slapped with the same thing. Some kid across town, nothing unusual about him at all that I could tell. Beats me what the connection is there."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Kyra sighed. "Is *nothing* ever simple with you?" she asked, tone somewhere between fondness and exasperation.

"Of course not," I said, pretending to be aggrieved. "I don't do simple, it's in my contract."

The really funny thing is that I wasn't, technically speaking, lying, or even kidding. Some weirdo actually did hire me to investigate a really strange case of littering (don't ask. Trust me, you *really* don't want to know the details) a few months back, and I actually did write into the contract that the situation would become more complicated than it seemed. Depressingly enough, I was right.

Outside, we all heard another car pull up. A moment later there were footsteps on the front stair, followed by someone knocking on the door.

"See?" I said as Aiko got up to let the Watchers in. "My mere *presence* makes things more complicated and irritating."

It was the same pair as before. As before, the short bald man led, and the gaunt woman in the cloak trailed after him like a spectacularly deadly puppy.

"Hello, all," he said in that same tone of meaningless joviality, and—I kid you not—actually *used* the hat stand next to the door, dropping his fedora on the top hook.

"What do you want?" I asked, not making any great effort at friendliness. I didn't miss the fact that the woman was still wearing her sword belt, and she made no move to leave it at the door.

He smiled tightly, beady black eyes glittering. "Just what we said, Mr. Wolf. We'd like to...have a *chat*."

"Yeah? We're talking, aren't we? So talk."

"We would prefer to speak privately," he said, still smiling.

"Really?" I said as sarcastically as possible. "Because I think this is a great setup." I showed him my own distinctly unfriendly smile, one that involved a whole lot of teeth. "I would prefer to speak with you right here, where people I trust can keep an eye on you."

The woman chuckled, an eerie little sound that once again reminded me more of a little girl than a psycho-killer. Now, don't get me wrong or anything; I've got nothing against little girls. But some things just aren't *right*. Her whole attitude was one of them.

The man's smile just tightened, infinitesimally, around the eyes. "Very well," he said, and the two of them advanced the rest of the way into the building. If they noticed the advanced disorder of the room, they didn't show it.

Both of them sat on the edge of a couch with the not-quite-relaxed posture of people who are ready to fight or run at a moment's notice. "We represent a certain organization," the man began carefully.

"I know," I interrupted. "The Conclave, right?"

To my surprise, it was the woman that responded. She laughed, the sound surprisingly deep, rich, and saner than anything I'd heard from her to that point. "Told you," she said to the man. Her voice, too, was deep, and it still had an odd, flat quality to it that wasn't much like anything I'd heard before. "He's not stupid."

The man glared at her. I looked from one to the other bemusedly, and realized that this whole thing had me confused as heck. "Fine," he muttered. "You were right." He pulled a leather wallet out of his vest pocket, removed a fiver, and handed it to her. She stuck it carelessly into an inner pocket of her cloak, smirking.

"Just to clarify," I said. "You *are* Watchers, correct?"

"My compatriot is," he said, genial mask in place again. "I do not, myself, belong to that particular order."

I did some quick mental arithmetic. He was a mage who wasn't a Watcher, but who *was* assigned to work with them. The *actual* Watcher was taciturn, openly armed, and neither of them was especially friendly.

I was guessing that made him a Guard. That, in turn, meant that I was in deep shit.

"So what do you want with me?" I asked bluntly. "I mean, don't get me wrong or anything, but you must have a lot of things on your plates. What are you doing here?"

It was again the Watcher that answered me. "We've been...concerned about you for some time now," she said carefully. "It recently became apparent that more direct action was necessary."

"Okay, sure, but *why*?" I said. "I just don't get what I've done that was *that* impressive."

"I can't believe you said that with a straight face," the male said, with barely-contained anger in his voice. Good to know there actually *was* something under that mask of meaningless banality. "Sitting practically on top of your latest victim."

I blinked. "Wait, what? What the hell are you people talking about? I haven't victimized *anyone*. Not recently, anyway."

"Really?" he said. "What do you call that, then?" He pointed past me to where Enrico was still lying on the floor in the corner.

"Some jackass hit him with a nasty curse," I said, confused. "I just took it off him. Look, could you just *explain* whatever it is you think I've done?"

"We've found more than a dozen instances of that curse in the past week," she said, still perfectly serene and still ready to go at me with sword or magic at a moment's notice. "All in people

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

directly connected to you. They have nothing else in common." She looked at me levelly, grey eyes sharp and cold. "Would you care to explain this?"

"A *dozen*?" I said, aghast. I imagined the harm that could result from something like that, and pretty much couldn't. "I had no idea...this is only the second one I've seen, both of them today. I don't know what's going on, but I swear to you that I'm not doing it."

She considered me for a moment, and I became aware that at some point in the last minute or so the man who had seemed like the boss earlier had been totally dismissed. "Doesn't matter. My assignment is to bring you back to my superior."

"And if I don't feel like coming with?"

She shrugged. "Bottom line, you're coming. You can do it easy, or you can do it hard. Worst case, I kill you and bring back the body."

"Really," Kyra drawled, interjecting herself into the conversation for the first time. She smiled, showing loads of teeth and essentially no humor. "I don't think so."

"You aren't capable of stopping us," the Watcher stated with that same eerie calm.

Her smile widened. "Maybe. Maybe not. But let's think about this one. Let's say you could take the three of us all together. Fine. What do you think happens next?" Kyra was grinning now, and there was a gleam in her eye that probably wasn't entirely healthy. "Because I think the Khan would have a few words for you."

"The Khan wouldn't act against the Conclave," the Guard said, sounding almost bored. "And without a legitimate grievance, the Pack would never support him."

"I have a grievance, all right," Kyra said, her voice friendly and all the more disturbing for it. "Or have you forgotten that you're on my territory." She leaned forward a little, voice dropping almost to a whisper. "Go ahead. Try it. Pick a fight in my house. See what happens."

The Watcher considered that for a moment, then nodded her head slightly. It reminded me, a little, of both a bow and a salute. I expected at least a sinister promise that they would see me again, but the two of them left without another word. I guess they didn't feel a need to reiterate what everybody already knew.

"You really think that was smart?" Aiko said once they'd driven off. I noticed idly that, at some point, she'd sheathed Tyrting again, which was pretty impressive considering how recalcitrant the sword could be when it hadn't spilled any blood.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, now you can guarantee they think you're the bad guy. Given that you're not supposed to kill them, don't you think it would make more sense to just go along with it?"

"Maybe," I admitted. "And at some point I'll probably have to. On the other hand, I don't really think I want to talk to their boss without a little more information about just what's going on here."

"Excuse me," Kyra interrupted. "But would somebody mind telling me who that was and what the hell's going on?"

"She was a Watcher," Aiko explained offhandedly. "Wizardy Gestapo, basically."

"Pretty sure the man was from the military branch," I added. "I'm guessing they're an assassination squad of some kind."

Kyra sighed. "Only you, Winter. I should be disgusted, but somehow I'm not even surprised."

Aiko snorted. "This is nothing. You should see what happens when he goes to a party."

"Oh come on," I said. "What are you complaining about? You didn't even get bruised when they threw us in prison."

Aiko opened her mouth to rejoinder, but Kyra cut her short. "Why is there an assassination squad after you?" she asked me, sounding perhaps somewhat plaintive. A perfectly reasonable reaction to any one of us, really, let alone all three.

"Honestly? Unless you count 'there is a God, and he's a sadist,' your guess is as good as mine at this point."

"Wonderful," she sighed. "You *do* have a plan, I hope?"

"Not really. I mean, I can't stay here indefinitely. Even if I could, I'd wager the Pack has an extradition deal of some kind set up with the Conclave, so...." I shrugged. "At this point, I think the first priority is information." I frowned. "I'd really like to get some equipment, too. I mean, I didn't exactly pack for a serious fight this morning. Going home is probably a really bad idea, though. You can bet that they have the whole area under surveillance." I sighed. "Wish I'd gotten around to replacing that shotgun."

Aiko grinned, this time the mischievous expression that usually means she just had a clever thought, and it's one that will almost certainly cause me problems. Although, in all fairness, it's usually also pretty entertaining, and I'm pretty far ahead on the "getting us in serious danger" measure. "Actually, that gives me an idea. We might be able to deal with a few problems at once."

"What is it?"

The kitsune shook her head vehemently. "No, no, no. Come on, Winter. The only way to successfully implement a plan is not to reveal any of the details ahead of time. Everybody knows that."

"Well, sure," I said reasonably. "But we only keep intelligence from the *enemy*, remember? Your *allies* not knowing what the plan is doesn't work quite as well."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"No, not *that*. It's...look, if everybody *knows* a plan, there's no suspense, right? So seeing it go off without a hitch doesn't provoke any excitement. Therefore, the only plans guaranteed to work are the ones that aren't discussed beforehand."

"Okay then," I said in the tone people adopt around crazy people. I hear it a lot, so I've actually gotten pretty good at it. "Sure. But, ah, that only applies to *fictional* people. Which, you might have noticed, we, um, aren't."

She held up one figure. "Aha! There's a flaw in your reasoning."

"What's that?"

"Loki."

I blinked. "You lost me."

She sighed. "Look. You know that there are at least two gods using you as a source of entertainment, right? Which, in turn, means that there's probably at least five more you don't know about. So to them, you're pretty much the star of your very own TV show."

I thought about it. "Except that they get to make edits."

"Exactly!" she said excitedly. "So, if they think it's getting boring, they aren't just going to change the channel. They're going to shake things up a bit, make it exciting again." She grinned. "So, logically, the thing for you to do is make sure they keep being entertained. That way they don't have a reason to screw with you some more."

"So," I said slowly, "even though I'm real, I should *act* like a fictional character, because if I amuse them enough they won't kill me?" I shook my head. "I'm not sure what I should be more worried about. That I'm dating a lunatic, or that you're actually making sense."

"Speak for yourself," Kyra muttered. "You two make my brain hurt."

"Doesn't this conversation go against that concept, though?" I said after a moment. "I mean, we just openly discussed our plan to defraud and manipulate them."

"No," she said patiently. "That's a long-term strategy rather than a specific tactic. Plus, this way they get their egos stroked. And by openly admitting it instead of actually scheming against the gods, we turn it all into a big joke and invoke their willing suspension of disbelief, rather than giving them a reason to nuke us."

I thought about it for a minute. "Okay, I'm going with Kyra on this one. My brain hurts."

Thirded, Snowflake muttered in the background. She was still sprawled, seemingly asleep, across my feet, but the dog seldom really stays out of a conversation. She's too fond of making jokes and sarcastic comments. It helps that Legion and I are the only ones who hear her without making a serious effort.

"Just trust me, then. It'll work."

"I'm still seeing one flaw, though," I said after another moment of thought. "I haven't made the thorough study of the subject you obviously have, but I *do* read. When the heroes need to have a plan go right, don't they usually just talk about it offscreen? So you tell me about it, and they can edit it out."

"Riiiiight," Aiko said skeptically. "You *really* trust Loki not to sneak a look backstage? Yeah, I thought so."

I sighed. "Fine. This one's your show."

She grinned again and stood up. "Great. Kyra, thanks a bunch and whatnot, but we need to be going."

Just when I was finally falling asleep, Snowflake said irritably, jumping to the floor.

"I get it that you don't think we should talk about what we're doing next," I said about fifteen minutes later. "But would it really be *that* bad to talk about what we're doing right now?"

"Driving," she said, shifting lanes with only the most cursory of glances behind us. I ignored it. You get used to that sort of behavior, spending time with Aiko. Besides which, there comes a point at which a car wreck just doesn't scare you very much anymore, and I'd spent most of the past year on the wrong side of it. At the moment, a nice stay at the hospital sounded like a relaxing vacation.

"I know that," I said, rolling my eyes. "But where are we going? And, more importantly, why?"

"Essentially?" she said. "It's impossible to track someone to the Otherside."

"Huh," I said thoughtfully. I hadn't heard that one before, but it made a lot of sense, considering the way the Otherside worked. "Couldn't we have just crossed over from Kyra's house?"

"No," she said testily. "We couldn't. Look, I'll explain later, but we're almost there, okay?"

"There" was, in this case, the kind of place which can charitably be referred to as nowhere special. It was a ways east and a little south of Kyra's place, in one of the moderately seedy neighborhoods near Fort Carson. To give you some sense of scale, the cars were all used and the signs involved a lot of Spanish, but most of the streetlights were intact and relatively few of the windows had bars.

The parking lot Aiko went with serviced a Mexican restaurant, a pawnshop, a laundry, and a handful of empty buildings. We didn't go in any of them, instead walking around to the alley in back. Snowflake trotted along behind me, not even pretending to be on a leash. Like me, she seldom really cared about other people's opinions except for when they affected her directly.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Aiko paused briefly once we were in the alley, seeming indecisive. Then she strode over to one of the back doors. The pawnshop's, if I wasn't mistaken. She closed her eyes for a moment, and I heard her mutter, "Perfect."

"Perfect for what?" I asked, glancing irritably over my shoulder.

"Look," she said, tracing her fingers over the surface of the door, her eyes still closed. "The Otherside is connected to this world, right? But it's not an absolute kind of thing. Like, if you want to go to the Fortress of Shadow, it's not just a matter of going to Skye and crossing from there."

"Okay," I said. "What's that have to do with this?"

"It's about ideas," she said. I felt a slow, steady buildup of magic, lightly scented with fox and cinnamon. "On the Otherside, the idea and the reality have a much closer relationship. Cross from Kyra's house, and you land somewhere similar on the Otherside. Given that we aren't looking for that, we had to go somewhere else first."

"Wait a second. What about that time we went to your uncle's party? I'm not seeing the connection between a random abandoned building outside town and the Dragon King's antechamber." As usual, I avoided referring to Ryujin by name. I'm reasonably confident he's not currently actively trying to kill me, but there's no sense taking chances.

"Yes," she said testily. "That was *Ryujin*. The more disparity there is between origin and destination, the more power it takes to bridge it. Bit of a qualitative difference between him and me, don't you think? Now hush, I need to concentrate."

The power she'd been building up stirred, intensifying and shifting. It felt strange, almost like shamanic magic on a surface level but very different in the specifics. Snowflake and I kept watch to either side, because what else were we supposed to do?

A minute went by without any obvious change, except that the scent of magic got progressively stronger. It was a pretty impressive reminder of what she really was, actually; that's a lot of magic to lay out all at once. Aiko, being only a one-tailed kitsune, doesn't have a phenomenal amount of power, and mostly what she does have she only uses for shapechanging and the occasional illusion. It's easy to forget that, with the right motivation and maybe a bit of practice, she's capable of quite a bit more.

After about three minutes of that, she said, "Hurry up, I can't hold this forever." The kitsune sounded strained, the way somebody might sound if they were trying to talk and also hold a barbell over their head.

When I looked at the door, I could see why. What had been a simple, metal delivery door, dented and somewhat dingy...wasn't. In its place was, as far as I could tell, nothing. Not a simple absence, mind you, but the active presence of nothing.

And yes. That makes my head hurt too.

I shrugged and stepped into the void. I mean, if Aiko was going to kill me, I'm pretty sure she'd have done it by now. Besides which, this was a pretty boring way to die, and that just wasn't her style.

Chapter Four

I'd only been to the Otherside once before, on that highly memorable jaunt to the party at Ryujin's palace. It hadn't exactly filled me with the urge to go back for weekend trips.

What I discovered this time was that there is a qualitative difference between portals. That one, established with the power of the Dragon King himself, had been incredibly smooth. It had literally felt like simply stepping across a threshold—you know, one second standing outside a small nondescript building, then being greeted in a palace of mind-boggling proportions.

Aiko, as it turned out, seriously wasn't kidding when she said there was a difference between that and the kind of portal she could make. When I stepped into it, I added a novel and exotic unpleasantness to my catalogue.

Imagine cold, the absolute-zero deep space kind of cold that could kill you in an instant. Imagine being put in a trash compactor. Imagine looking into the void between the stars, emptiness so vast and eternal and brutally uncaring that just imagining it is enough to make you shiver a little and look for a distraction. Imagine experiencing all of that at once, for just the tiniest fraction of a second. Then remind yourself that, as I didn't exist in the normal sense of the term, I wasn't actually feeling these things as sensations. It was just a single, distilled *experience*.

And then it was over. I was leaning heavily on a brick wall, panting, and felt like I was about to vomit, with no memory of how I'd gotten there. Snowflake, with predictable deviations due to anatomic differences, was doing pretty much the same thing near my ankles. Even Aiko looked pale and drawn.

"Damn," I muttered. "Is it always like that?"

"Pretty much," she said in a slightly raspy voice, sitting and leaning back against the wall. "Give me a minute to catch my breath."

While she recovered from the portal I took the chance to look around a bit. We were in an alley not too different from where we'd left, although there it had been around eight there and it felt like two in the morning where we were now. I wasn't sure *how* it felt like two in the morning, but it did.

There was no moon, or stars, or streetlights. In fact, there seemed to be next to no light at all; my night vision is better than human, but even so, Aiko and Snowflake were visible only as the vaguest of silhouettes. I only knew that the wall I was leaning on was brick by touch. The alley smelled funny, the way alleys sometimes do. It's a blend of stale urine, trash, vomit, and a special something all its own, which oddly enough doesn't seem to grow on me no matter how many times I encounter it.

"What is this place?" I asked.

"Well," Aiko said, sounding a little more like herself. "You know the seedy back alley, in a sleazy part of town, where shady characters like to hang out and it's rare you *don't* see a drug deal going down?"

"Sure."

"This is that." She hesitated. "Well, sort of. You know that every domain in the Otherside was built by someone, right? Well, at some point, somebody decided to make the ultimate sketchy neighborhood." She gestured vaguely around us. "This is what they got."

I glanced around. "Umm...not to cramp your style or anything, but are you *sure* this is the right place to be?"

She snorted and shoved herself to her feet. "Hell no. We aren't staying. This is just a layover." There was another, much smaller stirring of magic. It was hard to feel over the background power, which was much higher on the Otherside than what I was used to, but I've got pretty good senses for that kind of thing. A moment later there was a flicker of light, which then settled into a sort of sourceless, even illumination. It was a gentle but surprisingly intense red-gold light, illuminating a circle around ten feet across.

I'd have to learn that trick. I could work with light pretty well, but unless I'm using a preexisting light source it tends to be either anemic or blinding.

As it turned out the alley we were in was really narrow. Like, *really* narrow—I could easily have stood in the center and touched both walls. The bricks were red, with crumbling mortar, and there was a Dumpster nearby that looked like it had been vandalized so often they'd given up on keeping it either clean or locked. A classic, really. Everything had been graffitied heavily—not works of semi-rebellious art, mind you. No, this spray paint was a territorial display. They might as well have just pissed on the walls, really.

"I don't get it," I said, following Aiko past the Dumpster. "If we're going somewhere else, why stop in here? Wouldn't it make more sense to travel there directly?"

"Yes," she said patiently. "Except that you don't know jack shit about the Otherside. It's...look. The Otherside is connected to the mortal world, right? But not universally." She gestured vaguely about us. "This place? It's tightly connected, so close that if you get unlucky enough you can just walk down the wrong alley and wind up here instead. Makes it an easy place to start. Then, once you're actually *on* the Otherside, you can start moving toward where you really want to go."

"Oh." I frowned. "Maybe I should have started asking about this stuff earlier?"

She snorted. "You think?"

The alley led out onto a larger but not significantly nicer street. The concrete sidewalk was pitted and stained, while the street next to us was cracked and badly in need of cleaning. The buildings

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

we walked past were all brick, and they looked tired and beat down. The doors were all very secure, and the occasional window was barred or (more frequently) outright boarded over. There was a little more ambient light here, but it was still dark enough that I was grateful for Aiko's light.

I really had to hand it to this place's creator. I couldn't imagine a much better embodiment of the bad part of town than this place.

"There's something I should probably mention," Aiko said after about a minute and a half of walking past unchangingly dismal buildings and alleyways.

"I'm not going to like this, am I?"

"Yeah, probably not. Thing is, a place like this?" She gestured vaguely around us again. "Well, you can't have a dark alley without a mugger, can you?"

I sighed. "Great. Where are we going, anyway?"

"Somewhere I can use to get to the next stop. If I remember correctly, it should be about fifteen minutes' walk."

"Okay then. I'm guessing we can't expect to go that long without trouble?"

"You're good at this game."

I nodded. I'd expected as much.

I almost expected it not to work when I called Tyrfing, but the ancient weapon appeared in my hand exactly as if I hadn't left it an entirely different universe. Apparently a little thing like the barriers between worlds wouldn't cramp the sword's style much. I was almost disappointed.

I undid the clasp and casually flicked the scabbard aside. This was, believe it or not, a deliberate gesture on my part; it suggested that I was so eager to do violence I didn't worry about putting the weapon away afterward, which fit with the image I was trying to profess. And, on a more mundane level, it said I could afford to casually ruin a scabbard that was a work of art in its own right.

Both of these statements were, of course, total bullshit. The reality was that it was no harder to sheath Tyrfing if the scabbard were in another world than if it were on my belt, and it seemed to be as immune to damage and staining as the sword itself.

"Listen up!" I shouted in a carefully mocking voice. "We're just passing through. If you're smart, you'll stay put, and you'll still be alive when we leave. Anyone who doesn't like that idea, kindly come out now so I can kill you." I waved Tyrfing carelessly around. The blade, which was literally mirrored, shone strangely in Aiko's magical light. It was almost like firelight, now that I thought about it, except totally steady.

Aiko made a sort of choking sound, while Snowflake laughed inside my mind. "Crap," the kitsune said in a quiet and strangled voice. "Winter, that wasn't quite what I had in mind. No way they'll turn down a challenge like that."

"That was the idea," I said equally quietly, keeping my eyes on the darkness around us. "Get it out of the way now and scare the rest into keeping their heads down."

Let the abgefickt Spießler come, Snowflake agreed. She'd picked up the habit of swearing in German from Aiko, who claimed that the variety and creativity possible in their invective was vastly superior to English. And no, I'm not going to translate it for you; if you want to know that bad you can look it up yourself. Suffice it to say that it was insulting, obscene, and generally not a nice thing to say in any language. *I'll see how they taste.*

There was a sort of shuffling, scraping sound from one of the nearby alley mouths. And then...something...dragged itself into the light.

I can't really describe it very well. I mean, my normal method of describing things that don't fit very well into what humans normally experience is to compare them to saner things, right? Well, this thing doesn't compare very well. It was built a little like a quadrupedal gorilla, with gratuitously large claws tacked on, and sharp forward-curving horns. It had no hair, nor any obvious gender, nor did it appear to have eyes. Not too surprising, I supposed, if it were adapted to living in lightless alleys. Even things that live in terrestrial caves are often sightless.

Oh yeah, and it was better than ten feet tall, even hunched over so that its forelimbs dragged the ground. Gulp.

"Crap," Aiko said, sounding more resigned than anything. I remembered for the first time that she hadn't brought her armor, sword, or gun, leaving her essentially unarmed except for a tanto and her primarily nonviolent magic.

"Um," I said, staring up at the monstrous thing. "Uh. Oops?"

By way of answer it opened a mouth large enough to encapsulate my entire head without cramping, showing off an impressive number of teeth that looked very, very sharp. It roared, loud enough to be physically painful. Adding insult to injury, it spat all three of us with slaver. And, believe you me, the breath of the average alley-dwelling monstrosity is freaking *awful*.

Then, while all three of us were gulping and backpedaling (purely because it smelled so bad, of course), the gorilla charged us. I dove left. Snowflake dove right.

Aiko, to my profound horror, stood stock still, still facing the gorillathing with an expression of resigned disgust. It snatched her up in one massive claw-hand, rearing up to stand on its hind legs. It was absurdly tall, probably better than fifteen feet standing. I guess the square-cube ratio doesn't apply very strongly on the Otherside. I probably screamed something, but I don't honestly recall what it might have been.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

It roared again, right in her face. Then, while I was helpless to do anything but stare, it crushed her effortlessly in its hands. It tossed her broken body carelessly out of the circle of light.

I stared, unable to process what had just happened. It seemed unreal; I couldn't believe that she hadn't reacted. I knew I had to keep moving, had to do something, but I couldn't seem to actually *do* so, not even when the gorillathing rounded on me next.

On my own, I probably would have died right then and there, never managing to get my ass in gear.

Snowflake, as it turned out, had different ideas.

The husky launched herself effortlessly through the air. And I do mean that literally; she landed on *top* of the thing's head, ripping and tearing at it fearlessly. It roared again, spinning toward the source of this new pain.

Snowflake was stronger than a normal dog, but she was still basically just a dog. There was no realistic way she could hope to do enough damage to kill this thing. This, in turn, meant that if I didn't do something, she was about to die.

That thought, as it turned out, was enough to galvanize me to action.

It clipped her with a clumsy sideswipe, throwing her a dozen feet to the side. I heard her sudden sound of shock and pain both with my ears and my mind, and the bond between us was tight enough that I felt a flare of sympathetic agony in my own ribs. It didn't penetrate the shocky feeling in my head. If I'd been in a saner state of mind, seeing it deliver that kind of force behind its own head when it hadn't even hit her squarely would probably have made me feel afraid.

As it was, it just pissed me off.

Here's some free advice for aspiring villains out there. When attempting to drive the hero into a mindless rage by harming their friends, make sure you have a real solid plan for what to do if it works. This goes double for werewolves, who tend to have at least minor anger control issues at the best of times.

It goes triple for werewolves who are currently holding an ancient tool of destruction with few equals in the world, and who have previously demonstrated that their reactions in times of stress tend toward the extreme.

I can move really fast when I want to. By the time Snowflake hit the ground, out in the darkness, I'd covered the distance between me and the monstrosity, and it hadn't even fallen back onto all four limbs yet. I swept Tyrfin at its leg, never stopping, and caught the limb a little below its equivalent of a knee joint.

I was angry. I hit it hard, and Tyrfin's edge is sharper than any mortal weapon.

I kept going past it. Behind me it thumped back down on all fours—except that it only had three left. I'd cut clean through the rear-left limb. Which had to have been a little more than a foot thick. This, too, might have been a little unnerving at another time.

I turned to face it again, and I felt my face split into a grin so wide and feral it didn't feel sane even to me. The huge thing spun too, and I could practically see it wondering what had just happened. I was pretty sure nobody had *ever* hurt it that bad, and it hadn't even seen it coming—pun intended.

My grin spread further. "Come on," I called, almost in a sing-song, high on blood and fury. I'd experienced battle rage before, but my reaction to Aiko's death and the psychological effect of using Tyrfing in a fight spiraled into outright psychosis in that moment. I wanted to *hurt* this thing.

It charged again, awkward and ungainly on three feet. I laughed and spun aside, hacking another six inches off the wounded leg as it went past. Then, in the moment when I had a shot at its back, I went on the offensive, darting forward to bury Tyrfing in its back where the kidney would be on a human.

It caught me by surprise, kicking backward with its one remaining leg. The blow caught me square in the chest, and threw me back ten feet in the air, leaving the sword embedded in the gorillathing's back.

I hardly even noticed. The pain didn't even make an impact through the anger that was still building in me. I spun shadow and air into a pad beneath myself without even having to think, and used it and my own momentum to throw myself back into the ring of light.

I landed in an easy, graceful roll, calling Tyrfing to my hand once again with a thought. The touch of the sword's hilt brought with it a rush of silvery sensation, satisfaction and rage and a mad glee at the violence we would wreak upon this thing for daring to hurt her.

Either the gorillathing's other senses were incredibly acute or it actually did have eyes, because it had no difficulty orienting on me again. It lunged at me again, seemingly oblivious to the blood gushing out of its back and from its leg. This time I didn't dodge.

It lifted me into the air much as it had lifted Aiko. I grinned, staring right into its ugly face.

As it turned out, the horns offered somewhat more resistance than the leg had. It was like splitting stone.

I was *very* angry. Tyrfing barely slowed as it passed through the horn, or as I brought it back through the thing's freakishly huge wrist.

I dropped to the ground, of course, and immediately dodged sideways to avoid the crushing counterstrike that sent brand-new cracks through the concrete. It advanced on me again, and this time I gave ground before it, retreating almost to the edge of the light.

"Hey, stupid," I called. "Guess who you forgot?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

On cue, Snowflake hit it from behind. She'd taken a hint from me, and she went at its other leg rather than going for the kill.

She didn't hamstring it outright, alas. But she did do enough damage that, combined with all the beating it had taken to the rest of its limbs, it couldn't walk effectively. In fact, it couldn't even stand effectively, collapsing to the side. Snowflake darted out of the way just in time to avoid being crushed under a couple of tons of gorillathing.

I walked up to it, that storm of ice-cold rage still seething in my soul. Too stupid to recognize when it was beaten, it lashed out at me with its remaining forelimb. I dodged effortlessly and struck off that hand, too.

I stared down at the bleeding, mutilated, dying gorillathing, and felt...nothing. This wasn't *nearly* enough to satisfy the anger I was feeling. I wanted this monster to suffer, wanted it to fully realize its own utter impotence. I wanted to freeze its blood in its veins and rip it apart from the inside out. And, in that instant, I knew that I could, knew that I could visit brand new realms of horror on this thing's head.

And, worst of all, I recognized that nothing I could do to it would make things any better.

"Be grateful," I said quietly, looking down at it as it lay mewling on the asphalt, "that I still know what mercy is, at least." I gutted it, and then tossed Tyrfinng aside as I went to check on Snowflake. I felt something on my hand, and realized that I was crying. I had been for some time, probably.

"Wow," Aiko said. "Nice job."

I whipped my head around to stare at her. She was, impossibly, standing right there, tight to the wall, with her hands in her pockets.

I stammered something to the effect of "You're alive?"

"Obviously," she said dryly. "Come on, you didn't fall for that, did you?" She blinked. "Wow, you did. Hey, I've got a bridge to sell you."

I tried to ask about a dozen questions all at once, and eventually settled on, "How?"

She laughed. "Seriously, Winter. You didn't think I'd really just stand there and take it, did you?" She flicked her fingers, and with another subtle surge of magic there was another Aiko standing beside me.

"Those things are mostly blind anyway," the kitsune said casually. "Doesn't take a genius to dupe 'em."

I firmly believe that irony is trying to kill me. This is why I consider it both an insult and a personal attack that *another* of the things picked exactly that moment to come charging out of the dark alleyway. It was, if anything, even larger than the last one.

It rushed right past Aiko, going straight for me instead. It was impressively fast, and I was distracted. I dodged out of the way, but not nearly fast enough, and it caught me with a hellacious backhand to the face.

It hurt. A lot. I staggered drunkenly for a few steps and then hit the ground. I tried to stand, but was entirely too dizzy to manage it.

The gorillathing rounded on Aiko, only to find that the kitsune had disappeared. It seemed to sniff around, and I wasn't at all confident that it would be unable to find her. Besides which, if it couldn't, it would be coming after me next, and I was in no condition to deal with another of the things.

Fortunately, around that time my head cleared enough that I could do what should have been my first priority, which is to say *thinking*. And, lucid for the first time since the fight started, I noticed two things that the gorillathing really should have. The first was that Snowflake, too, seemed to have vanished.

The second was that Tyrfing was gone.

And about that time I saw how a kitsune on her home turf fights when she's playing for keeps.

She appeared about ten feet from the thing, charging it with Tyrfing in both hands like a baseball bat (a stupid way to hold a sword, and not one I would expect from her. Aiko has a lot more training and skill than I do when it comes to edged weapons.) Now, *I* could tell that it was an illusion—it was too *hollow*, as little sense as that makes. There was no sound when its feet struck the ground, it cast no shadow, it had no odor whatsoever—suffice to say that it wouldn't have fooled even a casual observer. Aiko, skilled and clever as she was, was still a very young kitsune, and I expect that under normal circumstances she couldn't even have convinced me that there was a "her" standing still when the real thing was moving, as she had at the start of the fight.

The key part to realize is that that isn't the important thing. Serious illusion magic is really, *really* hard. It was sort of her specialty, but it was still incredibly difficult, and that meant that it would never be perfect. A person under normal circumstances would be able to figure out that something was fishy within a second or so of observation.

But you have to have that second. Adrenaline is a great thing, but it doesn't lend itself well to detailed observation. Mix in sudden shock, a need for immediate reaction, strong instinctual urges to action, and all of a sudden it gets a lot harder to pick out the tiny discrepancies. Add in the fact that what you see is exactly what you expected, and it gets a lot less likely that you'll take the time to study it closely. When you have a serious sensory impairment, it becomes almost pathetically unlikely that you'll know what's real and what's a lie.

The thing spun, faster than something so huge should ever have been able to move, and swept those vicious claws across her face—except that in the same instant, the image faded as though it had never been. That happened twice more; the third time, Snowflake was running along beside the illusion.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

By that time, the monster had caught on, and didn't bother even trying to hit the illusion.

Except that, as you may have guessed, Snowflake was actually there. The dog sprinted past, inflicting only a glancing blow to the leg.

Then, while the gorillathing was distracted, the real Aiko appeared behind it. The first stroke, delivered with no warning whatsoever, hamstrung it, and it dropped to its knees. The second was a vicious two-handed diagonal slash from left to right.

Aiko wasn't as strong as a werewolf, so it didn't bisect the gorillathing. It must have done some serious damage, though, because it dropped like a puppet with its strings cut.

Aiko, wisely, doesn't believe in taking chances once a fight gets serious. She took its head off with another stroke, and then beheaded the other one.

"You okay?" she called to me, still holding Tyrfin and facing the black opening of the alley. Beside her, Snowflake was panting slightly. I could feel that, although she was in some pain, she was also very satisfied, exhilarated even.

I tried to sit up, with limited success. "Think a few ribs are cracked," I shouted back, wincing slightly. It must have been from when the first thing kicked me. Odd, that I hadn't felt it sooner.

If we stayed here, we would die. Therefore, I had to be able to move. I thought about this for a few moments, and then made a decision.

I am somewhat like a werewolf, and like all werewolves, I heal better than a human. More quickly, and more thoroughly. Like all werewolves, this ability doesn't prevent me from experiencing all the pain of any given injury, nor does it make me invincible. Not in any sense of the word.

Unlike most werewolves, though, I have a good bit of control over it. It's a matter of knowledge and training, more than anything, and it's something any werewolf could learn if they wanted to badly enough. You see, a werewolf's healing, like the superstrength and shapechanging, is a magical effect, not a strictly biological one.

What this means is that, if you approach it right, you can change the way it functions. By directing additional power to the healing process, for example, you can accelerate it. Of course, by doing so, you tire yourself faster and have less magic available for other purposes, but that's a fair trade when you *really* need to fix an injury.

Bone damage is hard to heal, though. A single broken bone can incapacitate a human for weeks or even months, and it might never heal completely. Even a werewolf can take weeks to heal broken bones. I could accelerate that a lot, but using normal means it would still take days, and it would leave me magically exhausted. That was bad.

So I cheated, by doing something that wasn't really very smart. I pulled out my pocketknife and nicked the skin of my left arm.

Blood is a potent substance, approached correctly. It's a matter of symbolism. If you ask somebody to pick a symbol of life and vitality, blood and breath are the most common choices. Vampires feed on blood, not saliva. This is not a coincidence. Granted there isn't much intrinsic *power* to it, but it's extremely symbolic.

This is important for, essentially, a different application of the same reason Aiko gave for why we had to travel away from Kyra's house to cross into the Otherside. What it boils down into is this: magic is hard.

As a mage, I can play games with the fundamental forces of the cosmos. Try and fit that on a business card. But, and this is important, *the fundamental forces of the cosmos do not like this*. Magic is a chaotic force, and it invariably resists any attempt to use it for a specific purpose. This is why, for the most part, the actual amount of energy you can muster isn't nearly as important as how effectively you use it. There's always a certain amount of energy loss due to inefficiency, but minimizing that is a big part of the difference between an amateur and an expert.

So the clearer of a symbol you have to organize your thoughts around, the better. Aiko had used an anonymous back door in an alleyway to symbolize an unsavory neighborhood; I used blood as a symbol of my own life. And, through that medium, I tapped that force and directed it.

In case you didn't guess this, draining your own life force is a very bad idea. It is also occasionally a useful one, because that kind of power is a lot easier to control and manipulate than pure magic. Low level usage of blood magic isn't as draining as the normal sort, although heavy or prolonged use can have some *very* nasty side effects.

In this case, I went with blood magic for two reasons. The first was that, even with my healing abilities, I would not be much good in a fight for the rest of the day at least. This, in turn, meant that my only recourse would be magic, and I figured it would be better to conserve my power for an emergency if at all possible. The second was that, due to a resonance in its essential nature and blah, blah, blah, as counterintuitive as it seems, blood magic is actually very good for healing.

I spent somewhere around five minutes on that, drawing no more power from my life than I had to. When I heaved myself to my feet after that, it still hurt a little to breathe, but I wasn't incapacitated. Go, team.

"You all right?"

"Good enough," I grunted. Then I raised my voice. "Okay," I shouted. "Who's next?"

There was an absence of movement and noise so pronounced it probably qualified as a presence all its own.

"Great," I said. "Where to?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Aiko stared at me for a second, then rolled her eyes and led the way down the sidewalk from nowhere to nowhere. She was still holding Tyrfing, I noticed, the oddly-lit blade gleaming in her hand. "Sorry about the delayed reaction back there," she said. "I didn't expect that level of crazy from you."

"I try to keep things fresh," I said lightly. "Nice work, by the way. I knew you were good with illusions, but I didn't know you were *that* good."

"We're on the Otherside," she said modestly. "Magic's easier here, especially my kind of magic. I *am* a native, remember?"

I did, though I seldom really thought about it. It was an easy thing to do—Aiko is more down-to-earth than most of the actual earthlings I've met.

Snowflake trotted up behind us, seeming totally unfazed by the whole thing. *They taste pretty much like chicken*, she said.

Chapter Five

As I'd intended, we encountered no further trouble in the world of the sleazy alley. When you see two huge gorillathings get taken down right in front of you without so much as seriously injuring *one* of their opponents, it tends to restructure your view of the local food chain pretty quick. That was the idea behind that challenge; sometimes demonstrating your willingness and ability to visit swift and blinding violence upon your enemies, with visual aids, is impressive enough that you don't have to do so again. Granted, I hadn't expected quite *that* nice of a demonstration of our prowess, but the theory was sound.

As we walked our surroundings slowly, steadily changed. It was still two in the morning, and I was pretty sure that in this place it would *always* be two in the morning. There started to be a bit more light, though, and things didn't look quite so dilapidated.

This shouldn't be taken to mean that it was any nicer of a place, though. It was just a different kind of bad. Think of it like the difference between moonshine and expensive whiskey. There's a pretty big difference on the surface, but they'll have more or less the same effect if you drink it.

So it was still a sleazy neighborhood, is what I'm saying. It was just a different flavor of sleaze. There was less evidence of vandalism, everything was in better upkeep, the alleys didn't look quite so foreboding, but all of that just served to suggest a higher-class form of corruption. We started walking past neon signs and doors that were actually meant to be opened. I didn't look closely at them. I was afraid I might see something.

Eventually, after about twenty minutes of walking at a casual pace, we had completely transitioned. Aiko eventually brought us to a halt outside of one of the buildings. This one had more neon than most, but was otherwise unidentifiable. Even standing outside I could hear the pounding bass of the dance music inside quite clearly.

She opened another portal. It felt pretty much exactly like the last one, although at least this time I knew what to expect. It seemed a little milder, too, left all of us a little less shaken. I was still out of breath and felt like I was about to hurl on the other end, though, so maybe not. (Incidentally, have you ever done the heaving-chest thing with injured ribs? It sucks.)

I looked around wonderingly. This place seemed like the polar opposite of the last one; the sky above was pure and perfect blue, the sun shining blindingly down on us from directly above. The structures around us looked like solid silver, although they didn't make me feel uncomfortable and twitchy the way that much actual silver would. They were impressive, though, most of them looking like massive obelisks that had to be more than thirty stories tall forming a ring about as big as a football field. We were right in the middle of it, standing on grass so lush and green it didn't even seem real. Through the gaps in the buildings I could see more buildings, all of them at least as huge and incredible-looking as those around us.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

This might seem odd, but the most striking difference to me was the smell. The last domain had smelled, to varying extents, like that first alley, a distinctly unsavory smell. Here it smelled like grass, rain, and fresh air. It was refreshing, and just breathing the air seemed to perk all three of us up a bit.

"Okay," I said. "I'll bite. Where are we now?"

"El Dorado," she said simply.

I blinked. "You've gotta be kidding me."

"Well," she amended, "that's what I call it. I don't know what the real name is. I try to stick to backwaters for layover spots. That way you don't have to worry about, say, stumbling onto the tengu's sacred mountain or something."

I don't think I can really describe walking through El Dorado. The buildings varied, but they were all beautiful. I saw at least a dozen architectural styles, ranging from the obelisks we entered near, through huge step pyramids, to modern skyscrapers. The buildings were made from an impressive variety of materials, too, gold and silver and bronze predominating. The streets, if you could even call them that, were either stone laid in patterns whose beauty would shame most mosaics, or more perfect grass. The whole place smelled wonderful, sometimes adding in an ocean breeze or the smell of flowering trees to the base I had first noticed.

Let me just put it this way. If I were to envision Heaven as a city, the result would probably be a lot like El Dorado.

After about fifteen minutes of strolling idly along the streets, we started seeing other...people, for lack of a better word. The first was a Sidhe, instantly recognizable by the pointed ears, slit-pupil eyes, and inhuman beauty. He ignored us with impressively haughty disdain, walking past going the other direction without even glancing in our direction. Snowflake made a rude comment, very quietly, but otherwise we returned the favor.

About that time we started walking through the more populous areas, apparently, because the streets were almost crowded. I saw three more Sidhe, two male and one female, involved in a quiet but very intense conversation of their own. A pair of trolls, the cheap-muscle of choice for the Sidhe Courts, stood flanking the entrance of a particularly fine tower made from highly polished marble, a huge black hound with glowing yellowish eyes standing beside each one. All four of them stood stock-still and stared out at the passing crowd with identical fixed glares on their ugly faces.

Most of the rest seemed more or less human, but some still stood out. Most interesting, if you ask me, was the cloaked figure ten feet tall and half as wide that moved so smoothly I was pretty sure whatever was under that cloak wasn't using feet, although it was so totally enveloped it was impossible to tell for sure. The only visible feature was a pair of eyes that literally burned with scarlet flame, but he, she, or it exuded magic more strongly than almost anyone I'd encountered before. People gave the whatever-it-was a wide berth, and it wasn't hard to see why. The power given off by the cloaked figure reeked of smoke, hot metal, and an endless expanse of desert.

"Wow," I said as we ducked aside into an alley between two silvery skyscrapers of titanic proportion. "This is a *backwater*?"

"It's not usually this busy," she admitted. "Looks like the Midnight Court is having an event. Ready for the next jump?"

"You're driving," I said dryly.

"I know," she said happily. "Okay, here we go."

This time the portal formed on the wall of the skyscraper next to us. This one was at least as bad as the first, and maybe even worse; take that list of comparisons I used, and add in that it sounded like screeching metal being played at...actually, I have no idea how many decibels. A lot, anyway. I never got clear on how that whole measurement scale works.

On the other side, we were standing in a pretty good match for where we'd just left, in an alleyway between two skyscrapers. I was, once again, half-collapsed against the wall about to be sick; it was becoming a distressingly familiar feeling.

It appeared to be late afternoon here, wherever here was. I was pretty sure it wasn't the Otherside; everywhere I'd been over there had a curiously *intense* quality to it that I hadn't ever encountered in my world, and this place didn't. It seemed pretty much like what I was accustomed to, right down to the sounds of traffic.

"Where'd we go this time?" I asked, shoving away from the wall to stand upright.

"Milan," she said succinctly.

"Oh, no way. You couldn't have just gone from Colorado to Italy in less than an hour."

"Technically," she said wryly, "we didn't. We lost, oh, about two hours at the first layover; that place always drains a little time."

"You mean this is seriously Milan?"

She smiled crookedly. "Sure, a little ways off the financial district."

"That is so awesome."

"Isn't it? Now come on, I've got somebody for you to meet. Oh, and let me do the talking; it's better if we don't sound like tourists."

She immediately strode down the alley with the ease of long familiarity. I had to hurry to catch up. "So...could we go anywhere like this, or what?"

"You can leave from pretty much anywhere," she said. "But you can only arrive somewhere you know really well." She hailed a taxi, giving the man directions in a fluid language I recognized not at all,

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

but which was presumably Italian. As per instructions, I kept my mouth shut. Snowflake, who apparently caused a bit of a problem with the cabby until Aiko said something appropriately placating, slept on the floor.

"I'm surprised you thought this far ahead," I said in a whisper carefully pitched to be inaudible to a normal human two feet away.

She glanced at me. "Think? In what way is thinking involved here?" she asked in a similar whisper.

"Well, you brought European money. That suggests some kind of thought."

"Oh," she said, nodding. "Right. Well, cabs are cheap around here."

"Really?"

"Yep," she said, grinning. "I figure once we apply the eight-legged discount, we won't have to pay much at all."

I stared. "You can't be serious."

She shrugged. "If you say so. I mean, I don't have any money and you don't speak Italian, but it's your call."

Damn, Snowflake commented, proving that she must have put a few points into feigning sleep the last time she leveled up. *I wish you could see your face right now.*

Your eyes aren't even open, I shot back sourly. *How would you know?*

When you get caught that flat-footed, your face is always worth seeing.

So, long story short, when it came time to pay we bolted. We didn't get caught, which isn't really saying all that much. When you have a kitsune and a mage who's skilled with shadows around, it isn't hard to go undetected. You don't even have to be sneaky. It didn't hurt that Aiko was obviously quite familiar with the area, knowing *exactly* which alleys to take.

"Okay," I said, once all the commotion had died down a bit. "That was needlessly exciting. What next?"

"Well," she said, picking her way fastidiously through the refuse in the alley, "you know I mentioned that I have friends in the black market? One of the best ones lives around here. I figure he might be able to get the information we need, and he can *definitely* hook you up with some new kit."

"Great," I said dryly. "What's it likely to cost me?"

"Ah," she said cheerfully. "Life would be terribly boring if it were easy all the time, you know?"

As it turned out, Aiko's contact lived in an upscale apartment building about a mile from where we ditched the cab, on the fifteenth floor. It used to be that being so high would make me nervous, but magic *does* have perks. Air magic was one of my few real talents, and while flight was far beyond my skills, I could at least keep myself safe while falling. Actually, like parachutists and the common housecat, I would be in *less* danger falling from a skyscraper (or an airplane, for that matter) than from a moderately tall building, because I would be certain to have enough time to react.

Aiko walked confidently to the corner apartment and pounded on the door. I could hear movement inside as she did, quiet enough that I doubt a human would have been aware of it. "Jacques!" the kitsune shouted, loudly enough that I winced a little. "I know you're in there. Open up!"

There was the sound of footsteps, slightly shambling, followed by a beady and bloodshot black eye glaring through the peephole. Jacques must have been satisfied by what he saw, because a moment later it vanished. I counted five different locks and two chains being disengaged before the door opened.

Jacques was...not pretty. His curly black hair was so disheveled I would not have been surprised to literally see rodents nesting in it, his eyes suggested a hardcore alcoholic coming off a week-long binge, and his unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt revealed a disturbing amount of chest hair and an impressive potbelly, which overlapped the waistband of his sweatpants. His feet were bare and—it being my role to notice the most inane of things—I saw that his toenails were yellowed, long, and jagged.

He also had on a scowl of the sort that, even on such an ugly face, I couldn't help but admire. I don't think even Alexander had matched that level of sheer belligerence. Not even over that thing with the acid, which I feel I should point out was totally not my fault, no matter what he claims. "Cupcake," he said with an equal amount of hostility in his voice. "What are you doing here? And who's the thug?"

I opened my mouth to answer, only for Aiko to cut me off. "This is my boyfriend Shrike," she said, glaring daggers at me. Only, you know, not literally. You know you're living the high life when you actually have to specify that. "And his good friend Spike." Snowflake growled, amused although not displaying it outwardly at all. Even as well as I knew her, and that was pretty damn well, I wouldn't have guessed if I couldn't feel her in my head.

"I see your sense of humor hasn't changed," Jacques said sourly. "Which is unsurprising, as it was exposed to copious amounts of gin during gestation. Speaking of which, there's an open bottle with my name on it, so if we could hurry this along...."

"I don't talk business in the hallway," Aiko said firmly, pushing past the man. Ballsy of her, really; I don't think I could have come that close to touching him.

Jacques sighed gustily, exposing me to a foulness of breath I'd previously thought only existed in canids and homeless people who don't even take the bottle out of the bag. He let her in without protest, though. I exchanged unsure glances with Snowflake, who was every bit as disgruntled as I was, then shrugged and followed. Jacques did up all the locks behind us.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Jacques's apartment was...pretty much exactly what you'd expect, actually. It smelled *bad*, like rotting food, mildew, and unwashed clothing, heaps of which could be seen lying around. It had two nice, big windows, but the yellow shades were drawn and all the lights were off, leaving the room gloomy enough that a normal human would likely have had a little trouble getting around. Especially with the junk and detritus lying around in piles on the floor.

"What do you want, Cupcake?" Jacques asked, collapsing on an overstuffed couch with a hideous paisley pattern and scratching his stomach.

Wonderful, Snowflake said, the thought carrying undertones of disgust such as I had seldom received from the dog. *This is not what I envisioned in a black marketeer. I'd ask if I could bite him, but I think he'd make me sick.*

Smart choice, I replied.

"Information and goods," Aiko said smoothly, all professionalism. I blinked; this was a side of her I hadn't seen. Usually she would have made, at the least, a sarcastic rejoinder or two first.

"Information first," Jacques said. The man grabbed a big glass bottle from a nearby table—I'd been hoping he was joking, but no, it really was open and waiting—and drank from it. Several seconds later he tossed it to the floor, belching. Snowflake winced a little, and I couldn't really blame her.

"Colorado Springs, Colorado," Aiko said, taking no apparent notice of the man's behavior. Or aroma. "A mind-affecting curse has been used on at least ten people in the past week. Conclave Watchers are involved. I want to know who's responsible, who's been affected, and what the Watchers are doing about it."

"When?" Jacques asked, taking another drink and scratching himself.

"Soonest. Dusk at the latest."

"Info like that won't come cheap," he commented. "Especially not in that time frame."

"I'm prepared to pay," Aiko said without batting an eye.

The black marketeer grunted. "And the goods?"

"I need a shotgun, at least," I chipped in.

"Model?"

"Don't care," I said. "Prefer a ten-gauge."

"You sure?" he asked, digging around in his couch and coming up with another bottle. This one was larger, and unopened. Jacques quickly changed that, chugging half of the contents before continuing, "Werewolf like you, that's a bit light, don't you think?"

I managed not to react to the fact that he knew I was a werewolf. It's possible to recognize a werewolf by both sight and smell, but not for the average human. "You have a better idea?" I asked.

He grunted again. "Got a line on a custom-model seven-gauge pump. German engineering, high spread, high power, variable choke. Recoil's a bit stiff, but I reckon a fellow like you can take it, eh?"

"Hard to find ammo chambered for a seven-gauge," I commented.

He grinned, showing off a bunch of rotten teeth and a few that were made of gold. "I can hook you up. Standard buckshot, birdshot, and slug rounds. You want to get fancy, I know a guy who does flechettes and specialty stuff, incendiaries and such."

"And you skim off the top."

His grin broadened. "How the business works, Shrike. You want it or not?"

"I'll think about it," I said in my best disinterested voice. I might not be an expert like Aiko, but I could haggle. "How about a pistol? Nine-millimeter or larger, semiautomatic."

"I can do you a nine or a forty-five by dusk," Jacques said immediately. "Nine's standard. Forty-five's custom, and I can get specialty and armor-piercing rounds for either."

"How about silver?"

He gave me a look of deep disgust. "Don't be ridiculous. Even mainstream companies can do that. I've got regular and enhanced silver in any chamber you can name."

"We'll take the shotgun and the forty-five," Aiko said decisively. "Plus standard ammunition. I'll need a few more of those grenades, too."

"How'd those work, Cupcake?"

"Not bad," she demurred. "Anything else, Shrike?"

"Do you have anything nonlethal that would work against a mage?"

Jacques frowned and scratched his face. "Might be able to work something."

"Do that," I told him. "I might also consider a few of the regular silver rounds. And maybe some incendiary, if your prices aren't obscene."

He chuckled and spat. On his own floor, no less. "Cupcake's buying," he said. "Don't see what business it is of yours. Anything for the doggie?"

"No," I said coldly. He laughed. No one else did, which didn't seem to bother him in the least.

"I expect you to have all of that ready by dusk," Aiko said. "Plus the information."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Jacques took another drink from his bottle. Whatever alcoholic concoction was in it, it smelled horrible and made my eyes water, which I guess is the mark of good liquor. "Don't you worry, Cupcake," he said, and for just an instant I could see the shadow of something cold and steely in his eyes. It made me respect him more, and like him even less. "I always fill the order."

"So," I said innocently. "Cupcake, eh?"

Aiko glared at me. "Shut up," she said, shutting the door to the apartment building behind us with maybe a little more force than was strictly necessary.

"That's okay," I said, ladling on the disingenuousness even thicker. "I've got nothing against sugary baked goods."

"I was a lot younger then, okay?"

"Hey, I understand. It's not like cupcakes are contenders for the title 'Most Disturbing Bird in the World' or something."

At least you got your own name, Snowflake sniffed. I got used as a prop for your joke.

"You realize that Spike was one of your suggestions for what I should put on your collar, right?" I asked aloud. Unless there are extenuating circumstances, I don't like communicating mentally with Snowflake while there are other people around. It makes me feel like I'm talking behind their backs.

That's different, she said haughtily.

"So what now?" I asked.

"I'm starving. How 'bout you?"

"Dinner does sound pretty nice," I admitted. "Or breakfast. Whatever. But it also sounds kinda problematic, don't you think?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well," I said dryly, "I don't know about you, but I hate legging it on a full stomach."

Aiko looked confused for a minute, then laughed. "Oh, you mean the money thing? Nah, I was just screwing with you. There should be an ATM around here somewhere."

I sighed. "Of course."

There are certain benefits to traveling with somebody who already knows the area. Aside from just the fact that I didn't speak the language, even. On my own I probably would have wound up in a

tourist trap functionally identical to every other such place in the city, if not the country or the world. Aiko, on the other hand, happened to know where to find a hole-in-the-wall restaurant in a quiet, residential district about as far from the main drag as it was possible to get. I was willing to bet it served just about exclusively local customers.

Aiko ordered, of course, on account of the whole Italian language thing. She also not only got Snowflake in the restaurant, she also got the dog a bowl of water and some raw sausage using the mighty power of shameless bribery.

"This is crazy," I said quietly while we waited for the food. "How many languages do you even *speak*?"

She frowned. "You know, I can't actually remember. Let's see...Japanese, English, Latin, German, Spanish, Italian, French, a bit of Greek and Arabic, decent with Esperanto...how many is that?"

"Actually, never mind." I spoke English. I'd tried learning Spanish in college, because I had to do a foreign language class. I remember how to say about a dozen phrases, and not much else.

Aiko laughed. "Don't feel bad. I pick up languages easily." She paused. "Also, I've got like twenty years on you. That helps."

And it's not like you make sense in any of them, Snowflake contributed.

"Still," I said. "This is...incredible. You do this often?"

"The traveling?" she asked. "Not as often as you'd think. You remember what I said about how you can only go somewhere you already know? Well, I wasn't kidding. There's only three places in Colorado Springs I can do safely."

I blinked. "But you've been living there for...how long, actually?"

"Almost ten years now," she said. "Still. I've got one place in Italy, two in Germany, and one in Spain, and that's all for Europe. Three in one city ain't bad." She shook her head. "It's a ton of work, too. And not the safest way to travel, as you may have noticed." She grinned, lapsing back into Italian as our server came back with food. "Of course," Aiko said, "there *are* certain advantages."

The food was good. And, honestly, that's about all I can say about it. It wasn't much like Italian food I'd had in the past; there was no pasta, for one thing, and nothing I could identify as a marinara sauce either. I didn't ask what I was eating; I was afraid Aiko might actually know, and nothing can ruin a meal faster than finding out what it actually is. For example, when I ate raw fish eggs for the first time as a kid, I didn't find out what they actually were until after the meal, and I *still* practically threw up.

After the meal there wasn't really much to do. It would be several hours before Jacques had the stuff, and it wasn't exactly like we could come back later after we went and did other things. If nothing else, it was pretty unlikely that the Watchers would be expecting me to be in Italy, which made this as good a time as any to relax a bit before jumping back into the frying pan.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

So we spent the time seeing the sights. The park system was particularly nice. Aiko, as a fox, and Snowflake both napped in the sun for a while in a corner of the park. Strangely, despite the length of time I'd been up and all the things I'd been doing, I felt no need for sleep, and wandered around instead. After they woke up we walked around, Aiko pointing out noteworthy landmarks, most of which I was pretty sure no tour book would mention. Snowflake ate a pair of squirrels and a Chihuahua, and Aiko stole candy from a baby.

And then, alas, it was time to get back to the business of not getting killed horribly. A shame, I know, but occasionally necessary.

"How sure are you about this guy?" I asked while we were going up the stairs.

"Jacques?" Aiko said. "He's good at what he does."

"He seems a bit...sketchy."

She laughed. "It's a front. I'm not saying he isn't a hard-drinking womanizer, but he gets the job done."

"I'm just a little leery, I guess."

"That's smart. Don't get me wrong, Winter, he's an old friend and all, but the man's still a scumbag."

"And his personal hygiene is appalling," I agreed. "Honestly, I'm shocked this whole freaking building doesn't stink."

Aiko laughed again. "Yeah, Jacques won't be winning any fashion awards, that's for sure. Before you ask, though, you don't have to be worried about the alcohol. I once saw him drink three werewolves under the table in a row. One bottle of gin isn't going to do much of anything to him."

I blinked. Werewolves are very efficient at processing alcohol, so much so that I've only actually gotten really drunk once in my whole life. The results were ugly enough that I've never been tempted to try it again, but it took almost three hours of serious drinking and involved five kinds of hard liquor. I wasn't sure quite how much of an alcohol intake outdrinking three werewolves would involve, but it sure wasn't something I would expect even the hardest of human alcoholics to pull off.

Jacques was, if anything, even slower answering the door this time. "You call this dusk?" he asked sourly as soon as the door was open. "I can still see the sun, Cupcake. Dusk it ain't."

"That's fine," Aiko said compassionately. "If you aren't ready yet, we can wait. Right here. Staring at you."

The black marketeer snorted. "Fuck you, Cupcake."

"Not even with a gondola pole," the kitsune said amiably. "You have the goods or not?"

"Luckily for you, I'm the best dealer this side of Sicily. Come on in."

Jacques had, fortunately, finished his bottle of booze. Unfortunately, he had apparently decided to move right on to a jug of rum the size of my head. And yes, he drank straight from the bottle.

He had, however, swept the table clear—literally, I mean; the stuff that had been on it (mostly empty bottles and dirty dishes, as if you had to ask) was heaped haphazardly on the floor, adding to the crust of old food on the carpet.

In its place was, apparently, the shotgun we were purchasing. It was pretty impressive looking, I must admit. I didn't know enough about it to recognize the make or model—although, from what Jacques had said, I was pretty sure it wasn't the kind of thing that would show up in any catalogs anyway—but it had the sleek black look common to a lot of military and pseudo-military weapons. The whole thing looked to be made of metal, presumably anodized or something to give it that black color. Directly under the table a number of anonymous cardboard boxes likely held ammunition.

"Pick it up," Jacques suggested, collapsing once again onto his couch.

I did so, hefting it and then sighting along it. I was pretty sure it wasn't loaded, but I didn't point it at anything I liked anyway, because I'm not a moron. "Heavy," I commented. It was, too, a lot weightier than the ten-gauge I was used to.

"Maybe so," he allowed, "but the thing's damn near to bombproof."

"Pump action, right?"

"Yep. Seven round magazine. The feeding mechanism's solid, too; take a hell of a lot to interfere with it."

That was a good sales point, and something I hadn't considered before. I probably should have, though; given that one of my primary weapons had a major entropy curse on it, it was the kind of thing I should probably start taking into account. Automatic weapons and Tyrfing were an...*exciting* combination.

"And the pistol?" Aiko asked suddenly.

Jacques grinned and shoved one hand into a crack in the couch. A moment later he pulled it out, holding an oversized handgun. "Here you go," he said, laying it down on the table with a sharp *click*.

It was either the same designer as the shotgun or a pretty damn good impression thereof. It, too, was black, metallic, and heavier than I would have expected. "This is really a forty-five?" I asked, turning it over in my hands. It seemed a little large.

"Yep. Custom design, though; don't try firing mainline rounds out of it unless you feel like one lucky punk."

Great. Another wiseass, just what I needed.

"Okay," Aiko said briskly, leaning forward slightly. "Enough with the weapon ogling. Time to move on to the info."

"Fine with me," Jacques replied. "First off, I couldn't get everything you asked for. The Watchers are treating this like some serious shit."

"Less complaining, more answers."

"Okay, okay. Jeez, Cupcake, I'm just trying to help. Okay." He cleared his throat. "Five days ago, Watchers responded to a reported curse in Manitou Springs, Colorado. Said curse was found to be an exceptionally malicious pain spell operating on a mental level. Human magical signatures were detected, and the Watchers therefore claimed immediate jurisdiction under the provision of—"

"Skip it," I suggested.

He shrugged. "You're paying. Anyway, they start looking around, and find another two incidents of the same curse. Apparently that's where they draw the line, because about that time they started taking it seriously." He paused to take a swig of rum. "So the Watchers sent it up the chain. I don't know what orders came back down—my guy on the inside says this is some high-level stuff, straight from the top and all hush-hush. He couldn't get me anything specific. They assigned three Watchers to the issue, top-level operators and such. Dunno who. Not local operatives, though, or not entirely; he said he had to arrange transportation for some of them."

"You got anything on their orders?" Aiko asked.

He snorted. "Shit, Cupcake. Thought I just got through telling you I don't. I can tell you it's a big fucking deal, though; Watchers are big on the internal secrecy, but my source can usually get *something*, and this time he's got nothing for me. Don't know who they're pinning this one on, either. Last my guy heard the investigation was still open, but if they don't get it soon my money says they pick some schmuck to pin it on. The Watchers are in a hard place; they really need a win right now."

Wow. Either he was lying his head off, or this whole situation was starting to smell pretty fishy. He hadn't mentioned the Guard involvement, for one thing, or the fact that they seemed pretty confident they knew *exactly* what had happened. That, combined with the fact that nobody seemed really clear what was going on, made me wonder whether this was really as aboveboard as they wanted me to think.

"Okay. Victims?"

He grinned and pulled a few, surprisingly unstained sheets of paper out of his shirt pocket. "Now that, I can do." He handed it to Aiko, who glanced at the top page and then shoved the papers into her own pocket. I didn't look; from what the Watcher had said I was likely to know a few names on that list,

and the *last* thing I wanted was to have some kind of breakdown here. "Got that from the Watchers' list," Jacques said. "And a few other places."

"All right," Aiko said. "That's two of three. Who did it?"

Jacques snorted. "What the hell you think I am Cupcake, a fucking miracle worker? You didn't give me anything like enough time to have an investigation done. Watchers don't know shit that I can tell. Who else you think I'm gonna ask, huh?" He shook his head. "Can't help you on that. Give me a day or so to come up with something, maybe, but I can't promise anything."

She sighed. "Fine. Grenades?"

The black marketeer grinned wider, and handed over a heavy-duty plastic case. The kitsune flipped it open and glanced it over cursorily before snapping it closed again.

"About that last thing. I couldn't come up with anything reliable against mages."

"Nothing?" I said, disappointed.

"Well," Jacques hedged, "I wouldn't say *nothing*. Flashbangs might work, but then you have a blind, deaf, and disoriented mage who knows he's under attack but doesn't know much else."

Visions of craters and burning buildings filled my mind, and I shuddered a little. "No thanks. Anything else?"

"Taser," he said simply. "But, obviously, that's only good for a limited range of targets. Witches aren't going to be inconvenienced. Neither will any druids, wizards, or sorcerers with an electricity kick. Might as well hand them the gun and get it over with faster." He shrugged. "Or you can go with a fast-acting tranquilizer delivered with a scoped rifle. That's probably the best I got."

I frowned. "Limited usage, though. Can't think of very many situations where I'd get the chance to use it. And a witch could beat that, too."

"I know," he said dryly. "Think of a better idea, feel free to tell me and I'll sell it to you. Otherwise, that's what I have. Mages have so much variation in abilities, you really have to plan to the individual."

I nodded glumly. It wasn't a surprise, exactly, but I'd been hoping he could give me a silver bullet of some kind. As it was, I was supposed to come up with a specific counter to their abilities when I had no idea what their abilities were.

"Well," Aiko said briskly. "I think that settles everything except price."

"Seventy thousand dollars," Jacques said immediately.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"I'm sorry," Aiko said, "I don't think I heard that right. I mean, obviously somebody who didn't even have the most important part of what we were buying wouldn't dream of asking that much. Clearly you actually said *seven* thousand dollars."

"Seven? Please. Those grenades alone are worth ten. I couldn't possibly go lower than fifty grand."

"I could get better grenades than this for five," the kitsune sniffed. "Twelve."

"I get it, Cupcake. You want me to starve. That's what this is about. Forty-five."

"Oh come on, you drink your meals anyway. And look at this scratch. I'd be doing you a favor to take this crap off your hands. Twenty-five-kay, and that's my final offer."

"Twenty-seven, and you tell me what sanctions your people have planned against the Khan for dicking you around with this publicity business," Jacques shot back immediately.

"Deal. The money and the info will be wired within the week."

They shook on it, while Snowflake and I hung back at the edges and hoped that nobody looked our way. I swallowed, and tried not to be too obvious about it. I couldn't afford twenty-seven thousand dollars that casually on the best day I ever had. I was kind of surprised that she could afford it, actually; I'd never quite gotten clear on what Aiko did for a living, but she didn't live in a way I would associate with someone who could throw money around that casually.

I mean, seriously. She hangs out with *me*. That's a pretty good hint, right there.

"So. Since when do you have that kind of cash?" I was currently carrying quite a lot of brand-new, highly illegal equipment. Fortunately, it was for exactly this kind of circumstance that I designed my cloak of shadow; it was currently in the form of a grey-black trench coat of indeterminate material, and doing an admirable job of concealing the gear. It weighed a good bit, but there *are* some perks to being a werewolf. Or werewolfish, at any rate. I'm actually considering inventing a name for whatever it is I actually am, just so I don't have to do that whole "almost, but not quite" routine when I introduce myself. It gets old fast.

"Maybe I'm planning to foist the bill on you," Aiko said lightly, casually leaping down the first flight of stairs and landing in a roll. It was, of course, a beautifully executed maneuver; she doesn't have my raw strength or speed, but she's graceful beyond words when she chooses to show it, and agile. It helps that she has the physical condition of a highly athletic teenager combined with the experience of five decades of life; that's the kind of mix that makes Olympic gymnasts green with envy.

Snowflake and I followed, albeit rather more sedately. "No," I said. "You aren't that dumb. I could sell my house and take out a loan and still not be worth that much."

"Maybe I'll just default on it, then."

"You're not that stupid either," I said wryly. "You wouldn't lose one of your favorite contacts for that little. Besides, somebody with that kind of black market connections probably knows a good assassin."

She laughed, but otherwise refrained from comment until we were out of the building. "All right," she said. "You've got me. I'm going to pay." She shrugged carelessly, meandering aimlessly down an alley. That was one of her more curious personality quirks that I'd noticed; unless she specifically needs to, Aiko almost never uses main streets. I have no idea why. "It's not a big deal, Winter. The money...it doesn't really matter to me, you know? So," she continued before I could respond. "What next?"

"Well," I said slowly, "I guess the first thing is to go over that list. Maybe we'll see something they didn't." Which I really, really didn't want to do, but that didn't really have any bearing on the situation. My not knowing about it wouldn't make things better for anyone.

Aiko looked like she'd just bit into a lime. Not one of those wimpy things, mind you, but a real key lime. Which is to say that she looked about as happy as I felt. "Right," she said. She led the way back to the park we'd visited earlier, I think as much to put it off as anything. We sat on a park bench and she handed me the stack of papers. Snowflake was, of course, draped over my feet like a furry blanket.

The top page was just a list of names, in alphabetic order. It had a curiously anonymous feel to it, almost sterile in a way. Simple typeface, no distinguishing features, no heading nor anything to indicate who the people were nor who had written it. If you didn't know better it could be a mailing list.

I knew better, of course, and as a result I was not happy reading that list. It didn't help that, as the Watcher had indicated, I knew just about every name on it.

Enrico Rossi, obviously. Anna Rossi was on the list too, which was almost worse; Enrico had at least chosen to get involved in my world. Abdullah Ali, who was—provided that this guy didn't just have a real thing against people named Abdul, which with my luck was entirely possible—the kid I'd seen first. Rachel Brown, an empath I knew from Pryce's who was, if not a good friend, at least a consistent acquaintance. Erica Reilly's name came as something of a comfort; if they were going to hurt people, I couldn't really think of a better victim than Erica. Katie Schmidt. James Frazier, better known as Jimmy. Sergio Hernandez, who owned and operated a Mexican restaurant I'd been eating at since it was a truck on the side of the road. Luna Kuzmak, a shady character who spent a lot of time hanging around Pryce's and to whom I'd sold a few magical trinkets. She wasn't a serious mage, and she wasn't a player on Jacques's level, but she was clever and she knew quite a few tricks.

Then there were a few names I didn't know as well. Jasmine A. G. U. A. Rosacea (yes, she actually changed her name to that, and no, I can never remember what all the initials stand for), who had been Kyra's neighbor when she was just a waitress living in a Manitou Springs apartment. I never spent that much time around her, but my memory suggested an aging hippie, slightly portly, with a

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

passion for gardening and an inexplicable fondness for fortune cookies. Michael Sutcliffe, the bartender at the Full Moon who I'd kept from being shot a while back. Keegan Lynch, who'd been my best friend's roommate at college right up until I'd had to kill said friend. I hadn't even realized Keegan was still living in Colorado Springs, but we were pretty good friends up until I killed his sister Catherine.

We kind of fell out after that. I mean, once I'd killed most of the people we were both friends with, it got to be kind of hard to hang out with the guy.

I frowned and pointed at the last name on the list, Dr. Llewellyn Witt, which (in addition to being either unpronounceable or just begging for cheap puns, depending on which name you looked at) was totally unfamiliar to me. "Who's that guy?" I asked aloud.

The doctor at Memorial, Snowflake supplied. Older guy, had your sorry ass as a patient a few times?

"Oh. Wait a second, how do *you* know that?"

I visited you in the hospital once, the husky said, sounding—well, not really, but you know what I mean and you have to stretch the language a bit if you deal with this kind of crap on a regular basis—almost embarrassed. He didn't think to keep me from seeing his computer. I can probably still remember his login information, if you want.

I stared for a moment and then shook my head. "Wow. You're...kind of scary. You know that, right?"

Thanks.

I relayed her information to Aiko and then stared at the list some more. I'd been trying to avoid thinking about it, but now that I didn't have something else to distract myself with it really started sinking in.

Thirteen people. *Thirteen*. Slapped in the face with a literal, for-real torture spell, and for what? Because they happened to know me? I hadn't even *seen* some of those people in years.

I couldn't believe it, didn't want to believe it, but I couldn't come up with another answer. Oh, some of them, sure—Luna and Jimmy, for example, had both certainly involved themselves in shady dealings to a sufficient extent that I could see somebody going after them. But Jasmine? Sergio? Or, even worse, Anna. I mean, I knew the rest of them, but I *liked* Anna.

And about then is when the guilt started. Not so much because they'd seemingly been targeted just for knowing me, although that was a definite part of it. No, for me the biggest factor was that it had taken me so long to find out about it. Some jackass had been torturing my associates and friends, and I hadn't even *known* about it for over a week, until after somebody else had reported it. Worse yet, even then I only learned it because they thought *I* was responsible.

That was a pretty heavy kick in the teeth. I didn't have even a clue what to do about it, either; that might have been the worst part. It's part of how I think, basically, and a pretty common pattern for werewolves. When something causes me pain, and especially when it does so by hurting someone I care about, my immediate and instinctive impulse is to lash out with violence.

My reaction to Aiko's apparent death is a textbook example, actually. An instant of shock while the reality penetrated, then it triggered a violent response so instinctual and overblown that it overwhelmed rational thought, and quite likely qualified as a psychosis in itself. Given the option, I would gladly be doing the same thing this time, although I couldn't guarantee I would restrain myself from killing this particular fellow in a cruel and unusual fashion as I had briefly considered doing to the gorillathing. Mugging somebody's one thing, but agony curses...a quick death really does seem to be too good for some people, y'know?

Anyways, the important thing is that, without any idea who I should target for my revenge or how to go about it, that response was impossible. It left me struggling to express my feelings, which sounds like something you would see on Dr. Phil or something but really is the best way I can think of to phrase it.

Aiko gently took the stack of papers from me, not saying anything, and flipped through them. The rest of the pages seemed to contain dossiers on each of the people named in the list. It occurred to me that she wouldn't even know most of those names, and after this long I might not even recognize several of them. Somehow that struck me as absurd, and I found myself giggling a little.

I let Aiko read, focusing instead on scratching Snowflake's ears. It was something to do with my hands while I waited, and the husky insists it isn't possible to scratch her ears too much. The kitsune took her time, reading through each entry carefully without speaking. When she got to the end she flipped it back to the second page and handed it back to me.

I glanced at the page she'd opened it to. It was the dossier on one Abdullah Ali, age seventeen. Jacques had even obtained a photo to include, maybe a yearbook photograph, which made it clear that this was indeed the same Abdul I'd met. Most of the information was pretty standard. Abdul was apparently a good student; his high school record looked almost as good as the one Conn had had forged to get me into a decent school. His GPA was 3.87, and he was involved in half a dozen or so service and volunteer organizations.

Aiko reached over and tapped one vivid green fingernail on the third paragraph. I read it over again, then looked up at her. "What?"

"Julia Parr is his girlfriend," she said in that special tone of voice reserved for pointing out the obvious to the mentally impaired.

"I wouldn't have expected you to make a big deal out of a mixed-race relationship," I said lightly. "Should I know who this person is?"

"Julia Parr?" she repeated. "You know, the girl Aubrey's been mooning over for months now?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Oh." It seemed a little weird at first, but I supposed it made a certain amount of sense. Aubrey couldn't be more than nineteen himself, so the age difference wouldn't necessarily be disturbingly large in either direction. It was easy to forget that; he was so reserved that he seemed decades older much of the time, especially to someone like me who was used to dealing with ageless beings. I mean, Conn looks even younger than me, and he mentions events seven centuries past as casually as I talk about last week.

"Think it's connected?"

Gosh, Snowflake said caustically, twitching her tail. Mental human magic being used to hurt people. The only target you hadn't at least met before was this girl's boyfriend. Aubrey's obsessed with her. He's a human witch with a flair for the mental stuff. Why would I ever think that there's a connection?

Aiko echoed the dog almost word for word, which was pretty amusing. Not surprising, given that they're both sarcastic wiseasses, but amusing.

"Okay," I said, laughing. "It's someplace to start, at any rate."

Do we even care? It sounds like the Watchers have this one under control.

"Yeah, I'd like to just walk away," I said in answer to Snowflake's question. "But that isn't a long-term solution. I mean, unless I can prove that this wasn't me, they're going to be keeping after me. That isn't a good idea."

Aiko sighed. "Nothing's ever simple when you're around, you know that? So where next?"

"I dunno. What are the options?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Well, it looks like Aubrey is the next step, which means Colorado. You said you had three places there we could go, right?"

"Oh," she said, understanding dawning on her face. "Right. Well...I can reliably do a parking lot on the west side, that park down the road from your house, and the Home Depot at Southgate."

I blinked. "Wait, what? Why Home Depot?"

She coughed. "It makes it a lot easier to skip out on work."

"You work at a *hardware store*?" I asked, incredulous.

"Occasionally," she said, shrugging. "Honestly, I'm not sure why I still have a job there, I spend so little time actually working. I think mostly it's that my boss cares about his job even less than I do."

"That's fascinating," I said dryly, "but I was more wondering how you have thirty grand to spare on that kind of paycheck."

"Oh," she said. "That. It's my family, really. I try not to take their money, but it's there if I need it. So which will it be?"

I mulled it over for a moment. "When you say park, what do you mean?"

"That place just down the road? Think it's called Red Rock Park or something? There used to be a pretty big quarry in there? That's where."

I frowned. "I thought there was a canyon in the name?"

"What, like Red Canyon? Nah, that doesn't sound right."

"Maybe it's Rock Canyon."

"That's a moronic name," she said acerbically. "Besides, I really thought there was a red in there somewhere."

It's called the Red Rock Canyon Open Space, you imbeciles.

I coughed self-consciously. "Oh. Anyways, I think that's the best place."

"Cool. What's up when we get there?"

"You remember that spiel you had about detailing a plan before you put it in motion?"

"Hey!" she said hotly. "You can't use the same excuse twice in a row!"

I chuckled. "Gotcha. Anyways, here's the plan...."

Chapter Six

As it turned out, the return trip was a bit more complicated than our path to Milan. Less dangerous, but more complicated.

I'm not sure why, but I had somehow thought that we would simply retrace our steps, at least a little. We didn't. Instead Aiko led us through the park to what would have been a pleasantly shady nook near a fountain in the daytime. After dark, it was a little spooky, the trees blocking out any light the crescent moon overhead might otherwise have cast.

"Okay," she said, rolling her neck. "Let's do this."

This time the portal formed in the space bracketed by two trees, their twisted interlocking branches forming the lintel. We stepped through into darkness.

It sucked. It felt like it was getting worse every time I did it. Agony and nausea and pure overwhelming *sensation*, all packed into an instant that seemed to last forever. This time I only became aware of myself again while I was on all fours staring at the ground from six inches away. A few seconds later I actually did puke, hard and painfully. We all know how that feels, though, so I won't bother detailing it.

"Sorry about that," Aiko said, leaning heavily on a tree. "You see why I try to use intermediate stops instead of jumping straight to a very separated domain?"

"Yeah," I said. Well, moaned, but that's beside the point. "I think I just threw up my toenails."

"Give it a minute," the kitsune advised. "This should be the worst of it. There's a few more crossings, but nothing that bad."

I cracked an eye, and instantly regretted it. It didn't hurt, but it immediately made my head swim so bad I thought for a second I was about to throw up again. "Where is this?" I asked, squeezing my eyes tightly shut again. I thought I could hear Snowflake whimpering in the background.

"Inari's Wood," Aiko said.

"Wait, you mean *the* Inari?"

"Yep. The god of rice and foxes, and if you ever figure out how those are connected be sure and tell me, would you?"

"Wow. You move in high circles, don't you?"

She snorted. "Hardly. This is just...our place, you know? The álfar have Álfheim, kitsune have the Wood."

"Oh." I risked opening my eyes again, and turned out to actually be capable of looking around. Score one for the away team.

It was a strange sort of forest we were in. It seemed uncommonly open, lots of open space and tall grasses between the trees, but high overhead they all joined together to form a canopy so dense it left us in twilight. I couldn't even have said what time of day it was. All manner of trees were represented. Evergreens seemed to predominate, especially cedars and spruces, but I also saw a number of oaks and maples. I wasn't entirely sure all those trees could even grow in the same forest, but when you're dealing with the Otherside that kind of thing isn't nearly as important.

Next to me Snowflake was dunking her head in a dark, slow-moving river. It made surprisingly little noise as it passed us, just the barest whisper of moving water. *That was horrible*, she said, pulling her head out of the water and shaking vigorously.

"What next?" I asked.

"Give me a minute. I hate doing two gates right on top of each other."

"Can't say I blame you."

After about fifteen minutes, we were all feeling quite a lot better, which obviously meant that it was time to make ourselves miserable again. Aiko tore another hole in the fabric of reality, not even bothering to leave the clearing we'd appeared in first, and we stepped through it.

It was, as she'd promised, not nearly as intolerable as the last one. This is, of course, not the same as saying it was pleasant, but at least it didn't reduce me to vomiting. We were in—surprise!—a forest. In fact, aside from the absence of the Otherside's magical field, it could almost have been the *same* forest we'd just left. It was more homogenous, mostly just conifers, but the twilight and deep silence were just the same. There was even a stream.

"Aokigahara," Aiko said without being prompted. "Welcome to Japan."

I blinked. Fifteen minutes, some hard work, and a somewhat horrific traveling experience, and we'd gone from Italy to Japan? It was incredible, almost unbelievable. It seemed way, way too easy, and I kept wondering when the price would make itself known.

A moment later I remembered something, and frowned. "Aokigahara? Doesn't this place have a...pretty sketchy reputation?"

She grinned. "Yep. Don't worry too much, though. Most of the suicides don't make it this far in." She paused. "Of course, I guess the body hunt might not either, so it's probably a wash overall."

"Great," I said sourly. It just figured that the famously beautiful forest we got to visit would also be one of the suicide capitals of the world. "Isn't the forest supposed to be haunted, too?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Aiko grinned a little wider, and I was briefly reminded of the terribly cruel face she sometimes presented during a serious fight. "Oh, it is. But they won't bother me. This is *our* place."

The walk was a little longer this time, maybe three or four miles uphill. As we walked the world went from the predawn twilight to early morning, though the dense canopy overhead ensured that it was still pretty dark much of the time. There was a breeze, though, and even a little birdsong, and as a result it didn't feel nearly as oppressive as before.

It *was* a beautiful forest, too. It felt secluded, cut off from the modern world. Mt. Fuji towered over us, with its iconic perfect snowcap almost unreal against the backdrop of an aching blue sky. For the record, the mountain really is as beautiful as they say.

Aokigahara was interesting for another reason. Every place has a vibe of sorts, the product of its interactions with the spiritual world. But this forest felt *much* more specific and definite than most, so strong that it nearly had a personality all its own. It was aware of us, and it made me twitchy, like having a dozen people stare at me from behind. It didn't feel malevolent, exactly, which was something of a surprise considering how disturbing its rep was, but it wasn't friendly either. Instead it felt aloof, uncaring. It looked at me the way I looked at an ant that hadn't yet begun to bother me, and I was pretty sure that if it decided to do something about me I would have about as much chance of stopping it as an ant has of stopping a man from stepping on it.

So this is what a genius loci feels like, Snowflake commented.

Aiko seemed to take no notice of it, which made a certain amount of sense. This was, as she'd said, her people's place. She wasn't an outsider here, as we were. She belonged here, was a part of the forest as deeply and as surely as the trees themselves. I didn't, and I wasn't.

We weren't in any particular rush, so it took us a while walking. After about forty minutes we found a skeleton resting at the base of a tree, scraps of rope still present on the branch above it to show how this particular person had elected to end it all. It was a sobering sight, not least because I could easily have wound up like that myself if things had gone slightly different. Aiko and even Snowflake seemed to feel it as well, and we skirted well around the bones. Otherwise we didn't see any signs of life the whole time.

"All right," Aiko said, maybe half an hour after we passed the suicide. "This should do." I had to admit a certain amount of relief at her words. Aokigahara was a lovely place, but I wasn't welcome here.

We were standing in a small, deeply shaded glen. It was chilly, down out of the sun, and there were maybe two inches of snow on the ground. We'd climbed quite a distance from the glade we'd entered in, and we were now high enough up the slope that the forest was just beginning to turn to mountain.

Another portal, another mind-wrenching episode of infinite blackness followed by brief but total sensory dislocation and amnesia. It was almost funny how fast I was getting used to it. Disturbing, too, even to me.

As before, we were in a forest on a mountainous slope. The trees were, if anything, more dense and oppressive than before. Huge pines and oaks, more like redwoods in scale than the mundane trees they resembled, soared hundreds of feet over our heads before spreading, their limbs of such monumental size as to dwarf most full-grown trees themselves. Snow lay thick on the ground, a pristine blanket a foot deep, more than three feet where drifts had formed under the trees.

The glade was perfectly silent, but it somehow felt different to me than Aokigahara had, or Inari's Wood for that matter. Those forests had been quiet, but this place had a hushed air to it that made me think of a cathedral. The air was cold, shockingly cold even to me, and I gloried in the feeling. Everything was perfectly still, not a whisper of wind to rustle the trees, not a bird or squirrel or insect stirring.

"Wow," I said, my breath forming a frosty plume when it hit the air. "Nice place."

"Easy for you to say," Aiko muttered. "It's bloody freezing. It's *always* bloody freezing here."

I pulled off my coat and tossed it to her, manipulating the shadow midair so that it would reflect heat a little better. It wasn't great as far as insulation goes, but it would work for the short term. "So where are we now? Jotunheim?"

She glanced at me, surprised. "Yeah, actually. How'd you know?"

I shrugged. "Lucky guess. Frost giants were the only ones I could think of with that much of a kick for cold. Isn't this a little off your turf?"

"It's best to know a variety of layovers," she said, stretching a little. "That way, in an emergency, you can get *somewhere* from practically any entry point."

"Huh," I said, intrigued. It was an interesting concept—escaping like that would be nearly untraceable, once the portal was closed. Anyone trying to chase you would not only have to be able to track you, which the shifting nature of the Otherside made functionally impossible; they would also need to know the exact same destination point, *and* be able to make the same associations between the two points. And, once you'd made two or three quick transfers, the odds of any individual being able to follow all of those paths would be negligible.

"How many stages are left in this one?" It was a fascinating idea and one I really had to learn more about, but I was really starting to get tired of the portals themselves. Did a lot to explain why Alexander had said magical travel wasn't worthwhile most of the time, even discounting the dangers I was sure would turn out to be involved at some point. In my circles it's pretty much inevitable that dangers turn out to be involved at some point, and I was pretty sure it went further than the occasional gorillathing.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"This is the last," Aiko said. "Good bloody thing, too. It's been years since I did this. I'd forgotten how hard it is."

"You all right?"

She shrugged. "Better be," she said wryly. "We sure don't want to stick around here. I'm pretty sure even you can freeze to death in Jotunheim." Snowflake gave herself one more shake to clear her head, and then the three of us walked out of the trees into heaven.

Granted, most people might not have seen it quite like that. It was cold, so bitterly cold I think the average human would need arctic gear to survive there for any significant length of time. The sky overhead was lead gray, a solid bank of clouds that started dropping big, fluffy flakes of snow as we walked. Out from under the shelter of the trees, the wind was moving at a pretty good clip, and it too was ice-cold. Before me the mountain seemed to tower impossibly high, huge enough to make Pikes Peak look like a veritable molehill. The slopes were blanketed in snow, just as perfect and pristine as that beneath the trees. I wasn't at all sure how deep it might go; I sank in above the knee before hitting a solid surface, but some of the drifts had to be ten or twenty feet deep at the very least.

"Wow," I said, looking around in awe. The mountain we were on was just one in a range, and not the biggest by a long shot. All of them were harsh, rocky, stark and cruel. "I have gotta learn this trick."

"Yeah, then *you* can do the heavy lifting while *I* kick back," the kitsune grumbled.

"Actually, I was thinking more about the recreational value. I mean, wow. If people ever find out about this, Aspen would look like chump change."

Yeah, Snowflake said excitedly. We're still working on adapting a snowboard to a quadrupedal frame, but she loves tobogganing like Jacques loves his bottle. And no, the irony isn't lost on anyone. Hell, even I'm named *Winter*, for crying out loud. It's like the universe is playing one long, drawn-out joke on me, and it's sense of humor is about as sophisticated as a middle-schooler in the presence of a Three Stooges marathon. *Just look at that drift. I bet I could get twenty feet of air off that thing.*

Oh, definitely, I said. I felt okay about excluding Aiko from this particular conversation, because she has as much interest in snowboarding as I have in crochet. *And that cliff? Make a quick jump, maybe put a little lift on with magic, and I could definitely clear it. Two hundred feet vertical drop easy, and a beautiful landing. We've gotta come back here.*

"If you two are *quite* done ogling," Aiko said acerbically, "we should get going." She took off jogging uphill.

I shook myself out of my brief reverie and followed after her. It was wearying trekking through the snow, but nothing I wasn't accustomed to. Snowflake, of course, ran literal circles around us, her paws not even breaking the crust of the snow. This was, after all, her natural environment, far more

than the city. She even darted up to the top of a nearby drift and slid down it, getting snow all over her face and laughing like a loon.

I wasn't too far away from that state myself, honestly. I love winter—depressingly predictable, I know, but there it is. Aiko could complain, but this place felt like home.

It felt so natural, in fact, that it took me several minutes to figure out just *how* impossibly homelike it was. I wasn't slipping around. I *knew*, without even having to think, where the snow was stable and where it would collapse from my weight. I sprinted up a cornice, somehow knowing where I should place my feet and exactly how far I could go before the snow would be unstable, and leapt off.

It was delight. I closed my eyes to more fully enjoy the wind rushing against my face, the sensation of floating in midair. Even without sight I knew when I would land, and I easily turned my momentum into a slide. I came to my feet, laughing, exuberant, feeling on top of the world, feeling like I was somehow *more* than I'd ever been before. It was strange, felt both mad and utterly natural.

It took me that long to realize what was wrong. I would have expected Snowflake to be laughing as hard as I was, and likely trying to duplicate the maneuver herself. Even Aiko should have been making some sort of sarcastic comment. Instead, there was nothing but a shocked silence, both physically and mentally.

I glanced back and saw Aiko, more than thirty yards away, standing on top of the cornice and looking at me with something that wasn't quite fear in her posture.

Wait. *Thirty yards?* I couldn't jump that far.

Evidence suggested otherwise.

I looked away and realized what she was seeing. It had taken me a bit longer than usual to notice, thanks to the environment, but I was covered in frost. Crystals of the stuff coated my skin, head to toe, dozens and dozens of layers all piled up on each other. My fingers had gone blue at the tips, but I didn't feel the slightest bit cold. The wind had stirred into a sort of mini-whirlwind centered on me, filling the air around me with a veil of glittering snowflakes, which I could somehow see through without any difficulty whatsoever.

Ten thousand years of winter. Doesn't it feel good? Ten thousand years of winter in your blood.

The voice in my head was, just barely, recognizable as my own. That's not the same as saying it was *me*, though. It was vast and deep and frozen, with the hint of a growl underneath and about as much resemblance to humanity as this place had to earth. It was also a voice I'd heard exactly once before, when I'd been using my nature as a what-the-hell-is-*that?* to produce an icicle for use as an improvised weapon.

I closed my eyes, shaking a little. Unfortunately, I couldn't pass it off as being due to cold even to myself, because I still wasn't even chilly.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

A couple minutes later I knew—not heard, not became aware, *knew*—that the others had caught up to me. "Maybe," I said quietly, "coming back here isn't such a good idea after all."

"You think?" Aiko was good at faking. If I hadn't known her as well as I did I wouldn't have recognized the concern under her caustic tone.

And, of course, I did nothing to show that recognition. It wouldn't have been polite. "Maybe. Where now?"

She grumbled a bit and then continued up the mountain. Snowflake paused to lick the frost off my fingers, whining gently in two spectra, and then we followed.

It felt...very different from that point on. It was, if anything, more disturbing, simply because it wasn't nearly disturbing enough. I still felt more like I'd lived here for years than that this was my first visit. With every step, every heartbeat it felt like I was growing, expanding, becoming *more*. I found myself having to struggle to keep to a pace they could keep, although under ordinary circumstances Snowflake is significantly faster than me.

About thirty yards further up the slope we dropped onto an actual path. I do mean dropped, too; it was cut into the snowpack, a claustrophobic trench less than three feet wide. On either side rose walls of snow more than fifteen feet tall, and there was more under our feet. Strangely, there didn't seem to be any difference in lighting down in the trench.

It was a lot faster going, with a real trail to follow, and we were all motivated to keep moving. When we scrambled back out half an hour later, we'd traveled more than two miles. Snowflake was all right, of course, having been designed for even colder environments than this, but I was feeling pretty sorry for Aiko.

A quick jaunt back downhill brought us to a small, windswept grove of pines, nestled in against the base of a steep, jagged granite cliff. Although they would have been quite respectable anywhere else, compared to the trees I'd seen earlier they seemed almost scrawny.

"Okay," Aiko said, flexing her fingers. "Last one."

She formed the portal framed by the rocks this time. It took her almost twice as long as the first had, I noticed; clearly she wasn't exaggerating the difficulty of the trick. Eventually, though, she got it, and we stepped through.

Chapter Seven

We were, thankfully, back in the real world. I wasn't sure how much more of the Otherside I could take.

We were standing in a thin layer of snow at the base of a rock formation. The rock was the bright red granite common around Colorado Springs, which as I understand it is rare and moderately famous. Some rather scraggly bushes ensured that the alcove we came out in, which was barely big enough for the three of us to fit, wouldn't be easily visible to anyone else. I had to be impressed at Aiko's destination points; they were impressively good at preventing anyone from noticing our arrival. Even without leaves to speak of, this was a pretty secluded spot.

Surprisingly, I appeared to have come through the portal the best. Oh, I didn't feel *good* by any means, but they looked worse. Snowflake had collapsed in her namesake, and Aiko was swaying on her feet. As I watched, she sank down to sit, leaning on the rocks for support, eyes closed. She looked absolutely exhausted, eyes sunken and skin gone ashen.

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine," she rasped. "How many gates did we just do?"

I frowned and thought about it. "I have no idea," I admitted after a moment. Somewhere along the line I'd completely lost track.

"Me neither," she said, coughing. "Surprised I managed that." Snowflake whined gently, prompting the kitsune to reach out and ruffle her ears. "Don't worry, *dumme Sumpfhundin*. Give me twenty minutes or so, I'll be good as new."

I sighed. "Yeah, but we're on the clock again. Don't know what the Watchers are gonna make of this, but it's a sure bet they'll be on me again like fleas on a werewolf now that I'm back in Colorado." I pushed myself to my feet. "I'll go see what they're doing."

Twenty minutes or so later, I clambered back down the rocks. "Looks like they're content to wait in the parking lot for now," I reported.

"Damn," Aiko muttered. She was, as promised, looking much healthier. "They're already here?"

"Yep," I said smugly. "You owe me a chocolate cake."

"Should have known better than to bet against you when you were offering to shave your head and wear an eyepatch for a month. Did you get a good look at them?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"That is generally the bright side of being able to borrow a hawk's eyes," I said dryly. "Nobody seems to see it coming, strangely enough. It's the same pair as before. Looks like they're standing around in the parking lot waiting for us to come through. Cleared everybody else out, too."

She grunted and, shoving Snowflake off her lap, stood up to pace. "How do you think they found us?"

I shrugged. "My guess? Given who we're talking about, they would have done their research ahead of time, including researching known associates. Assuming they know your contact points in the city, it isn't too much of a stretch that they'd put all three under surveillance as soon as they realized where we went."

"Makes sense," she said reluctantly. "That kind of magic's right up their alley."

"True. Or they coulda just, you know, used satellite photography."

She nodded. "We go overland, then?"

"Nah," I said. "I'm going to have to deal with them eventually. The plan should work."

I jogged into the parking lot alone, glancing furtively over my shoulder.

They must not have been expecting such a blatant approach, because it took them several seconds to react. I made it almost to the other edge of the lot before the Watcher stepped in front of me. She was holding a pair of heavy manacles, and she wasn't smiling.

I pulled up short. "Hi," I said. "How's your day going?"

"Put the manacles on," the Guard said, stepping up beside her. "Don't make this harder than it has to be."

"I think it's a little early in our relationship for that," I said lightly. "Besides, those things smell like silver, and that's kind of a turn-off for me, obviously."

"You're alone," the woman said abruptly. "Where's the kitsune?"

"Oddly enough, she didn't want to pick a fight with you guys," I lied. "Said I was on my own if I wanted to do something that dumb."

The guy nodded, his expression so pleasant and understanding it was actively aggravating. "Smart move. You should listen to her."

I sighed and stretched my hands out as though I was waiting to be cuffed. "Yeah," I said. "I probably should."

The woman nodded and stepped forward, manacles raised. I waited until they were almost on my wrists, and then lunged forward and punched her in the abdomen.

It wasn't a terribly hard punch. It was an awkward movement, and even with preternatural strength there's only so much you can do from an odd position.

But it was hard enough, and well enough placed, to make her grunt and stagger. I stepped forward, avoiding the manacles, and shoved her hard into the guy. Both of them stumbled sideways, unprepared for this series of events.

Then I turned and ran, taking off into the park.

I knew the park pretty well, and the paths were groomed enough that I could maintain a pretty decent pace without having to worry about tripping. Between that and my head start, by the time I ducked off the path and out of sight, the Watchers were barely within sight of me.

"Okay," I said. "They bit on it. You ready to go?"

Duh, Snowflake said, standing and stretching. *You want me to start?*

"Better give it a few minutes," I said. "They wouldn't believe I could change that quickly. I have enough of a lead that we can afford the delay."

I watched them approach through the eyes of a coyote, following their progress carefully. By the time they were within a hundred feet of our hiding place, three or four minutes had passed and they were slowing down a little. She looked like she could be running a good bit faster without trouble, but the Guard was a little overweight, and it was showing now.

"Now," I said to Snowflake. She immediately stepped out onto the path, looking back at the Watchers. Through the coyote I could see that her expression was mocking, to such a degree that even a human would recognize it as such. She barked at them, almost laughing.

Then she bolted down the path.

Meanwhile, I worked myself further into the alcove, draping my cloak of shadows over myself, and watched them through the coyote's eyes. This was the key moment; if they saw through this ruse, my plan was pretty much done.

"Is that him?" the Guard asked, staring after Snowflake.

"Hard to say," the Watcher said, shrugging. "A werewolf's mind feels a lot different as a wolf than a human. I don't know that I would recognize him."

"But it is a werewolf?" he asked impatiently.

"It feels like one," she said. "Let's move. He's getting away."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

The Guard nodded and started running again, though it was clearly a struggle.

I grinned and pressed myself back against the cliff.

The two of them ran past less than a minute later. The Guard, who was panting heavily by that point, didn't seem to see anything beyond the next stride; he never so much as glanced into the alcove where I was hiding.

The Watcher, on the other hand, did rather more than glance. She looked right at me, met my eyes, and grinned.

Then she kept going.

Once I was sure they were gone, I extricated myself from my hiding place and started jogging back down the path toward the parking lot. I was a little concerned about that smile from the Watcher, but there wasn't a lot that I could do about it. The plan *had* worked, even if I did have my doubts about how much of that could really be attributed to it being a good plan.

Back at the parking lot, I started walking along the highway. It didn't take long for a black SUV to pull up alongside me, with Aiko grinning at me out the window. Under normal circumstances I would have labeled it a government vehicle without a second thought. Under the present circumstances, I knew that label was correct, although the government in question was a little different than normal.

I sighed. Some things are too much even for me.

On the other hand, the interior was pretty nice. Cars half full and all that.

"So," Aiko said as we got into the black SUV. Armored, of course, and the windows were both tinted and bulletproof. "Did you get away clean?"

"As far as I could tell," I said. "Think the Watcher might have noticed me, but I'm not sure. Snowflake's going to run them through the hills for a while and then meet us back at my house. I need to pick up some kit anyway. Did the car give you any trouble?"

"Nah," she said dismissively. "These things are *easy* to hotwire. So what's next after we pick up the mutt? Aubrey?"

I pulled the folded papers out of my pocket and spread them out on my lap. "Going after Aubrey directly is a bit of an overreaction at this point, I think," I said absently. "I at least want to get some details on this curse first."

I went over the list of names again. Strange, how hard putting it into an impersonal format and telling me it was a puzzle I needed to solve made it to feel for them. "Most of these people aren't involved in the community," I said, thinking it out as I went along. "I'd rather not deal with the Inquisition at the moment, and I'm not sure where to find Luna or Rachel."

The Inquisition was one of her—numerous—insulting epithets for the gang of moderately-skilled mages running around town pretending to be vigilantes. They were assembled by Loki, for reasons that I've never gotten quite clear about, and then abandoned shortly after I crossed their path. I try and keep an eye on them, partially to keep them from getting killed, and mostly to make sure their psychoses are directed in the right directions.

It sounds kinda manipulative when I put it that way. But I'm honestly not sure what else to do about them. None of them is so dangerous or insane that I feel a need to kill them, but all of them are dangerous and insane enough that I don't feel right leaving them without some kind of supervision. The best solution I've come up with so far is to try and get them to direct their vigilante activities toward things that deserve to die, and make sure I'm in place to pick up the pieces when they inevitably get themselves killed doing something stupid.

"So that leaves Enrico, then," Aiko said.

I sighed. I was *not* looking forward to that conversation. But there was nothing for it but to bite the bullet and go talk to him. The fact that he was the best source of information I had available to me right now just made avoiding that conversation even harder.

I never had these problems back when I was still an antisocial loner living on the fringes of society, darn it.

As it turned out, I didn't get my stuff from my house. I was glad we'd taken the time to drop by, though, because otherwise I might have missed the opportunity to see it burn, and that would have been terrible.

The blaze couldn't have been going long, because the building was still standing. It had a peculiar intensity, though, which made me pretty sure it wasn't the accidental kind of fire. Accidental fires don't generally reek of magic so strongly it burned my sinuses a block away.

We sat in our stolen SUV and stared through the windshield. It was sorta pretty, mostly because the reality hadn't quite sunk in yet.

There was no way I could stop this. Absolutely no way. Once you've got a big fire going, there's so much raw energy involved only a specialist with a lot of skill could reasonably hope to contain it. Even if I were one of those, which I am very much not, it was clearly already too late. Fire has a strong spiritual and energetic presence, and it's a potent destructive force. There are enchantments which can withstand a firestorm, but mine aren't on that level. And, while I am inhumanly sturdy, there are definite limits, and running headlong into a magically-accelerated burning building crosses about, I don't know, all of them. Trying to get anything out—if anything was even intact—was a cruel and unusual way to commit suicide.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Think you have the Watchers to thank for this one?" Aiko asked in the curiously dislocated manner of someone who, looking at a train wreck, isn't quite sure what to say but feels that she has to say *something*. She was staring straight forward at the fire with a blank expression on her face.

"Maybe," I said, and I could hear the same numbness in my own voice. "Hard to say, though. Too many people enjoy screwing with me too much."

Snowflake came running out of the hills behind the house. *We should get moving*, she said, before she'd even reached the car. *They weren't more than a few minutes behind me. I didn't want to risk them deciding to turn around and running into you.*

I shook myself out of the daze. "Yeah, you're right. Looks like I don't need to pick anything up after all. Enrico should still be at the pack house."

Aiko glanced at me sidelong. Such a fun word, sidelong; I wish you could use it to describe something other than glances. "Shouldn't you be...I don't know, crying or something?"

"Why?"

"Because we're watching your house burn down," she said reasonably. "It seems like the kind of thing that should provoke a reaction. Shock, at the very least."

I shrugged. "Maybe, but let's face it. That house? Was a piece of shit. Nobody was hurt, and I keep most of my really valuable stuff I at the lab these days anyway. I've been doing regular backups for a change, so I didn't even lose any of my important files. I'm not seeing a lot of reason to cry." I paused. "Although it *is* irritating that I just lost most of my foci for the second time in a year. I used to be so good at hanging onto them, too."

She stared at me for a second, then shook her head and muttered something very rude in French before putting the car in gear.

When we pulled up outside the pack house, I could hear Kyra through the broken window. She was speaking too quietly for me to make out the words, but I could hear her tone. It wasn't a good tone. It was more like the tone you use to talk down someone standing on a ledge.

Walking inside, I found that my initial impression hadn't been far wrong. Kyra was sitting in one of the few intact chairs, her posture so submissive that even a human would have been struck by it.

Enrico was standing on the other side of the room holding a shotgun. It wasn't anything like the model that I'd bought from Jacques, but it was plenty heavy enough to get the job done. Particularly if it was loaded with silver, and knowing Enrico, that was almost certainly the case.

"Great," Kyra said to me when I opened the door, sounding rather exasperated. "Winter, you talk some sense into him."

"What's up?" I asked, walking in cautiously.

"I'm a menace," Enrico said. In contrast to Kyra, he sounded eerily calm. "There isn't any doubt on that point, not anymore. As long as I'm alive, I'm a danger to everyone around me."

"No, you're not," I said. "The only reason you attacked Robert was because a mage had been screwing with your head. You can't blame yourself for that."

"That's not what this is about," he said, pacing. "Not really. You two turned me into a monster. Maybe it was the only way to save me, I don't know, but that doesn't change what you did."

"You aren't a monster," Aiko said dismissively. She sounded almost as dispassionate as Enrico did. "Trust me. I know monsters, and you aren't one."

"She's right," I said. "You should know as well as anyone that werewolves aren't monsters, not really."

"You say that," he said. "But then, you would, wouldn't you? It's been over a year, Winter. I still can't live normally. I can't be around injured people safely. I'll never work with the police again. I couldn't, not like this."

"Maybe your expectations aren't realistic," I said, as gently as I could. "You need to adapt to who you are now, not waste your life trying to get back to who you used to be."

"Maybe that's the problem," he said. "Maybe you've made too many compromises." He shook his head and stopped pacing, looking directly at me. "I can't do that. I had a purpose, Winter. I set out to help people. To protect them. That was who I was, who I made myself. And if that means protecting them from me, so be it."

I opened my mouth, but he shook his head again, cutting me off. "Don't bother," he said. "I've made my choice. I'm sorry, Winter."

And then he lifted the shotgun and pulled the trigger.

Chapter Eight

Not for nothing is the stopping power of a shotgun so highly regarded. The blast hit me hard enough to send me stumbling sideways, whereupon I promptly tripped and fell face-first onto Snowflake. Her yelp of surprise was buried by the noise of the second shot.

"He shot me," I said, pushing myself to my feet. "I can't believe he actually shot me."

I wasn't going to get the chance to complain about it. The second shot had been for himself, and there wasn't much doubt of the result. Suffice to say that, werewolf or not, a shotgun blast to the face from point-blank range is an undeniably effective means of suicide. Kyra would have to hire a really good cleaner to get the stains out.

"Are you okay?" Kyra asked immediately.

"I think so," I said. "He must have been using a light shot. I think the armor stopped all of it."

"Not quite all," Aiko said, touching my cheek. Her fingers came away red. "You weren't wearing the helmet."

"I didn't think I'd need it," I said numbly. "I mean, I knew Enrico was unhappy, but I never expected...this."

"It *was* a bit more of a dick move than I saw coming from him," Aiko said. "Killing yourself when you've got plenty to live for and people who care about you? You have to be a pretty major asshole to do that."

Kyra looked at the kitsune oddly. "That's more sentimental than I would have expected from you," she commented.

Aiko shrugged. "My favorite cousin killed himself when I was around thirty," she said. "It left an impression. I wasn't that close to Enrico, but I would imagine you guys are feeling similarly."

"Yeah," I said. "But I don't think this was a suicide, not entirely. I think it was murder."

"The curse you mentioned?" Kyra asked. Her voice was almost calm, if you didn't listen too closely.

"Yeah," I said. "Enrico was already on the edge. I think we've known that for a while. But based on the timing, it seems pretty clear that this curse was what pushed him over."

"Who did it?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "But believe me, finding out just went up another step on my priority list."

Kyra nodded tightly. "You'll tell me, when you find him." It wasn't a question.

"Yes," I said. "Do you know where Anna is?"

Kyra's composure cracked, just for a moment, and I could see how deeply Enrico's death had affected her. "You want to tell her about her brother?"

"Among other things." I glanced at the clock and saw that it was already almost eight. "I'm starving. Maybe we should go for breakfast."

There are all kinds of breakfast places in the Springs. When pressed, however, I will almost always settle on a comparatively small biker hangout. The reasons for this are multitudinous. For one thing, it's close enough to the west edge of the city that I could get there without that much trouble. Like most greasy spoons it has good food, large portions, and a cheerful disregard for anything resembling nutrition. And, best of all, the old Native American man who runs the place doesn't care if I bring Snowflake so long as she doesn't cause trouble.

"Okay," Anna said once the coffee had restored her to some semblance of consciousness. "What's so earth-shatteringly important that it couldn't wait until eight?"

"I was hoping you could tell me," I said. "Did something happen to you recently, something weird or inexplicable? You might have felt emotions without knowing why, or behaved in a way that you normally wouldn't. Something like that."

She frowned and looked away from me. "Yeah," she said. "A couple of days ago. I don't know what happened, but I'm missing about twelve hours."

I nodded. "Could you tell me a little more about what happened?"

"What do you want to know?" she asked hesitantly.

"Well, for starters, what did it feel like?"

"I don't really know," she said hesitantly, staring into the coffee. "There's just a...gap. I don't remember it at all."

"What's the last thing you can remember?" Aiko asked suddenly, not looking up from the origami she was making out of three straw wrappers and a paper napkin.

Anna frowned. "I was...walking home from work. This was on Monday, at around half past eight. It was raining, a little bit. And then...." She trailed off and shook her head. "That's it."

"Okay," I said. The food arrived about then, and for a few minutes there was no conversation of any kind.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Delicious as it was, though, the meal couldn't distract me indefinitely, and before long I had to get back to business. "What happened next?"

She shrugged. "The next thing I remember is waking up. I was in my bed, just like usual, except I didn't remember how I got there."

"Did you feel normal when you woke up?"

Anna shrugged again. "Mostly, yeah. My head hurt a little, and I felt really tired, but mostly normal. There was someone else there when I woke up, a woman. She was tall, with blond hair. She was really thin, too."

Huh. No cloak, but otherwise that sounded like a dead ringer for the Watcher. "Did she say anything?"

"Yeah," Anna said. "Something about paying debts, and sending messages. I didn't really understand. She left before I was really awake."

I nodded. "That makes sense. Have you done anything about this? It seems like it could be pretty frightening."

"It was," Anna said emphatically. "I thought about going to a therapist, or asking you for advice, but it just seemed like a really bad idea. I don't know why."

"Don't worry about it," I told her. "You aren't crazy. This won't be happening again, I don't think."

"Good," she said, sounding deeply relieved. "So what's going on? What happened to me?"

"I'll tell you the details in a minute," I said. "But there's something you should know first." My voice sounded almost as tired as I felt.

"What is it?"

"What happened to you was the result of magic," I said dully. "Something designed to inflict pain. The person responsible seems to be targeting the people around me." I paused, trying to think of a way to frame the next part delicately, and failed. "One of the people targeted was your brother," I said, somewhat lamely.

Anna winced. "Oh God. What happened?"

"Enrico was already depressed," I said dully. "He's never really been the same since he was changed. The spell pushed him over the edge. He shot himself this morning. Lethally."

"Oh God," Anna said again. Her voice was choked, and there were tears in her eyes. "I...I need to go to the bathroom," she said, standing and rushing in that direction.

"So the Watcher was there when she woke up," Aiko said once Anna was gone. "Think that's significant?"

"Yeah," I said. "She knew I'd talk to Anna sooner or later. That message was meant for me."

Aiko nodded. "Bit of an ambiguous message," she said, her mouth so stuffed with food that she resembled a squirrel. "Could be a statement of support."

"That, or a threat. There's more than one way to pay a debt."

She nodded again. There wasn't much more to say on that topic, and for several minutes neither of us spoke. Snowflake complained about the quality of the meat she'd cajoled from the waitress, with remarkable inventiveness in her use of profanity, but there was no real bitterness there.

"Seems like Anna's been gone a while," Aiko said at last, wiping up the last of her green chili and eating it.

I shrugged. "Yeah. It's probably nothing. She wanted some time to cry, I think, get it out of her system. There's nothing to worry about."

Aiko looked at me for about five seconds. Then she started laughing.

"Right," I said. "I'll go check on her."

Anna didn't answer when I pounded on the door of the small unisex bathroom, or when I called her name. I frowned, then checked the handle. It was unlocked.

I opened it and stepped inside, flicking on the light. This showed Anna lying on the floor, to all appearances peacefully asleep.

I had just about enough time to see that before I heard the door close and felt the sudden, depressingly familiar pain of someone hitting me in the head with something hard. Then, while I was still reeling sideways from that, a burlap bag was popped over my head.

I tried to fight back about then. It didn't go very well. I was blinded, disoriented, and up against a trained fighter. I landed one solid punch, and was rewarded with a grunt of pain. Then there was a brief sensation of falling sideways, followed by another impact to the head, and things faded to a sort of dull, pain-laced red-black.

I woke up, unsurprisingly enough, in pain. The only bright side, if you could even call it that, was that the sack had been removed from my head. The room I was in was entirely dark outside of a small circle of dim light around me, but I could see enough to get the gist of the situation.

I was floating in a large tank of water. It wasn't especially warm, but I wasn't in any danger of hypothermia. I was held in position, and my head kept above water, by heavy manacles around my

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

wrists, pinning my arms above my head. They were, needless to say, stainless steel with a tracery of charged silver over top. The silver stung, but hadn't been in contact with the skin long enough yet to burn me. That gave me a pretty good idea of how long I'd been here; the pain was intense enough that I'd been touching it for at least twenty minutes, but if it had been an hour the skin would have started to burn and blister.

It was a clever setup, really. My arms were numb enough that I couldn't swim adequately, and I was over at least ten feet of water. Even if I could somehow break the manacles, I would quite likely sink and drown. In the meantime, though, most of my weight was buoyed by the water, so I hadn't actually separated my shoulders yet.

"This is getting to be too familiar," I said, sounding only slightly raspy. "What is it with you people and seeing me naked?"

There was a croaking, wheezing sort of laugh from somewhere near the base of the tank. "Trust me," said a croaking, wheezing sort of voice. "I've got better things to do than gawk at you." Which, although somewhat tactless, was probably true.

"That's what you say," I said lightly, testing the manacles. They were solid, unfortunately. "But somehow, everyone who kidnaps me seems to insist on stripping me naked first thing. So who is it this time? Vampires, maybe? I haven't done vampires before."

"I think you already know." And I did.

I had, without really thinking about it, expected the head of the Watchers to be an old—but, naturally, still extremely fit—man with a fondness for expensive suits and, perhaps, the occasional martini. Shaken, not stirred, of course.

Well...I was right about the old.

She looked like a skeleton dressed up as a person for Halloween. Barely five feet tall, she was so thin and frail it seemed that she would shatter at a passing breeze. It didn't help that her simple black robes hung off her frame as though they had been made for someone twice her size. She was leaning on a plain black cane, and still climbed the steps to the lip of my tank only very slowly. She was also very definitely blind; the whole right side of her face was covered in burn scars, resembling half-melted wax more closely than healthy flesh, and her left eye was nothing more than a hollow socket surrounded by claw marks.

And yet for all of that, there was still pride in her posture, and she reeked of magic like lilies and ashes and days gone by. If it came to a physical fight, I could crush her, even if I hadn't been a werewolf—but I wasn't at all confident I would live long enough to get near her.

"So what's with the Gestapo treatment?" I asked, glancing at the manacles.

She started to answer, but was wracked with an ugly coughing fit before she could. Just when I was starting to wonder if she was about to pitch over dead at my metaphorical feet, it subsided and she straightened again. "I thought you might be less likely to do something stupid when you woke up this way," she rasped. "And given your reputation, I felt you could use all the help you can get in that regard, eh?"

"Thanks," I said as dryly as I knew how. "Given that I'm awake now, would you mind letting me out?"

"Give me a moment," the old mage said, walking behind me. A moment later, following a few sharp metallic noises, the manacles snapped open, dropping me fully into the liquid.

"Was this really necessary?" I asked, catching the edge of the tank.

"Restraining you? Or kidnapping you?"

"Either. Or setting your goons on me in the first place, for that matter. I mean, I know it looks suspicious, but I didn't actually do anything. This time, anyway."

"I know."

"Granted, I'm not exactly an unbiased source, but...wait, what? You *know*?"

"Obviously," she said. Her driest dry voice was a lot dryer than mine.

"Then...*why*?"

"I do what is necessary," she said, with the flat bedrock certainty of a fanatic. "Now get out of there." When I hesitated she laughed that terrible, creaking laugh again. "Don't worry, Wolf. Your modesty is, I assure you, in no danger from me. I don't have the time to ravish you."

I shrugged and hauled myself up out of the water. "You seem to have me at something of a disadvantage," I said. "What's your name?"

"Names are a luxury I haven't required for some time," she said, descending the stairs again. "People call me Watcher. You can do the same."

"The order was never to stop you," Watcher said, the clicking of her cane against the stone floor providing a counterpoint to the words. Despite her impairment and the cane, she moved with perfect confidence. If I hadn't seen her face, I would never have guessed that she was blind.

Before you read too much into that, you have to realize that isn't nearly as much of an impairment to a mage as to a normal person. Magic just gives you such an unfair advantage that, aside from familiarity, actual vision is pretty much superfluous. I'm not even that skilled, and I can still detect air currents and changes in light reflection well enough to play cards blindfolded.

"I figured."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, I got to thinking about it, right? And I realized that they were really, really easy to distract. They let me go at Pryce's, and at Kyra's. They chased after that decoy, too."

"All of which you had explanations for," the old woman pointed out.

"True," I acknowledged. "The real kicker, though, was the last one. Even at the time, I kept wondering why they let me pull that off. I mean, you'd think that they would have known better than to get within my reach, and it's pretty hard to believe they wouldn't have been able to stop me from running." I shrugged. "Seemed pretty likely that they were trying to make me worried, but not actually do anything about it. Mining me for information, most likely."

"Astute," she commented, coughing some more. It wasn't a pretty sound. "Quite astute of you."

We turned another corner into a large kitchen. Like the rest of this place, it was made of a combination of natural stone and concrete, and lit by simple fluorescent fixtures. It also contained the first furnishings I'd seen here, Formica counters and a simple, hard-used metal table and chairs. She opened the dented commercial refrigerator and pulled out a plastic-wrapped sub sandwich and a bottle of water, which she tossed at me. "Eat," she said wearily.

"What makes you think I'm hungry?"

She chuckled. "Werewolves are always hungry. Relax, Wolf, I'm hardly going to poison you at this point, don't you think?"

I shrugged and tore into the sandwich. It wasn't great, but it was edible. "What I really don't get," I said between bites, "is why I'm here now. If you're so busy as that, and you already know I'm not responsible, why waste your time?"

Rather than answer me directly, she pulled out one of the chairs and sat down gingerly, leaning the cane against the wall. "A great many people are very interested in you, you know. I've had you in custody for less than half an hour, and I've already received more than twenty messages about it."

I blinked. "Really? From who?"

She pulled out a sheaf of papers from an inner pocket of her robe. "This letter," she said, pulling one off the stack, "is from the current head of the Blake clan." She pushed it over to me.

I glanced over it. Underneath the flowery language, it was pretty much lambasting the Watchers for overstepping their authority and demanding I be released immediately. "They're *supporting* me?" I asked incredulously.

"Indeed. I have similar letters from, let's see here, clans Cateye, Jäger, and Lackland, among others. Not to mention seven offers of bribery if I find you innocent of all charges and let you go. I also

have notes from the Müller, Nagual, New-Day, Li, and Raven clans congratulating me on apprehending a dangerous felon and recommending your immediate execution."

"But *why*?"

"I doubt either of us has time for a detailed description of the past ninety years of Conclave politics," she said dryly. "Suffice to say that when one clan moves, the others perforce do as well." She shuffled the papers back together and tucked them into her robe. "You've become quite the bone of contention, Wolf."

"What's that have to do with abducting me?"

She chuckled again. "Everything. If I were to approach you openly, you see, it would be a political disaster. Those who favor the Pack would be sure I was proclaiming support. The rest would throw a hissy fit." She smiled, a somewhat chilling expression. "On the other hand, if I take you into custody as part of an active investigation, there's nothing they can say about it. I'm free to do whatever I see fit."

I didn't much like the sound of that. "And what *do* you see fit?"

"That remains to be seen," she said. "What do you think I should do?"

"Let me go?" I said hopefully.

"But you are a destabilizing influence. That makes releasing you a risk."

I frowned. "I don't know about that. The only time I can think of I was involved with your people was that bit with the crazy witch last summer. And, from what I've heard, you would've done the same thing given the chance."

She frowned slightly, the motion emphasizing the scars on her face. It was about that time I realized she was also missing three fingers on her left hand, and her right thumb was little more than a stub.

Being a Watcher might, as it turned out, not be the healthiest long-term career plan out there.

"You have a point," she said after a moment. "But you make a very simple, very common mistake. You see, Wolf, people tend to think that the Watchers exist in order to protect mages. This is quite simply not the case. We protect the world *from* mages."

"But you are mages."

"Exactly," she said, and there was iron in her voice. "We are mages. We know better than anyone the danger we represent to the world. You want to know why I do this? Because I know what happens otherwise. I know how little it takes. One witch experimenting with blood magic, one shaman making a foolish bargain, one druid gone mad. That's how much it takes to break the world."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Oh, come on. Don't you think you're exaggerating a bit? I mean, granted magic can do some scary things, but I hardly think it's *that* bad."

"That is because you have no understanding of how ugly these things can be," she said calmly.

"I think I've seen some fairly nasty things, actually."

"Have you ever watched a man cry after a witch forces him to rape and kill his own wife and daughter to get revenge for a petty insult?" she asked without any particular inflection. "Have you smelled the aftereffects when the contents of a person's lungs, stomach, and intestines are heated to such a degree that they explode? Have you ever heard a woman screaming in agony while a wizard offers the spleen he cut out of her to a monster as a bribe, without even having had the decency to kill her first?"

"Have you ever tasted it when a werewolf throws up in your face?" I countered. "Because if the conversation keeps going like this I think you're about to." I shook my head. "Okay, point taken. Bad shit happens. That doesn't mean I'm about to start doing it. I mean, seriously. That shit is just freaking creepy."

"When you were initially changed," she shot back in the same tired, brutally dispassionate voice, "you murdered four people."

I paused. "Yes," I said finally. "I did. And I regret it more than you do, I promise. If killing myself would bring them back, I would probably have done so." I shook my head. "But it won't. And if you'll notice, I *haven't* killed and eaten any random people in, gosh, however many years it's been since then."

"And the girl whose death you caused? Catherine Lynch, I believe her name was?"

I shrugged. "Same deal. I regret it. I would take it back if I could. And I learned from my mistake. I go out of my way to avoid endangering normal people since then." I gave her a gimlet stare. (And what is a gimlet, anyway? I swear, if we even thought about the things we say, we'd be amazed.) "All of which you already knew. Look, my time's valuable, and I'm sure yours is as well, so could you kindly get to the point?"

"The point is to convey to you two pieces of information. Number one, we are always watching. That's what we do, no pun intended. If you break the rules, we'll know. We'll find you. You will run, and you will hide, and in the end you will fight, and you will still die. Because we really are that good." She smiled a thin, twisted smile.

I believed her. "And the second?"

"We're the good guys," she said, with the total certainty generally found only in morons and fanatics. And she didn't seem stupid. "I know that can be hard to see, at first. But we are. We're the ones making sure bad things don't happen to good people."

I snorted. "You're doing a hell of a job, then."

She didn't seem offended. "That's a natural reaction," she said calmly. "But perhaps you should ask yourself what the world would be like if we *weren't* around. Trust me when I say that, as bad as it seems sometimes, things could be much worse."

And, whatever psychoses she had (and I had a feeling it would take a while just to name them all), that I knew to be the truth. Whether she and hers were contributing to the problem or the solution was, of course, another matter entirely.

"Still not seeing the connection," I said. "Not really my business what you do."

Rather than answer me she pushed her chair back and stood up. "That does not have to be the case," she said, ambling down another dimly lit tunnel. I was obligated to follow. Given that she was blind it would be unfair to say that she glanced back at me, but I got the distinct impression that it would also have been accurate. "I can always use a subcontractor. Unofficially, you might say."

"Payment taking the form of...?"

"Negotiable."

"Let's say I'm interested. What happens then?"

"You go back to Colorado and deal with this situation. As an aptitude test, you might say. One of my people will go with you and make sure it gets done. If that works out I might contact you in the future with more work."

"And if I'm not interested?"

She smiled again, an expression which reminded me more than a little of broken glass, all sharp edges and jagged points and no humor at all. "Whatever gave you the idea that this is optional, Wolf?" We emerged into a room whose purpose I could not identify. There were heavy wooden chests along one wall, long steel tables down the middle, and no other furnishings.

The creepy woman in the red cloak was sitting on one of the chests. It was an unfinished red wood of some kind, maybe rosewood or padauk, although there was no consistent pattern to the chests to tell me for sure. Some were pine, but others were almost ridiculously expensive, including one that I was pretty sure was solid zebrawood. "Mr. Wolf," the blind Watcher said, "meet Ms. Stark. She will be accompanying you."

I stared. "You have got to be kidding me."

"Contrary to popular belief, Wolf, I am not possessed of a sense of humor."

"You expect me to work with *her*?"

"Ms. Stark is one of my best operatives." Said operative hadn't even looked in our direction the whole time, seemingly oblivious to the conversation being carried on ten feet away.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Maybe so, but she's also flippin' crazy, if you hadn't noticed. Not to mention that she practically broke my head to get me here."

She sighed. "Could you please leave for a moment, dear?" she called to the psycho. Said psycho got up immediately and walked out, all without once acknowledging our presence in any other way. Thus leaving me alone with, y'know, the other psycho.

"What's your problem, Wolf?" she asked bluntly.

"Actually," I said wryly, "I'm pretty sure I covered that with the whole 'flippin' crazy' thing earlier."

Her lips tightened slightly, and she moved her head in a nod so small it might as well not have been there. "I see. Tell me, Wolf, what were you doing in December?"

"December?" I frowned. "Nothing too memorable, I don't think. Training a couple employees, mostly. I—"

"She was hunting a vampire," the blind Watcher interrupted me. "We'd noticed a recent increase in activity in and around Detroit, and he was obvious enough about it that the Council allowed us to intervene. It was primarily a Guard operation, but it was serious enough to justify the participation of two Watchers. Seventeen people, Wolf. He murdered *seventeen people* in the space of four months. All of them were tortured over a period of at least several days, and in one case more than a week."

I winced.

"One person survived," she said, still in that deathly calm, quiet voice. "A little girl. Eight years old, Caucasian, upper middle-class. She was injured, and terrified, but alive. Ms. Stark's team had to investigate that little girl, Wolf, in order to figure out why she hadn't died. She was terrified, didn't want to think about it. They had to interrogate her."

"It turned out," she continued, "that the vampire in question had an unusual obsession with children. He had no compunctions about visiting brutality upon anyone, but he preferred hurting children. Young girls, in particular, obsessed him, although we never did figure out why he let this one go. Can you guess how they reacted to that information, Wolf?"

"They baited him," I said in a near-whisper.

"Once again, you show your astuteness. They did indeed." She smiled thinly, and with no humor at all. "Of course, no sane parent would ever agree to such a thing. So they kidnapped her. A girl, as much like the previous one as possible. Nine years old, very similar in appearance, named Julia. They staked her out, very nearly literally, in the middle of his favorite hunting ground, and set up a perimeter around her."

I shuddered. Don't get me wrong, I've seen some nasty things, and I don't generally consider myself a sensitive guy—but come on. Everybody has limits, and this was brushing up against mine.

I couldn't see this ending well.

"It should have been safe," she continued. "But the vampire noticed something, and he was faster than anticipated. He knew that he had no chance in a fight—one vampire against five Guards and two Watchers will die, no questions asked." She shook her head. "But he was fast enough to get to the girl. Had a knife on her before anybody could connect with an attack."

"He took her hostage?"

"Exactly. He held a knife to her throat, and promised that he would kill her if they didn't let him go."

I stared. "But...that's crazy. The second he was out of range, he'd have slit her throat anyway."

"Yes. And even if he had kept his word, it would still have left him free to do the same to dozens of other children. But the Guard who was in command of the operation is a father. His daughter bears a significant resemblance to the girl they used as bait." She shook her head slowly. "An unfortunate oversight. Had we foreseen that eventuality, things might have been very different, but...well. We did not."

"He was going to take the deal?" I asked, somewhat surprised at how horrified my own voice sounded.

"Stark claimed that he was, said she could see it in his eyes. Later, he admitted that he was considering it." Her blind eyes stared off into the distance, and she showed about as much emotion as Legion might have. "She recognized that it was foolish, that it would end badly. And so she did the only thing she could. She shot the hostage herself."

I stared some more.

"Julia took three military-grade rifle rounds, one of them to the head," she continued. "She died without feeling it, certainly without weeks of torture. The vampire was too stunned to react properly for several seconds. Seven mages were in ideal combat positions and had absolutely no reason not to annihilate said vampire. It was not a fight, Wolf, it was a slaughter. No one else sustained injuries."

"Damn."

"Quite. It was a horrible choice. She had a split second in which to make her decision. No time to consider the words of philosophers. No time to think at all. And she chose right. She was smart enough to see that the brutal action was kinder than the softhearted one."

She turned that terrible sightless gaze on me again. "That is the kind of situation we deal with here, Wolf. Those are the kinds of problems, the kinds of choices, the kinds of people with which she is accustomed to dealing. So before you condemn Ms. Stark, before you call her a psychopath and decry her as a monster, I recommend you consider that. You might not agree with her, you might not like her, but you can at the very least respect her for making the hard choices so that you don't have to."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I sighed, and I looked away first. "Fine. I'll take the psycho with me."

Chapter Nine

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Wolf," the Watcher said in a bright voice totally different from the creepy psycho-killer face I'd seen before. "Your gear's in the trunk here—the red one, right?"

The same trunk she'd been sitting on. "Naturally," I muttered, throwing the heavy wood lid open. Inside, neatly folded and stacked, were my clothes, my cloak of shadows, and the various trinkets, toys, and tools I'd had in my pockets. It was a pretty large pile. I hadn't been carrying it, but Tyrfing was prominently displayed on top of the heap, positioned so that the light brought out the subtle patterns in the sheath. Typical of the sword, really.

"Wonderful job on the cloak, by the way," she chattered. "Excellent work, even Gil said so—not that he'd ever admit it, of course. I have to say, I'm really looking forward to working with you, Mr. Wolf."

I frowned, fastening said cloak over my shoulders and belting Tyrfing on. "Are you bullshitting me?" I asked after a moment. "Because, if so, I'd really rather you stop. I don't know what your boss told you, but you don't need to butter up to me."

"Of course not," she said, sounding a little surprised. "I figure I can learn a lot from you. Everyone says you do excellent work, Mr. Wolf."

I frowned some more. "If you say so," I said dubiously. I wouldn't call *any* of my work, in any field whatsoever, excellent, but whatever. "You can call me Winter, though. I hate it when people call me Mister."

"All right, but only if you call me Laurel," she said, belting that steel oval on over her chest. Up close, I could see that it was a stylized depiction of a sword with the blade surrounded in flames. That done, she led the way down another narrow tunnel. This one wasn't as well-lit as the others.

I thought about letting it slide. Then I shrugged. Screw it. Sensibility was never really my strong suit anyway. "I have a hard time reconciling this with your attitude earlier," I commented.

She laughed. "I know, right? Everybody says my game face is really good. I am sorry about that but, well, orders are orders, you know?"

"Yeah, I guess I do. Where next?"

"We can do the first crossing...right here."

The tunnel terminated into a sort of cul-de-sac, a room maybe ten feet across with no other entrance or exit. Unlike the rest of the complex, it was entirely cut from raw stone, and the only lighting was that which leaked in from the hallway.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"We have the whole place under wards," Laurel explained, running her hands over the walls. "Try and open a portal anywhere but this room, all you get is a door to nowhere. There's probably a way to get around it, but that's way over my clearance level. Sorry, I'm pretty slow at this."

She wasn't kidding, either. It was probably more than ten minutes before stone blurred, flickered, and turned into an oval of absolute nothingness.

I will admit that I was rather nervous about stepping into that patch of darkness, but they'd already had me unconscious. If they wanted me dead, there were much easier ways to go about it than this.

It was then that I learned that, just as some connections are harder to make than others, so too are some people not as skilled at establishing gates as others. I'd thought Aiko's portals were brutal, but I'd actually been pretty lucky. As a native of the Otherside, she'd been using such magic to travel since she was a child. Laurel, who lacked that kind of engrained knowledge, wasn't nearly as smooth.

Several minutes and a bit of vomiting later, I looked around at a rather unaspiring locale. We were standing in front of a simple, unadorned stone arch about ten feet tall. The entire surface was covered in very fine, delicate script that I couldn't read. It wasn't in any language, or even any alphabet, I recognized. The runes I knew, mostly, but there were also bits that looked Greek, Egyptian, and ninety kinds of Asian which I never learned to distinguish.

Around us, arranged in a circle, were eight other arches, side by side, with a sort of nine-sided stone table in the center. The whole thing was contained in a huge dome of carved stone, all of it worked with thousands upon thousands of picayune inscriptions, which terminated about fifty feet overhead. There were no exits or windows to be seen anywhere.

"Nexus," my traveling companion explained. "Every arch leads to a different domain. So where are we going?"

"Back to Colorado, I presume."

She laughed. "Well sure, but how do we get there?"

I frowned. "You're driving."

She hesitated. "Actually, I figured you would. Since you're more familiar with the terrain, right?"

"You realize I can't actually do portals, right?"

"Shit." She sighed. "I know we need to classify key information, but sometimes it seems excessively ridiculous. How'd you get to that park then?"

"Portal," I admitted. "But it wasn't mine. You really didn't know about this?"

"Not a word," she sighed. "It said we had to watch for you to show up in three different places. I just assumed that meant you were doing it yourself." She chewed her lip. "I don't know a terminus in Colorado Springs. Closest I can do is Denver."

I shrugged. "Denver it is, then."

"All right," she said, walking to another archway in front and to the right of the one we'd entered through. While she got to work on the next gate, I looked around, being careful not to touch anything. I noticed for the first time that the table, or altar, didn't match the rest of the room. There was no writing anywhere on it, but the top had several...pictograms, I guess, simple and very stylized. The surface was divided by very fine lines into nine sections, one per archway, and in each section was a glyph. A cloud, a tree, a snowflake. Only the arch we'd come in through was blank. Laurel was working on the arch marked with a crescent moon.

"Ready?" she asked me.

I frowned. That hadn't been nearly as long as the last time, no more than a minute. When I turned away from the altar, I saw that the portal itself was also different. Rather than a void in the world, it was like looking through cheap glass, or maybe the heat haze over asphalt in the summertime.

Nothing like those Laurel or Aiko had made. But *exactly* like Ryujin's portal.

It appeared to be nighttime on the other side of the arch, and I could just make out the dim outlines of trees and rocks. The inscriptions on the arch itself had also changed, and were glowing with a soft silver-white light—a light, I noticed, which was exactly like moonlight, and that same crescent-moon sigil was formed by slightly brighter runes. Apparently whoever had made this place wasn't big on subtlety when it came to a theme.

"Where now?" I asked, walking closer.

"Faerie," she replied succinctly. "On the Nighttime side of things. You coming or not?"

I shrugged and stepped across the boundary. There was no horrific interval of infinite darkness, this time, just a faint tingling across my skin—although, trust me, having the interior of your nose and ears tingle is a pretty weird sensation on its own.

I emerged onto a simple footpath at the edge of a dark, moonlit forest. (It was a crescent moon, of course, although in real life it was waxing full.) The air was gently perfumed with pine, bee balm, and night-blooming flowers, with just a hint of something sweet and unpleasant underneath, like decay in a perfumery. It was dead silent, except for a soft breeze coming from the left—the forest. To my right the woods faded into a broad, open plain which extended as far as I could see in the half-light.

"This way," the Watcher said, and took off down the path. The silver, faintly glowing gravel crunched under our feet.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

About half an hour later, she turned off the path and we started walking through the grass. It was very nice grass, green and luxuriant with silver tips, and came up to my thighs. Unfortunately, it didn't feel nearly as nice as it looked. Anywhere the stalks brushed against me, they scratched my skin, and the marks it left itched terribly. Its smooth surface was deceptive, too, hiding rocky, uneven ground that tried to trip me every other step. The message was quite clear; this was not a place that welcomed visitors. They might as well have put a sign saying *Stay on the path*. It would have been less communicative.

After another forty minutes of tiring, irritating, itchy wading through the grass, we'd made it into the hills. They weren't much by my standards (between Colorado, North Dakota, and Wyoming, I'm kinda hard to impress with a hill), short and grassy.

Against all expectations and geographic sanity, though, the other side of the first row of hills was neither more hills nor rolling plains. Instead, the hill turned into a perfectly sheer cliff, plummeting impossibly far below us.

I stared down into the canyon, and could just see the silver ribbon of a river at the bottom. How far down was it? A thousand feet? More? I couldn't even guess. "Nice," I said, mostly because you have to say *something* when faced with that, and anything more eloquent seemed to be beyond me at the moment.

"Isn't it?" the Watcher said, laughing. "The path's over here."

Normally, I would have been somewhat unnerved at the prospect of descending a thousand foot deep canyon in the dark by a narrow footpath. Fortunately I had two advantages. One, if I fell, I would have plenty of time to manipulate the air so that I wouldn't splatter. In fact, with how easy magic was on the Otherside, I could probably manage to get myself back out of the canyon without even having to climb. Two, as a werewolf, I had significantly better night vision than any normal human. It still wasn't bright (and, like a normal human, I had no detail or color vision in the dark, which is why I still use lights), but the sliver of moon was plenty for me to see by.

I did feel a little sorry for her, though. I would not like to go down that path without a failsafe.

When we'd descended maybe three hundred feet down the cliff (although the river below seemed just as far away), she clambered up and over a section of rock to the side of the path—the cliff side, obviously, not the drop-off side. The boulder was barely two feet from the rock wall and about four feet tall, but she disappeared from sight the moment she dropped over the edge. I stared for a second then shrugged and followed.

On the other side of the outcropping was a small hollow, filled with the same grass as before. It was maybe fifteen yards in diameter. The opposite side from me was very definitely the same cliff as we'd been walking down, but nothing else seemed right. The rock I was standing on, for example, was a good ten feet tall, and similar rocks formed an enclosure around the hollow, though no such rocks had been visible from the path.

"I hate the geography over here," I said, dropping down into the depression. "Worse than hallucinating."

She snorted. "You think this is bad? Wait 'til you see the weird places. Escher would shit himself." She cracked her knuckles absently, turning to the cliff. "Don't throw up this time, please. Would be very awkward."

"Well, all right," I muttered just loud enough to be audible to another werewolf—which is to say, too quiet for her to hear. "But only cause you said please. I mean, I was really looking forward to throwing up, but I guess I can take a pass this time for you."

About ten minutes later, I stepped through into the infinite void. And, upon exiting the other side a subjective eternity later, promptly hit my head on something. Just as I straightened up, Laurel exited the portal behind me, thereby shoving me roughly forward and bouncing my head off of—this time I identified it correctly—the corner of a metal shelf.

"What the hell! What is it you have against my head?"

She chuckled. "Yeah, it is a little cramped in here. Hang on, the light's on the other side of you...." The Watcher contorted to stretch past me, in the process shoving my head into the shelving unit again. A moment later a simple electric light flickered to life, showing me....

"A *janitor's closet*?" I demanded.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time, okay? Now this is the fun part. You went through first, so the door's closer to you. I think if you turn sideways I can reach around you to pick the lock. Yeah, that'll work."

And that's how I wound up twisted sideways and standing on one foot while the creepy psycho-Watcher reached one arm around either side of me to manipulate the lock with a very nice-looking set of picks. It was, to say the least, an awkward position.

I could, of course, have opened it myself. It wouldn't even have been difficult—I've been playing with locks for the entirety of my adult life, on a purely hobbyist basis except for a bit of mostly-legal locksmithing work, and I was clearly a fair bit more experienced than she was. But as far as I knew she wasn't aware that I had that particular skillset, and that made it information I wasn't ready to give out yet.

Don't get me wrong. She seemed friendly, and I was sure as hell planning on using her talents against whatever bastard had been responsible for this curse. But the fact remained that she was a scary person who had shown herself willing to use violence against me, and I hadn't forgotten just how creepy she had seemed initially. She might be my ally, at the moment—but she was by no means my friend, and I wasn't about to forget it. That meant that I treated her as a potential enemy at all times, and that meant concealing whatever abilities I could from her.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Of course, paranoia does have its costs. In this case, for example, it meant that I tripped and fell flat on my face when I went to move once we'd gotten the door open. And, of course, dragged her down with me, which meant that I knocked my head on the tile floor, and a hundred-fifty plus pounds of Watcher landed on me. And, of course, thanks to the awkward positioning, her elbow fell in the small of my back, and Tyrfing's hilt was in my abdomen.

For those of you who have never landed gut-first on a hard, knobby steel object, this was a rather unpleasant experience. By which I mean that I had been exposed to literal torture which didn't cause me that degree of pain.

I extricated myself and, wheezing, managed to stand up. "It's okay if you want to kill me," I wheezed. "But do you think we could maybe just fight, instead of you trying to bust my head open one piece at a time?"

She glanced at me as she stood and walked out of the closet. "You okay?"

"Oh sure, sure. Don't mind me. Werewolves are people too you know. Just because it'll heal doesn't mean it doesn't *hurt*."

"Actually," she said, "I didn't know. I've never worked with a werewolf before."

I frowned. "Really?"

She nodded. "Scout's honor." She may have made some sort of gesture then; I'm not quite sure, thanks to the repeated cranial impacts. I honestly have only the vaguest concept of what that phrase means anyway, so who cares.

"Why'd you get this job then?"

"Beats the hell out of me," she said cheerfully. "I'm assigned to the southwest, but mostly anything involving werewolves gets handled by the Guards." She shrugged. "I've found it's best not to ask too many questions about these things."

Right. And pigs were undoubtedly about to start crapping on me from above.

I shook my head to clear it. "Where are we, anyway?" I said, letting what I was pretty sure was a lie go unmentioned. No sense alienating her any more than necessary this early in the game. Glancing around a bit didn't help, because it seemed to just be a poorly lit hallway. Wooden doors opened off at regular intervals, but none of them seemed to be open.

"University," she answered, moving toward the right. "This is the computer science building."

I blinked. "Really? Seems pretty quiet."

"Yeah, not much going on here at midnight."

I blinked again. "Wait, what? It's midnight already?"

"Yeah, you lost a bit of time in transit. And...well, somehow it always seems to be midnight when you exit from the Nighttime side of Faerie." She shrugged. "You get used to it."

Down a flight of stairs and out the door, and we were outdoors. I'd seen the campus a few times—hockey games, mostly, and then I came back with Kyra to visit once (she was an engineering student, once upon a time, although she never graduated). I'd never seen this part, though, and in the dark I wasn't really sure where we were going.

Laurel was. "Come on," she said, setting off to the north. "There's a parking garage the next block over."

"You have a car parked here?" I asked, jogging for a few seconds to catch up.

She snorted. "No. But I do have a set of picks and a total disregard for private property. Fortunately the ethics board has lax views on theft."

Why was I not surprised.

She wound up hotwiring a recent-model black sports car. It was a nice change from, say, Kyra's vehicle, believe me. You'd think that you wouldn't find the highest quality vehicles at a college campus (feel free to add your own starving student joke), but there were actually plenty to choose from. I guess that's the benefit of robbing a private university.

"Wake me when we get to the Springs," I said, laying my head back against the rest. I wasn't entirely sure why, but I was brutally tired.

I was asleep within five minutes.

"Wake up," she said about thirty seconds later.

I opened my eyes and looked around muzzily. "Wha?" I mumbled, blinking.

"We just passed the Air Force Academy," she said mercilessly, speeding down the mostly-empty Interstate. "You said to wake you when we hit Colorado Springs."

I blinked some more and then shoved myself upright. A quick glance around confirmed that we were, indeed, back in my town, and furthermore that it had actually been most of an hour since we left Denver. "Right. Thanks. Okay. What do we do now?"

"Don't ask me," Laurel said pleasantly. "You're in charge."

"Great," I muttered. Then, louder, "How much do you know about what's going on?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Pretty much just the bare bones. I know there's a curse going around, and I know everybody who gets hit with it is connected to you somehow. That's about it, although I have been able to examine the curse in detail."

"When you broke it on Anna, correct?"

"Yep, and also on several other people. They all shared the same base structure, if you were wondering."

I frowned. Something wasn't quite clicking here. My instincts—wonderful things, instincts, they come highly recommended—were clamoring that there was something painfully obvious which I had overlooked.

"And the memory block?"

She shrugged. "Mixed in with the curse. Probably to keep us from getting any information out of them."

"Why did you torch my house, anyway?" I asked absently while I tried to nigger at whatever it was my hindbrain was trying to say. Always pretend to have more information than you do. That way, even a person trying not to tell you anything ("I can't tell you that") is actually conveying some very important info ("Yes, it was us who burned your house down.")

"Someone burned your house down? Shit, man, I'm sorry. Wasn't us, though." Okay, so that theory never seems to actually work. That doesn't mean it's a bad idea. Really.

I frowned. I hadn't really expected it to be the Watchers—but it didn't fit with the pattern of anybody else out to screw with my life, either. Burning my house down, sure, I could see a dozen different people doing that (Loki foremost among them), but this sort of elaborate revenge mechanism? Didn't fit. And the timing made it pretty damn unlikely that it was an unrelated event.

"Luckily," I said, "I wasn't there at the time. Okay. How did you find me at the restaurant, anyway? Did you get the tracking spell up and running again?"

"Didn't need to," she said smugly. "The car was bugged. Why did you think we gave it to you?" Ouch. Really should have seen that one coming.

On the other hand..."So you could still find it?"

She shrugged. "Sure."

"Okay then. Here's what we do...."

About five blocks in, I was really starting to regret my own paranoia. Not that I thought it was wrong about Laurel or anything, she really set my teeth on edge, but it would have been nice to get

dropped at the door. I'd been holding off the fatigue pretty well the past few days considering how hectic things had been and how little rest I'd had, but it was starting to catch up to me, hard.

On the other hand, a little tiredness was well worth keeping the location of my lab at least nominally secret from the Watchers.

As I unlocked the front door, there was a rustling sort of sound in the metal garbage cans around the corner. I tensed, but it was only Snowflake, who launched herself at me with none of her normal decorum. The usually reserved husky hit me in the chest with all four feet and bore me backward to the ground, where she spent several moments licking my face. Rather than words, all I got from her was an overwhelming sensation of relief. A sure sign that she wasn't feeling herself, that; Snowflake prefers to communicate with pseudo-telepathy, rather than the directed empathy which actually comes more easily to both of us.

"Hey, girl," I said, hugging the dog tightly. Snowflake is a big girl, and she can take care of herself, but I'd been getting increasingly worried at the lack of communication from her and Aiko. I mean, granted I'm not the world's best conversationalist, but I'd like to think they would have *noticed* that I'd been gone for—what? Nearly a day, now? Damn. This whole Otherside-travel thing was really screwing with my sense of time. I couldn't even remember how long this had been going on, at this point. It didn't seem like very long, but it must have been most of a week by now.

Where have you been? I couldn't find you, that's not supposed to happen, where have you been? Snowflake asked, squirming around in my arms so that her ice-blue eyes stared into mine from less than three inches away. It was sort of amusing, really; I almost never see that level of emotional reaction out of her.

"Kidnapped," I said lightly. "Which makes no sense at all, given that I'm not a kid and I didn't get to take a nap. What happened to you?"

Some guy in a suit came in to talk to Aiko right after you went to the bathroom. I couldn't hear what they said. I don't know why, either—my ears are supposed to be better than that.

Magic, probably. Kitsune as a race have an excellent reputation for illusions and trickery of all kinds, and Aiko had repeatedly demonstrated that it was deserved. If she couldn't dupe the ears of a husky, no matter how thoroughly augmented she was, I'd eat my hat. (It makes it a lot simpler to say things like that when you don't actually wear hats.)

"What happened after that?"

She scribbled something on a napkin and stuck it under my collar and left without saying anything, she said, frustration tinting the communication like a whiff of sour milk. It's still there, by the way, and it itches like hell. I couldn't read it, of course, because she took the time to tape it closed and I don't have any fucking thumbs, but presumably it explains what the hell she was thinking.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I sighed. Somehow, every time I think life hates me, it comes along and proves me right. I mean, as many jokes as I make about how everything around me becomes complicated and the gods are (quite literally, at least a few of them) conspiring to make my existence hell, I really wish I were kidding more often.

The first thing I did, once Snowflake was confident enough that I wasn't about to disappear again to let me stand up, was to get inside and lock the door. The locals had gotten to know me well enough that they wouldn't be in a rush to start trouble; after the first several to try wound up with badly broken bones while Snowflake and I laughed, even the muggers got the idea. But that didn't mean that it was a good idea to stand around in the middle of the night.

The second thing I did, once we were safely ensconced behind locks and wards, was to take Snowflake's collar off. As she'd said, there was a much-folded scrap of paper underneath, which did indeed turn out to be a napkin which had been taped shut. And what was with *that*, anyway? Not even I carried Scotch tape everywhere I went.

Anyways, I eventually managed to get it open, without damaging the napkin. It was written in purple ink (don't ask) and read:

Winter,

Damn, that was fast. I wasn't expecting this for at least another day or two, or I would have told you. Apparently interfering with those mages pissed the family off more than I expected. My uncle showed up while you were in the bathroom with an 'invitation' to come explain my actions to the higher-ups, and I don't get to say no this time.

Before you start going on, yes, I knew this would happen going into it. I made my choices, and I can live with the consequences. No, they probably aren't going to kill me. And, before you start going off on a guilt trip: Not everything is your fault, okay? I mean, seriously, I was the one who told Aubrey he should be more proactive about getting the girl.

Try not to get killed, okay? I'll be in touch.

I read the letter. Then I read it again, hoping that I had misinterpreted it somehow. Then I just stared at the paper for a moment. The handwriting—eccentric, ranging from huge looping letters to scribbles so compacted as to be nearly illegible—was Aiko's, and hard to imitate. The purple ink was a holdover from an *entertaining* event that had taken place about a month back (no seriously, don't ask. Trust me). The napkin smelled primarily like Snowflake, of course, closely followed by grease from the restaurant, but I had superhuman olfactory capabilities and under those I could also detect the touch of fox I associated with her physical scent, and just barely the mild, vaguely floral perfume she'd been wearing.

It would be extremely hard to forge a note that thoroughly, even for very powerful people. There were too many small details and idiosyncrasies—to say nothing of Snowflake. I don't care how

much time you have to work with, it takes some serious skills to lift *anything* from under her collar without her knowing it.

Meaning, basically, that this was almost certainly genuine. And that was seriously worrying.

"Well," I said aloud. "That's just wonderful."

What?

I set the napkin down on the floor where Snowflake could get to it. As she had implied, the dog was perfectly capable of reading—meaning that she collects dictionaries and used textbooks, and she's read more classic fiction than I have (you have no idea how funny it is watching a dog read *Old Yeller*). I think she and Aiko had been doing language lessons while I was working in the lab some days, so she probably had at least the obscenities down in several other languages.

Great, she said once she'd finished. You got kidnapped—I presume that was the psycho-mages? Thought so. I'm still sore from that gorillafreak in the alley. Enrico's dead. And now the fox is gone.

"Yeah," I said. "Things are looking pretty shitty. Did you learn anything while I was gone?"

Not really. What's the Watcher update?

"They're all crazy, for one thing," I said bitterly, resting my head on the table. Damn, I was tired. "And now we get one of our very own following us around. I sent her to get the car Erica took, figured that would get her out of our hair long enough to figure out what to do."

The same one that's been chasing us around town?

"Unfortunately, yes."

There was a long pause. *I think I want to quit now, she said eventually. This isn't fun anymore.*

"Me too," I sighed. "But I don't think ditching town is gonna be enough for this one. These people are too stubborn."

I always say that the best part of living the way I do is that I can always say, with perfect honesty, that things have been worse. This time was no exception. The problem was that it didn't *feel* that way. I knew that I had seen worse things, but somehow that didn't feel like much consolation. My girlfriend was AWOL and might be dead by now for all I knew, two of my three real friends had been afflicted with black magic curses because of me, and one of them had just committed suicide.

It was, in short, a disaster. Making it worse was the fact that, unlike most of the disasters I'd been involved in, I couldn't really blame it on someone else. This wasn't someone else's problem that I happened to be helping out in. It wasn't pack business. This was my mess, plain and simple, and I'd been doing a horrible job of cleaning it up. I dug through my pockets until I found the sheaf of papers detailing the victims of the curse. Thirteen people I'd failed.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Maybe it was time to just call it quits.

"Oh, spare me the pity party." Legion's voice was caustic as usual.

"I am not interested in dealing with your crap today, Legion. Shut up."

"Oh, sure," he said bitterly. Well, not really; the tone was exactly the same. It was just that I *knew*, via no means I could understand or which he could explain, that he was communicating bitterly. "That's me, just here to do what the boss says. I'll just leave you two to wallow, then."

I raised my head to glare balefully at the demon, while beside me Snowflake had just begun to growl. She—or, more properly, he, because this was primarily about the wolf inside her head and that entity was born male—never did like Legion much. They got off to a phenomenally bad start. "I don't expect you to understand, demon."

"Oh, I understand plenty," he shot back. "Like the fact that you're all too freaking moronic to see past your own noses. 'Why does this always happen to me? What did I do? I'm so depressed.'" This last was said in an exaggeratedly whiny tone which was obviously meant to be a caricature of me. It probably wouldn't have bothered me so much, except that it was disturbingly close to what had been running through my head a moment ago.

I found myself on my feet without any awareness of how I got there, staring into Legion's cruel white-blue eyes. My fists were clenched at my sides, and I couldn't help but notice that Tyrting, which I had dumped as soon as we left the Otherside because carting around swords is generally not the best way to avoid attention, had found its way to the worktable right next to me. "I'm sorry," I said quietly. "I thought I was your boss." My fingers had gone white, I was clenching my fists so tight. Snowflake sidled away, whining softly.

"That was the deal," he said mockingly.

"Then unless you have something useful to add," I said, still in that very quiet, very even tone, "I recommend that you shut. Up. Right now."

"Yeah?" Legion jeered. "How 'bout this, Sherlock? If this whole thing was about getting revenge on you, why would they go after freaking Erica? Did you ever wonder that?" He shook his skull sadly. "No, I guess not. Way more important to feel sorry for yourself."

I stared. Then I looked down at the list of names. Then I looked back at him. "What are you getting at?" I asked, anger giving way to confusion.

He did that not-shrugging thing again, except this time there was an element of not-sighing mixed in too. "Last time I saw you, you were talking about how this might be a revenge mechanism. Okay, I can go there, that's a classic. But Erica? Really? Even I know you hate her guts. Seems like this guy's doing you a favor to take her out."

I stared some more. Then I said, "You're right. You're absolutely right. How did I not see that before?" I ignored his insulting, predictable—and, honestly, fairly accurate—reply in favor of looking once again at the sheet.

Enrico and Anna were both obvious targets for someone trying to hurt me. Keegan and Sergio were a little less predictable, but still fairly easy to figure out for anyone digging into my background. Same for Rachel, and maybe Michael the bartender.

Who was left? Abdul, who was directly related to Aubrey—Aubrey who had no apparent motive for wanting revenge on me, Aubrey who wasn't really all that as mages go, Aubrey who had been getting along fine with the rest of the Inquisition. Jimmy, Erica, and Katie were all part of the same gang. So was Mac, who as a nurse worked alongside doctors every day. Was one of them the man on this list? It seemed quite likely. Especially given that they were at the same hospital, which I hadn't caught before.

Jasmine was a hippie who, if I recalled correctly, had a number of interests in common with Erica. It was not inconceivable that they would know each other—and, like Erica herself, she wasn't someone who anybody would think to take revenge on as a proxy for me. Luna knew everyone in the local preternatural community. Considering how much time all of the Inquisition spent at Pryce's odds were beyond long that none of them knew her.

Right then, everything started clicking into place. I knew why they had gone about it this way. I even had a fair idea who was behind it.

Now if I could just think of how to shut them down—with, if possible, *extreme* prejudice—we'd be in business.

Chapter Ten

I don't like this, Snowflake said for maybe the fourteenth time in the past twelve minutes.

I know, I shot back, keeping the communication as slight as I possibly could, such a minimal investment of energy that even she would barely notice it. The Watcher was supposed to meet me at this intersection in about ten minutes, which I naturally assumed meant that she was already here spying on me. (Paranoid, remember?) I wasn't quite sure whether it was possible to eavesdrop on my conversations with the husky—probably not, given that she was an animal and that particular gift was rare indeed, but I didn't feel like taking unnecessary chances. There were already too many involved which I couldn't eliminate. *But as far as the Watchers know, you're just a dog. That's the only hole card we have.*

I know that, she shot back, the faintest touch of a growl in her mental voice. *That doesn't mean I have to like it.*

A couple minutes later, I spotted the ridiculously blatant Watchermobile approaching. It wasn't hard; the streets are never really empty in the city, not even a relatively small one such as Colorado Springs, but it was almost two in the morning and they were far from busy. I ruffled Snowflake's ears one more time, and then stood and walked out of the alleyway. Snowflake stayed, ghosting back into the shadows. She should have been painfully obvious—her fur is mostly *white*, for Loki's sake—but she disappeared almost instantly. Magic? I dunno. I mean, I've seen her do some pretty freaky things—if nothing else, no normal husky can launch herself ten or fifteen feet through the air with enough accuracy to land on a gorillathing's head, or take a hit from one and keep scrapping, and her ability to find people she considers pack is absolutely uncanny. That's why she was so unnerved when I was kidnapped—the Otherside, coupled with the (presumably significant) distance, had prevented her from doing so. But she claims not to know anything about doing magic, and I've never noticed the smell, so maybe it's something else going on.

I left her, trying to ignore the twinge of loss I felt, and went to meet my mostly-ally. She stopped in the street with an admirable lack of concern for laws, appropriate behavior, and the cars she forced to drive on the wrong side of the street to go around her FBI-esque behemoth.

"Did you get the information?" Laurel asked as I hoisted myself up into the Watchermobile.

"Maybe," I said. "Got another lead, anyway. Did you get my stuff?"

"In the backseat."

With a little contortion, I was able to ascertain that all of the goods we'd purchased from Jacques were still there. I left the shotgun because, as comforting as the idea of having it around was, I was fairly sure it was a wee bit much for the moment, and way too easy to see. The cloak could only cover so much.

I did take the pistol, though, folding it neatly into the cloak, which formed a neat pocket around it. And I dropped a hand grenade in, too, because why the hell not? I mean, it *was* easily concealable, right? And I'd seen firsthand the damage a couple of these babies could do; they were a custom model, which I'm pretty sure violated several international treaties and were totally illegal for me to even lay eyes on, and they pack one hell of a punch.

"Where now?" the Watcher asked.

Rather than answer directly, I shifted around, trying to get comfortable—for such a huge seat, they didn't exactly do a great job in that department.

Of course, if my right hand happened to fall right next to my thigh, that was a total coincidence. So was the fact that, prodded by my will, the shadow-stuff of my cloak shifted around beneath the surface and brought my brand-new forty-five to exactly that position. Really. Oh, and so was the knife that slipped into my left sleeve. Totally coincidental. Trust me.

"It seems to me," I said slowly, "that it's about time we get some things out of the way."

She glanced at me. "Such as?"

"Well," I drawled, "I ain't stupid, if'n you know what I mean. I know you're lying to me, okay? That's cool, I totally get it that you guys are super important and you've got all kinds of secrets. But I kinda think this might work better if I, you know, actually knew what was going on in this specific case." I smiled brightly, showing off bunches of teeth and meeting her eyes. She looked away after only a moment. I get that reaction a lot, and I can't honestly pretend that I don't understand it. I'm used to them, but I freely admit that my amber eyes are a bit creepy, especially when you haven't seen them much, and my smiles generally look more "psycho" than "friendly."

Most werewolves look different in the wolf form than they do as humans, and especially they look different around the eyes. The hair doesn't tend to change that much beyond obvious differences in texture and placement, and neither does relative body size—a big man usually turns into a big wolf. But the eyes, the eyes change.

Mine don't. In fact, I hardly change at all, visually, aside from the obvious.

And I look like a pretty normal wolf.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," she lied. It wasn't a very good lie, which told me that she wasn't trying to be deceptive. It might be a formality, or a joke of some sort, but I was confident that she would have done a better job than that if she were really *lying*.

I snorted. "Yeah, I'm sure. Do you have a list of people you know have been affected so far?"

She started to say something, paused, and then pulled an envelope out of an interior pocket of her cloak. It was the ultra-cheap kind you buy at Wal-Mart and had no markings whatsoever. She handed it to me with a grimace and pulled back out into traffic.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I opened the envelope and pulled out a couple sheets of blank, anonymous printer paper. The first one was a letter written neatly in black ink. *You might want to consider improving your social skills, Wolf, it read. Just before two? If so, I just won the betting pool. Normally I wouldn't tolerate this sort of impudence. However, in this case, I'm willing to make an exception. The list is enclosed.*

I glanced at the clock. One fifty-seven. I sighed. "She wrote that before I woke up, didn't she?" I asked rhetorically. It wasn't signed, but it hardly needed to be.

Laurel glanced at me, seeming almost embarrassed. "Yeah."

Of course she had. As far as I knew genuine prescience was impossible, which meant that she was just scary smart. Or she'd given Laurel a few dozen letters to pick from, which would also be pretty creepy when it comes to foresight.

I put the letter back into the envelope and examined the other sheet. It was, fortunately, significantly more informative than the letter—not so much because of the names that were on there, as the ones that weren't.

I had, by this time, memorized the list we'd gotten from Jacques. This was the same—except that it didn't include anybody that would inspire me to suspicion. That meant no Erica, no Jimmy, no Luna, no Jasmine, no Dr. Witt, no Michael.

In fact, looking at this list, I could see why you would immediately fixate on me. There wasn't one name on this list that wouldn't show up on a list of people closely related to me. Except, of course, Abdul, and that was where their forgery fell apart.

See, Jacques was a scumbag. He was a disgusting, reeking, disgusting, shambling, disgusting, pathetic, and disgusting wreck of a probably-not-human being. But, and this was very important, he clearly knew what he was doing. Aiko wouldn't have vouched for anyone but a top-notch black marketeer. And no top-notch black marketeer would have thrown away a steady customer without a damned good reason. Not due to moral concerns, of course, but because reputation is everything in my world, and a known oathbreaker would soon have no customers at all.

I trusted the Watchers rather less, for obvious reasons. As such, I was inclined to go with Jacques's list where the two differed—given that it had clearly been prepared with me in mind, I couldn't trust a thing on the Watchers' list. And, by comparing the two, it was pretty easy to see what was going on with theirs.

They had deliberately removed any indicator of what was really up, with the exception of the one person they *knew* I was already aware of. Abdul, really, was the one weakness—they couldn't cover that up, not when I'd already talked to him. Oh, it wasn't much—had I not seen the unredacted version, or had Legion not slapped a bit of brain back into me, I probably still wouldn't have noticed a thing out of place. As it was, though, it was a telling gap, and one that answered most of the questions I'd really been going for when I pressured her for the list.

"Where next?" she asked impatiently, jerking me back to reality.

"Memorial Hospital," I said absently, tucking the envelope into a pocket.

She looked at me oddly.

I shrugged. "I didn't pick it."

Memorial is a decent place, for a hospital. Which, granted, makes it only a slightly higher class of hellhole, but I have to give them credit for trying. And, if I'm being totally honest, a lot of the problem is me, not them.

I hate hospitals. Everybody does, really, but I hate them extra.

What it comes down to is this. Nobody goes to a hospital because they want to be there. Nobody. You go to the hospital because you can't go anywhere else. Oh, there are different classes of need—the girl in the emergency room who can't breathe right 'cause she just got shot in the lung is in a whole other world of unhappy than the guy there for some routine tests. But nobody *likes* going to the hospital. Except maybe a handful of people with really weird fetishes, I guess, but they don't count.

So lay that down as the base, and remember that I have extra senses to experience it with, and they aren't much better. Hospitals always smell the same. The first thing I notice, the first thing anybody notices, is the disinfectant. They splash tons of the stuff around, probably trying to cover up all the other smells. Under that you have the blood, the shit, the chemicals with twenty syllables in their names that do things I can't begin to understand. Then, right on the border between physical and magical odors, you have fear, desperation, agony, death.

I don't care how much disinfectant and air freshener you pile on. There's no hiding that kind of stench.

So that right there tells you a lot about why I don't like hospitals. They're not pleasant places. But, for me, there's another layer underneath, and that is the people there.

Don't get me wrong. I don't hate sick people. I sure as hell don't hate doctors. They're good people. I'm the one with the problem. I have no difficulty admitting that.

I'm not human. I'm a monster, really, by most definitions, and I'm sure not a safe person to be around.

I am a predator.

Now, I've had a lot of years to get used to that and I'm not surprised anymore, but the fact remains that there are all kinds of instincts that come with that status. When you've spent a decent chunk of your life seeing the world from the point of view of cats, dogs, coyotes, foxes, hawks, and various more exotic animals, it has an effect. It has a *profound* effect.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

And that was *before* the werewolf thing. Between the two, well, I was more animal than human, mentally. I could cover it up pretty well, but I wasn't in denial about it. End of the day, I'm a predator. It's who I am, and it's what I am, and all the pretty words in the world aren't going to change that.

And one of the universal truths about predators is that they target the weak.

That's what they mean when they say that predators can smell fear. If you flinch, if you hesitate or (God forbid) limp, they see that you're vulnerable. Predators of any stripe have a very strong urge to attack that kind of vulnerability. In fact, most predators' victims will fall into a few categories. Unless the animal in question is desperate, they tend to be the injured, the young, the sick, and the old. Predators almost never attack a healthy individual of a comparably sized species.

Now look at who goes to hospitals.

So yeah. That's the real reason I try to avoid hospitals whenever I can. If I'm physically capable of hunting, almost every person I see there provokes a violent instinctual response in me. I see helpless people, and some part of me can't help but think about what easy prey they would make.

I don't let it control me, of course. I've had my whole life to learn to keep those impulses in check. It's still an intensely uncomfortable reminder of a part of myself I generally try to keep hidden, though, and it isn't something I enjoy.

So I don't go to the hospital often, unless I'm dealing with a life-threatening injury myself.

But Mac worked nights, and I didn't have the time to wait for her to get off-shift. So, you know, there I was.

"Probably best if you wait here," I said, unbuckling the seatbelt I'd only put on to stop that infernal dinging noise. Come on, like I don't *know* when I'm not wearing the thing?

The Watcher looked at me sidelong. "Something you don't want me to know?" she asked. Her voice was light, but after seeing how creepily cheery she looked while on the brink of violence I wasn't trusting it.

"No," I said. That was truthful enough, as far as it went—I was pretty sure she already knew, I just wasn't sure I wanted her knowing that I did. "But my source doesn't like talking to strangers, and introductions would take too long." Which was also true.

She sighed. "Fine. You aren't back in half an hour, I'm leaving."

"Fair enough."

They weren't thrilled about me showing up at the emergency room, oddly enough. I couldn't imagine why. I mean, shady characters showing up at two in the morning, uninjured, wearing a grey-black cloak and refusing to go through the metal detector isn't a big deal. Must happen all the time.

Okay, so maybe they had a point.

Eventually, though, after a whole lot of fast talking, I got the receptionist to tell Mac to come find me when she got a chance. Then I went back outside, to get away from the smell and to avoid freaking people out more than I already had.

It's a hard job working nights at the emergency room, okay? They didn't need me making it harder.

It was almost fifteen minutes later, and I was starting to wonder whether the message had been relayed after all, when Mac finally opened the door and walked out.

Mac was one of those people who...well, the only way I can think of to explain it is that she was too perfect to be real. Seriously, you could pretty much write up a checklist of "hero-appropriate" traits and run down it, and be hard pressed to find something Mac *doesn't* fit.

Tall, blond and beautiful? Check, at least for some versions of beauty—not enough character, if you ask me, but I'm a biased source. Well-spoken and always eager to see the best in others? Check. Dedicated to helping people? Absolutely—she works night shift as an ER nurse despite having both hemophobia and trypanophobia (I love how you can just tack things onto -phobia and make new words. It's hilarious). Presumably they weren't that serious, because I don't see how you could work in a hospital if you were really that scared of blood, injury, and needles. But Loki had thought it worth mentioning, and that wasn't something to dismiss lightly.

Of course, like any good hero, Mac really doesn't like me all that much. She's a pacifist—a real pacifist, I mean, the kind who I could actually see refusing to fight back if attacked—and I'm...not. So she looked pretty belligerent when she saw me. "It's you," she said, and for a second I thought she would turn right around and go back into the hospital.

"It's me," I confirmed. "I need your help."

"Are you bleeding?"

"No," I began. She immediately turned to go back in.

I stepped forward and grabbed her by the arm. Not hard—I wasn't trying to hurt her, and she knew a good few nasty tricks she could have used if I did, especially given that I was making skin contact—but firmly enough that she definitely noticed it. "Wait," I hissed. "Hear me out here." She stopped moving, and I let go.

"Touch me again and I sue you for assault," she said, just as quietly as I had spoken but with a greater quantity of venom. She meant it, too, and she would probably be successful if she did. I mean, she was a pretty white female nurse, I was a creepy looking dude who attracted the attention of the police on a regular basis, and we were within sight of her coworkers. That was the kind of case that causes defense lawyers to make the sign of whatever dark and mysterious gods lawyers worship.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Look," I said desperately. "I know we haven't seen eye-to-eye often—or, well, ever—but I'm trying to help, here."

She stared at me. She said nothing. She said it very loudly.

"Do you know a Dr. Witt?"

"He's my boss," she said bluntly. Her voice wasn't *quite* openly hostile.

"Has he behaved...erratically lately?"

She frowned. "He called in sick a few days ago, if that's what you mean."

I let out my breath. Damn, it feels good when you take a wild guess and it actually pays off. "What would you say if I told you that he wasn't sick? That it was the result of a major-league curse? That he was only one of a number of people who have been affected by this curse recently? That at least one of these people has been driven to suicide already, and I have no idea how most of the others have reacted?"

Her frown deepened, but at least it didn't look like it was directed at me. "Do you have any evidence?"

"I give you my word," I said seriously—with reason, because that's a *very* serious statement on the supernatural side of things; a lot of us, being bloody ancient, are a wee bit old-fashioned, and if somebody learns that you've broken your sworn word it's pretty much curtains for you, buddy. "Other than that...." I pulled the sheet of paper out of my pocket, along with a pen. And yes, I carry a pen everywhere I go. It isn't the weirdest thing that lives in my pockets, believe me.

Mac watched curiously as I wrote a series of names on at the end of the list the Watchers had given me, finishing with Dr. Witt. "These are the people I know have been hit," I said. "Abdul is the boyfriend of that girl Aubrey's been stalking."

"I'm not sure stalking's the right word," she said absently, staring at the sheet of paper. A moment later she looked up and met my eye. "Somebody's gunning for us," she said, *us* in this case referring to the Inquisition.

"Looks like," I said. "And me too." I smiled slightly. "Did I mention that this curse involves mental witchcraft designed to inflict pain? It's almost enough to remind me of the last time we worked together."

Comprehension dawned. "Jon's dead, Winter."

I nodded. "I know. We shot him half a dozen times, I chopped off his head, and then Loki burned what was left." I tapped the list pointedly. "Doesn't mean he didn't have a friend, though. Somebody who might be looking for revenge by now."

She stared some more. "I see. What should we do about it?" Mac doesn't much like me, but she's seen me in action enough to respect me, and she knew that I wouldn't deceive her about something like this. Plus, if I was right, my own ass was on the line too, and that wasn't something I was likely to ignore.

I sighed and tucked the sheet of paper back into its pocket. "I don't know. There's something very, very fishy going on, and I don't know who we're looking for. For now? Wait, be ready, be careful who you trust."

She nodded firmly. "I can do that. God be with you." She went back into the hospital without saying goodbye.

I stood there for a moment longer. "I doubt it," I said finally, though I knew she didn't hear me. "Why would He start now?"

I turned to leave, feeling incredibly bitter about...well, pretty much everything.

I was, just barely, back within Laurel's time limit.

"Well?" she asked as I got into the Blatantmobile. I got the distinct impression that her patience was running short, and I honestly couldn't blame her. From her perspective it must have seemed that I was just burning time, and dragging her around with me while I did it for no apparent reason.

"There was a witch in town a while ago," I began. "I don't know his name, but he went by Jon. He was a mentalist, same as the current curse, and he was experimenting with some sort of ritual to drain power from preternatural beings."

"Really?" she said. "That's really interesting—"

I held up one hand. "Stop," I said wearily. "Stop right there. I get it that you don't like sharing, but I'm not a moron, all right? Maybe you didn't get involved, that's cool, but I don't for a moment believe that you people didn't collect information on it. So don't try and give me that line."

She stared, and I could almost see the gears shifting in her head as I was reclassified from *tough-talking werewolf bruiser* to *tough-talking werewolf bruiser with a brain*. Before she could quite finish the process, I continued. "So," I said, trying and failing to maintain a veneer of politeness. "Please, and I mean this quite seriously, *please* just answer this one question honestly. If I told you that I have solid evidence that this is related to him, that the person responsible for this curse either is or is employed by a person who was some sort of ally of that mage, what would you think?"

She was silent for a long moment. "I don't know what that means," she said finally, and I got the impression that she might actually be being honest for once. Shocking, I know. "I can look into it, but it'll take time." She looked at me, and although it was hard to tell for sure through all the lies and insanity, I

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

almost thought it might be a look of concern, or maybe even pity. "Get some sleep, Winter. I'll call you in the morning."

Chapter Eleven

It hadn't really sunk in, until now, what had happened.

My house was gone. As in, burned-to-ashes-and-sown-with-salt, never-coming-back gone. I hadn't had insurance of any kind and there was no way I could afford to replace it.

Which is how I wound up sitting alone in a darkened motel room not far from the college, staring out the window at the city and trying not to cry. Not the manliest of things to do, I know, but—

—but there's no point trying to lie, is there? That's the worst part about being brought up by werewolves, I think, and especially werewolves like the Khan's family. I can't lie to myself, not really, not the way other people do.

My house was gone. Just—gone. It hadn't been much, but it had been mine. My home for most of my adult life. It was practically a part of me. The furniture was terrible, but most of it brought back memories of working with Val. I'd never see it again, not any of it. The memories were all that was left, and they were bittersweet at best.

My best friend, excepting possibly Kyra, was dead.. He'd killed himself, and why? Because of me.

I could tell myself that it wasn't what I intended, that I'd done everything I could, and it would be true. But you know what? Every step he took on that path, there I was, smiling and holding out my hand, from the night I told Kyra to change in front of him against both of our better judgment, right up to the day someone cursed him to get back at me. My fault, every bit of it.

The same damn story as always. I make the mistakes, but it's the people around me who die. I couldn't even remember, anymore, how many innocents had died because of me. How many of the people who got close to me *hadn't* I killed?

What do you do when you've already done everything, and all you accomplished was to make things worse? Aiko was missing, Enrico was *dead*, and for what? I was no closer now than I had been at the beginning, not even an inch closer to fixing the problem.

I stood up and put my shoes on. Somehow, I didn't think I was going to be able to get any sleep anyway. And then I thought about Watchers, because self-pity was a luxury I didn't have time for, and I didn't deserve it anyway.

If I couldn't sleep, and I wasn't going to throw a pity party, that left little for me to do other than think about what had happened. When I did, I noticed a pretty glaring inconsistency, one which left me more than a little frightened.

Enrico killed himself because he couldn't take the guilt. Because he knew he'd flipped out and almost killed Robert, one of the nicer werewolves I'd met. I could see him doing that; the ex-cop had

always had a strong protective streak, and he was worse about guilt-tripping himself than I was. It was tragic and senseless, but utterly believable.

Except. Except if this curse, vicious and nasty thing that it was, included a memory block...

How had he even known what he'd done?

And for that matter, why would you include that sort of thing in the first place? When you want to hurt someone, and it seemed quite clear that was what this mage was after, the last thing you want to do is erase their memory of the pain. That defeats the whole purpose.

But Laurel had, for want of a better phrase, lifted that curse several times, and done it smoothly—much more so than my clumsy attempts. To do that you would have to be a witch with a fondness for mental effects.

In other words, *exactly* the right kind of mage to place a memory block—or, for that matter, to lay down the curse in the first place.

Laurel had been the one to pay for this motel room. Suddenly, I wasn't at all convinced that had been a good idea. And, given that I wasn't going to be getting any sleep anyway, I might as well get moving.

Besides, I had a decent idea where I had to go next.

Back to where it all began, of course. Isn't that always how it goes?

I didn't trust the phones, not anymore. I had no way of knowing how deep the poison ran, or what capability the enemy had. Against a single person I had a decent chance, I thought—but I didn't really think that was the case. Not anymore. I had no idea who I could trust at this point, and it wasn't far away, so I decided to walk rather than call for a ride.

After about a minute, I wasn't sure that was the brightest idea. I'm paranoid at the best of times, and I knew that at the moment that would be heightened even further. But, even taking that into account, I felt a lot more uneasy than I should have. There was an itch between my shoulder blades, and I had to fight the urge to look back over my shoulder.

I've survived a lot of assassination attempts now, and in the process I've necessarily learned a bit about *how* to survive them. Lesson number one: if you think there's something dangerous going on, if it feels like your instincts are trying to tell you that there's somebody after you, they're probably right. It isn't a matter of being a werewolf, either; humans get that too. As a species, you evolved in a world where pretty much everything wanted to kill and eat you, not necessarily in that order, and you evolved to survive that. Just because you don't *listen* to your instincts doesn't mean that they don't still *talk*.

Incidentally, that's why the best hunters will all tell you that the trick is *not* being sneaky. If you *try* to creep up on someone, you give off all kinds of cues that they can pick up on. If you wear a bunch of black and skulk around behind them, they will realize that something's wrong every time, even if they don't know how or why. On the other hand, put on a janitor's uniform and act casual and you can walk right up to them without them ever noticing a thing.

This guy obviously didn't know that trick, because my scare-o-meter was pegging it. I glanced back over my shoulder, making it a part of my gait so that it wouldn't stand out, and focused all the senses at my command behind me.

Was that section of the street just a little blurry, as though there were something there I was being prevented from seeing, my eyes skipping from one side to the other without ever quite registering the space in between?

Did I hear the slightest scuff, as though someone had stopped suddenly when they realized that I was looking?

Did I smell the faintest touch of anise on the air, and the nostril-burning sensation that marked magic?

And that is why magical invisibility is inherently unreliable unless mixed with a sizable helping of mundane stealth. Once they twig to you, the tiny imperfections in any spell of hiding are plenty to give you away.

I broke into a run. Behind me, I could just hear a muttered curse as whoever was tailing me realized his—or her, because this might well be Laurel—cover was blown. The sound of footsteps pounding behind me, way way *way* too close, urged me on.

Ten feet to the alley. I'd juke into it, and then use the poor lighting and my cloak of shadows to weave my own spell of concealment. I'd left the shotgun with Laurel—*stupid, stupid*, the part of me that had been screaming all along not to trust anyone that creepy shouted—but I had a big-ass pistol loaded with charged silver and iron, and Tyrfin was never far from hand, and between all of that and my werewolfiness I could do a number on pretty much anything in close quarters. I reckoned that if I made it into the tight confines of the alley, whoever was tailing me might well know that well enough that they would simply stop following me at that point.

Eight feet. Five. Three.

Too slow.

Something hit me in the back, a hammer of fire and agony like nothing I'd experienced before. My vision went to black and red, and I was only dimly aware that I'd fallen—been knocked, really—from my feet. That is, until I hit the ground on my left side, and another blast of burning lightning slammed through me.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I tried to push myself to my feet, and failed. I couldn't even move, the pain was so bad; just trying to get my arms under me provoked another surge of agony that threatened to drive me from consciousness entirely. I couldn't even *breathe*.

I looked desperately back up the street. A figure was approaching, having abandoned all pretense of stealth. It was dressed all in black, barely even visible, and it was carrying a pistol in one hand.

That's when it clicked. I hadn't been hit with some sort of horrific curse—I'd been *shot*. With, and now I could identify at least a piece of that horrible burning sensation, highly charged silver. I'd never actually been shot before, and I was stunned at how much it *hurt*.

I knew that my enemy, the mage who was responsible for all of this, was coming. I knew that if they wanted to hurt me right now, there was absolutely nothing I could do about it while lying in a heap against the wall. And it made no difference whatsoever. I still couldn't get my arms underneath me.

The footsteps stopped, right next to me. This close, the stench of magic was practically overwhelming. I forced myself to shift enough to look at them, determined that if I was about to die I would at least see it coming, though even that motion sent fire all through me.

It was too short to be Laurel. And that was exactly all I could say, because the bastard was swaddled in black cloth. I mean, seriously, black cloak (that was supposed to be my look, you jackass), black gloves, black boots, black mask (mask? seriously), black sunglasses (come on dude, don't you think you're taking it a little far here?). There was literally not one speck of skin, hair, or eye visible. How was I supposed to identify my attacker like this, dammit?

"The bullet clipped your kidney," he—and it definitely was a he—said after a moment. The voice seemed familiar, but it was hard to tell through all that muffling. "I expect it hurts, but if you stem the bleeding soon you should survive."

And with that he turned and walked away. "Aren't you going to kill me?" I asked weakly. I knew it was a stupid, stupid thing to say, but at this point I was too confused *not* to ask.

He didn't look back, but he did stop. "Of course not," he said, sounding genuinely surprised. "I want you to *suffer*, fool. Why would I let you die this easily?"

"What makes you think I won't just let myself bleed out?" Not that I *wanted* to die, of course, that should go without saying by now, but this guy was seriously creepy and I wanted to mess with him.

I could hear a smile in his voice. A cruel smile, to be sure, but a smile nonetheless. "First," he called back over his shoulder as he resumed walking away, "because you were always too stupid to stop when you should. And second, why, if you die...who will stop me from doing the same to everyone you've ever known?"

A moment later, without breaking stride, he pulled his veil back around himself. Given that I was, y'know, a wee bit distracted with the bullet wound, I lost track of the moving void that marked his location almost instantly.

The first thing I tried to do was stand up. That didn't go so well. When the burning sensation had faded enough that I could see, I decided to focus on surviving the next few minutes first and worry about ambulation later.

It had been more than a few years since my last first aid class, but some things you don't forget. Because of this, I knew that I was in deep shit.

There are two things you have to worry about with a kidney injury. The first, which I'd already encountered, is that it hurts like hell. There seriously aren't words to describe it. I don't care how badass you are; somebody stabs you in the kidney, you feel it. The silver made it infinitely worse. The bullet must have passed straight through me, because I couldn't feel it burning me like acid from the inside out, but just traveling through my flesh was horrible.

Nothing hurts worse than charged silver. Nothing. I'd always known that—even if, for a while there when I wasn't quite as werewolfy as I am now, I forgot. But now I knew it on a whole new level, and it made me understand how a werewolf could claw her own eyes out trying to get rid of the silver dust in them.

So that was the first thing. The second thing that you have to worry about with kidney wounds, the important thing, is blood loss. The kidneys serve as the filter for all that crap that winds up in your blood. Thus, they get about a third of your blood supply, all to themselves.

He'd said that the bullet only clipped my kidney. I knew he must be right because, werewolf or not, if he'd hit it dead on I would have bled out before that conversation finished. As it was, there was still a very good chance that I would do so in the next few minutes.

Alas, the clichéd villainous speech was dead on the money. I really was too stupid to quit—although a large part of that was, contrary to what he'd said, simple revenge. He'd hurt me, on all kinds of levels.

Nobody gets away with that. Not nobody, not no how.

It took me a few seconds, but I spun my cloak of shadow into a band around my midsection. The silver burn kept me from concentrating enough to congeal it into something thick enough to do much good at absorbing the blood, but there was enough of it to wrap around me a few times and I managed to convince it to apply a decent amount of pressure—which, believe me, helped the pain exactly not at all.

Makeshift bandage securely in place, I took a deep breath—*ow*—and called for Tyrfin. Thankfully the cursed sword appeared instantly, lying on its side in the modest puddle of blood which had formed around me. And if the symbols of death worked into the scabbard seemed more prominent,

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

and the black stones in the pommel seemed to glint more than usual, and my eyes lingered on the way the scabbard was wicking up my blood instead of effortlessly shedding it the way it did other liquids...

Well, it was probably just me. Sure. I believed that.

Moving slowly so as not to black out from pain, I gripped the sword by the hilt. As always the touch of it, familiar and cool and grim as a starving wolf, seemed to banish the pain a little. Not that it went away; I still hurt, waves of fire threatening to swamp me with every movement. It just didn't seem to matter as much.

I was forced to move with maddening care, slower than molasses in February, and I had to lean heavily on both Tyrfing and the wall behind me, but I managed to get myself on my feet. I kept most of my weight on the sword, using it as a makeshift cane as I turned and hobbled down the street. I had to bite back a scream every other step, and my peripheral vision seemed to be blurring, and there was a trail of blood in my wake, but I was moving.

The destination hadn't changed. It was just that the urgency had spiked.

The next few minutes were a blur. I staggered desperately through the nighttime streets, seeing nothing but what was directly in front of my face. I saw no one, and if anybody saw me the weirdness of a wild-eyed man dripping blood and leaning on a gold-hilted sword staggering down the road in the dark of the morning was sufficient to overwhelm any altruistic impulses they might have had.

My confusion wasn't helped by the fact that, somewhere between calling Tyrfing and actually standing up, I'd started slipping across the boundary between physical reality and the conceptual overlay that connected it to the true spirit world. Either that, or I was just seriously hallucinating, you never know.

In any case, everywhere was light. Tyrfing was a shaft of fire, vibrant scarlet and silver, swirling around a core blacker than Loki's soul. The walls around me were a particolored patchwork of thousands of tiny sparks, echoes of everyone who'd lived within them, flash-frozen memories preserved long after those who made them had forgotten. My blood, crimson tainted with grey, boiled on contact with the air and gave rise to curls of mist after it hit the ground.

It was, to say the least, a little bit distracting.

At one point I became aware that I had stopped, and was leaning against a wall again, eyes focused dully on the street sign twenty feet away. I forced myself back into motion, growling incoherently under my breath. Another time, when I was less than a block away from my destination, I tried to get back up from where I'd fallen and realized that I couldn't. Even with Tyrfing to lean on, the pain and weakness—and dizziness, which I knew was a very bad sign, even if I couldn't seem to remember why—were just too bad.

So I crawled, abandoning the sword in the middle of the sidewalk. The clatter of steel on concrete seemed to echo toward me from a long ways away. Crawling was, if anything, more agonizing

than walking had been, and it drove anything resembling thought from my mind. The next clear memory I had was of staring up at a familiar door. I was lying face down on the front step, hardly able to lift my head enough to see.

I couldn't reach the doorbell. It was hilarious, at least in my current condition. I survived being shot with silver, made it an impossible distance, reached my destination...and now I was about to die because I *couldn't reach the doorbell*. How pathetic is that?

I found a bit of clarity, somewhere down there. No. I hadn't made it this far, survived all the shit I'd been through, to die like this. No way. Fuck that.

I summoned Tyrfing again, although even that effort was almost beyond me. I couldn't feel my hands and I could barely see them, but I managed to wrap them around the sword. I lifted the sword, my arms shaking from the weight, and, with the very last of my strength, let it fall against the button.

I heard, very distantly, the chiming sound. Tyrfing fell, disregarded, from my hands, and I barely registered it when the cursed sword landed on my uninjured side. I didn't hurt anymore, oddly enough. I just felt...tired. So tired. Maybe a little bit cold.

What's with that? I thought muzzily. Even my thoughts sounded like they were coming from a long way off now. *I'm not supposed to be...the one...who...gets...cold....*

And then my eyes slipped closed.

What happened after that, I have no idea.

At some point I started drifting back toward consciousness. I fought back. I didn't want to wake up. Waking up meant...pain. Debt. Living with the consequences of my myriad failures.

It didn't hurt, where I was now. I was floating in a dark cold sea, and there was no pain, and when you're all alone you can't kill your friends. Why would I want to leave this place?

Why would I want to be alive?

Eventually I couldn't keep it back anymore. The pain returned first, and that was the end of my rest.

It hurt to breathe. It hurt not breathing too, but when I took a breath the pain blossomed from an ache in my lower back to a bloom of fire from my thigh to my shoulder, sank its claws into my guts and spread across my chest.

I opened my eyes. It took me seven tries, but I managed it.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I hate silver poisoning.

I was lying, still in my extensively bloodied clothes, on top of a neatly made bed. The room was very dim, and I couldn't work up the energy to turn my head, so about all I could say from sight was that the ceiling was at a normal height, and painted a light cream. I could smell generic air freshener and blood, and hear my own labored breathing.

About that time my stomach informed me that, so long as I was paying attention to things anyway, it would quite like to be fed. A lot. Maybe I could start with about twenty pounds of meat, and go from there.

No surprise. Healing was heavy work, even for a werewolf, and I hadn't eaten in...actually, I had no idea how long. I mean, obviously I had no way of knowing how long it had been since I was shot, but even before that I wasn't sure when the last time I had food was.

I tried sitting up. It wasn't much fun. I sweated a bit, and cursed a lot, but eventually I managed it.

Once I was uncomfortably leaned up against the back wall, I was able to get a better look around. Tyrfing was lying in bed next to me, of course; it might be an ancient and terrible cursed weapon that was constantly trying to kill me and everyone else, but you couldn't say it was less than faithful. Otherwise, the room seemed anonymous, almost featureless. One dresser, the top of which was scrupulously clean, stood over to my left. The nightstand next to the bed was likewise spotless, giving away no information about the person who owned it. The closet was shut off from the rest of the bedroom by a simple sliding door, which was closed, and there was no clothing visible except from the bloody stuff I was wearing.

I shivered a little. The last time I could remember being in such a perfectly anonymous, life-by-numbers room was in the house of a recently deceased vampire. This place wasn't that creepy, certainly didn't have the pervasive almost-blood reek of vamp sunk into the walls, but the comparison wasn't exactly nice.

About that time Mohammed opened the door and came in, making no more noise than the average housecat. He was holding a tray, on which were arranged a mug of what smelled like herbal tea, a bowl of soup, and a piece of what I was betting was homemade bread, with all appropriate flatware. (Incidentally, have you ever actually heard someone use that word? I mean, I know silverware is inaccurate most of the time, for which I thank whatever deity might have been responsible, but flatware? Doesn't seem very descriptive, does it?)

He looked exhausted. I mean, I'd thought he looked tired and careworn before, but that was nothing compared to now. His eyes were sunken, and he moved with the careful delicacy of someone who isn't sure how much longer they'll be able to stand.

"Hey," I said, my voice sounding about as strong as he looked, and rasping in my throat unpleasantly. "Good thing you were home, huh?"

"Indeed," he said, carefully setting the tray down on the nightstand. His hands shook a little—not enough to spill anything, but enough that I saw it. "Praise be to God."

I reached out, my own hand none too steady, and snagged the tea. It smelled of chamomile, peppermint, and honey, and the cup was just full enough that I wound up with tea all over my lap when a tremor went through my hand at an inopportune moment. I try not to make a habit of being severely injured, but it's happened often enough that I wasn't surprised by how I felt.

I sipped at it cautiously. It was just the right temperature, almost hot enough to burn, and tasted heavenly. I wasn't worried about being poisoned at the moment, given that Mohammed could have just let me bleed out on his doorstep if he wanted me to die. "Funny thing about that," I said. My throat felt a lot better about it this time around, thankfully. "I should be dead."

His lips quirked into a tired smile. "Miracles do happen, Winter."

I glanced away. "Maybe," I said, suddenly feeling more exhausted than he looked. "Maybe so. But they don't happen to me, do they? Not the good kind of miracle, anyway."

His smile stayed stubbornly in place. "What do you mean?"

I set the tea back down. "How's Abdul doing, Mohammed?" I asked, meeting his eyes again.

Some emotion flickered across his black eyes, almost too fast to see. Then he sighed and slumped, the motion bringing out the signs of wear on his face. He grabbed a chair from just outside my field of vision, a simple and unadorned oak armchair, and sat in it. "He is doing as well as can be hoped, I think," he said, and that same unidentifiable emotion lurked in the bottom of his voice. "He was not injured by your little tussle, the doctor says, and he seems to feel well."

"Does he remember anything of what happened?"

"Nothing. He says that there is nothing between when he first complained of feeling poorly until he awoke after you left. It is a disappointment, I suppose, but I think also a blessing."

I grunted an agreement. "So what are you?" I asked after a moment, grabbing the bread from the plate. At least if I dropped the bread it wouldn't burn me.

"I don't understand the question."

I snorted, mouth full of bread. "I think you do. See, he wouldn't just forget, you know? I'm pretty sure of that. Now, I know I didn't do it, and there aren't all that many other candidates. So what are you? What are you really, Mohammed?"

There was a long pause. "I suppose I knew you would figure it out eventually," he said finally. His voice was odd, the same as that of the man I'd known for much of my life but simultaneously inhuman, with odd over- and undertones. "I am djinn."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I grunted. Djinn. That explained a lot. I'd read a lot about the Arabic fire-spirits in my eternal quest for knowledge of the magical beasties of the world. It was hard to get a precise fix on their power, but removing a teenager's memory while he slept seemed well within the realm of what a djinn could do. "Normally I'd have smelled that," I commented.

He bowed his head slightly. "Many things are possible, if you have knowledge and are willing to pay the price." Hard to argue with that.

"I thought most of your people weren't fond of the faith," I said, eating some more bread.

"Alas, many of us are not. I have tried to convert my fellows, from time to time, but I am not the speaker the Prophet was and few have listened."

I nodded. "Why'd you call me, then?"

He grimaced and looked away. "My abilities were sufficient to preserve your life when you would otherwise have died," he said. "And also, as you said, to remind Abdullah of what he is not. Not to help him remember what he is." There was the faintest trace of bitterness in his voice.

"Really," I said, my own voice hardening. "You're one of us freaks, Mohammed, you would have known what I can and can't do. You have to have known that I was a terrible choice for that kind of work. So again I ask, why me? The truth this time, please."

He didn't look at me. "Because," he said softly. "I was informed that I had to, that it had to be you. That if anyone else were to break the curse it would be only laid again, and more strongly."

"Informed by whom?"

"By the one who cast it," he whispered.

Wonderful. "Who was it?" I demanded.

"I do not know. I was given a message, but there was not a name on it."

It made a whistling sound when I sighed. Apparently I'd lost a tooth somewhere in that painful, delusional run, and I just hadn't noticed it until now. A shame, that; werewolves can heal almost anything given enough time, but amputations of any kind tend to be permanent. "Why didn't you just tell me?" I asked, feeling more exhausted than ever. "I would have helped. Come on, Mohammed. You *know* me, man."

He looked at me. His black eyes, which had a hint of flame in their depth now that he wasn't hiding what he was from me, were nevertheless cold, and hard. "No, Winter," he said, his own voice equally tired. "I *knew* you. But I hear things, and the things that I hear about you?" He shook his head slowly, pushing himself to his feet. "I don't know whether you are the monster that he became, or merely a beast which has taken his face for its own. But you are not the man I once knew. He would

have died rather than do such things." He turned and left without another word, closing the door quietly behind himself.

I felt like I'd been stabbed. Or, maybe more accurately, like I'd been stabbed a long, long time ago, and Mohammed's words had been the cheerful twist of the knife still sticking out of my back.

The monster that he became. Gosh thanks. I really needed to hear that.

I ate the rest of the food and drank the tea, and at some point became aware that I was crying.

And the worst part of the whole damn thing was that I knew that every word he'd spoken was true. Every one.

God, it's fun to be me.

I didn't see Mohammed again. No surprise there; he'd clearly said all he meant to. What more could he add, anyway? "I wish you were dead?" Obviously not, because whatever his opinion of my monstrosity, he still went out of his way to save my life. "Don't come around again?" Already got that, thanks. "You should have been the one to die?" Take a number, queue forms to the right.

After I'd finished eating, although I still felt rather hungry, I took the time to examine myself. The wound was closed, which came as something of a shock. Wounds inflicted with silver, especially potentially charged silver, tend to heal no faster than human, and occasionally even slower. I would have expected to still have a gaping hole straight through me.

Whatever Mohammed had done to me, though, I was far from mint condition. Fresh scars, angry red and violet, radiated out from the epicenter on my lower back, and my abdomen where the exit wound had been was even worse off. The wound felt like it was a month old, but it was definitely not completely healed. I could breathe, and walk without assistance, but that was about my limit. Running, fighting—you know, the things I was likely to need to do pronto—were out of the question.

Even more fun was the fact that I had no idea how durable I was. The wound felt old, but it wasn't, and since I didn't know how it had been healed I wasn't sure how much stress it could take without reopening. Was I as unnaturally tough as I had come to rely upon being? Or would I rip my guts open just by twisting the wrong way?

The only way to find out was, obviously, no way to find out.

The bedroom turned out to be on the second floor. I tottered unsteadily down the stairs, wincing slightly every time my left foot hit the ground, and then walked down the hallway, keeping one hand against the wall in case I happened to slip. All the other doors were firmly closed, a subtle but not unnoticed reminder of my status here. The newly-revealed djinn might have helped me, but I was not welcome in his home. Not anymore.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

He must not have lost all good feeling towards me, though, because I found a sub sandwich wrapped in plastic sitting on the kitchen table, next to a Styrofoam cup with more soup in it. Stacked neatly beside them, and covering most of the rest of the table, were the contents of my pockets from last night. I checked carefully, but everything appeared to be there, and I felt a palpable sense of relief as I twisted my cloak back into a long coat and sorted my gear back into place. Miraculously, I hadn't even lost my pistol or knife when I played with the shape of the cloak, which was frankly more than I had expected.

I drank the soup, which was still hot, and took the sandwich, which was still cold, with me as I left. The door clicked shut behind me, and then it locked itself.

Chapter Twelve

It was morning. My phone, which had barely any charge left by now, informed me that it was in fact the *next* morning, and I had slept through a full day after my, ahem, accident. I wasn't too terribly perturbed by that; it was a small price to pay for still being alive and moving.

It also told me that I had missed three calls, all from the same number, which I did not recognize. Laurel, most likely. She had told me that I would be hearing from her, and she must have been getting either furious or worried by now.

I didn't feel quite up to dealing with her yet. Besides, I needed to swap my gear now that I knew more about the opposition. As usual, that meant the lab.

I still didn't know who to trust, but it was sunny and surprisingly warm out, and under the enveloping coat you couldn't see the bloodstains, so I could walk the streets without concern. It was a bit of a walk to my lab, but not terribly so, and I'm accustomed to walking through the city.

I might have been concerned, after the way it turned out last time, except for one thing. In the middle of the night, you can reasonably expect to corner somebody alone in a side street. That just doesn't happen at eleven in the morning, and everything about this guy suggested that he wasn't into direct confrontation or showing himself. It would have been highly out of character for him to attack me directly in broad daylight.

Thankfully, for once the villain appeared to be willing to agree with my analysis of the situation. I saw plenty of shady business on my way to the lab, but nothing excessive or unusual and nothing that smacked of a setup. Of course, I didn't breathe easy until I was safely behind locks and wards, and even then it was touch and go.

Snowflake walked most of the way with me. I wasn't sure that I approved of that—she was still my trump card, and I wasn't certain that I wasn't currently under surveillance—but sometimes you have to make allowances. She was, end of the day, still a dog, and that was more than just her appearance. She didn't like being separated from me for long, and especially not when she knew there was a game afoot. Between that and my unexpectedly long silence, I would have had to beat her off with a stick to keep her away, and even that would have been iffy.

She hadn't seen, heard, or smelled anything useful since I saw her last, so mostly I told her about what had happened to me, and she stuck as close to me as caninely possible, as though to reassure herself that I was still alive. She didn't say much, but the feeling of her worry echoed down the connection between us with a message all its own.

Back at the lab, I finally took the time to listen to my voicemail. The first message, as I had predicted, was from Laurel telling me that she'd learned something, and that I should call her as soon as I could. The second, left late last night, said that she was assuming I wasn't responding because I

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

couldn't (nice job there, Sherlock) and she was going to try and deal with things solo. Of course, like all good morons, she neglected to mention what it was she'd learned, what she was actually *doing* about it, and where I could find her.

These people, I swear. One of these days maybe I'll link them to the Evil Overlord list and totally blow their minds. I mean, come *on*. Have they never watched a movie in their entire life or something?

The third was less than two hours old. For a fraction of a second, I was hoping that she would be telling me that she'd found our culprit, or maybe even that the problem was solved because she'd offed him already.

It was, of course, not that easy. I knew this as soon as the message started. Because, as you may have predicted (I know I did, after that last message), it wasn't Laurel speaking.

"Hello, Wolf," said a smooth, confident, slightly muffled masculine voice. "I do hope you're feeling better. It wouldn't do for you to be playing at anything less than the top of your game, you know. As you have most likely surmised, I have your Watcher friend in my custody." There was a brief pause, punctuated by a groan of pain in the background. Laurel, presumably.

"You have twenty-four hours," he continued. "If you do not find her within that time, she will die. Good hunting, Wolf. I look forward to our next encounter."

Snowflake swore. At great length, and with startling originality, in three languages.

I was not a happy camper.

I did not, I feel I should hasten to say, give much of a damn what happened to Laurel. She was weird and disturbing, I had no idea how much of her apparent friendliness was a front, and she'd gotten herself into this mess by charging in solo, which even I could have told her was stupid beyond the bad guys' wildest dreams. As far as I was concerned, she could pretty much cope.

Unfortunately, I rather doubted Watcher would see it that way. In fact, I reckoned this would be scored as a definite failing mark on my secret police entrance exam. I wasn't sure whether this would mean, say, a mild reprimand and being passed over for promotions for the next year, or being slowly vivisected. Given that they were the law enforcers for a whole bunch of frighteningly powerful mages and apparently pretty darn good at it, though, I kinda doubted that they would be inclined to be reasonable and understanding about the whole thing. It seemed safe to say that getting one of the boss's favorite operatives killed on my very first unofficial quasi-mission was a very dumb thing to do.

So I pretty much had to save her, whatever my personal preferences on the matter.

That left me with just one teensy-weensy problem, which was that I *still* didn't know who I was chasing, much less where to find his super-secret hideout. And, given that I was working on a short timer now, it didn't seem like a good idea to just wander aimlessly around town. Colorado Springs, while not

exactly Chicago or New York, is still a city of more than six hundred thousand people. The odds of me finding the right place by chance were exactly zero percent.

For that matter, there was no guarantee that she was being held in this city. Heck, given that he'd had at least a couple hours to get his setup perfect, she might be in another state, country, or even a different plane of existence. How the hell was I supposed to comb all the pseudo-infinite depths of the Otherside when I couldn't even *get* there without outside intervention, and everyone interested in helping me had already been removed from play?

Not acting was a nonoption. It would cause all kinds of problems later on, and would also leave this freak free to keep torturing and killing my friends.

Looking for her wasn't much better. It might make me feel better about failing, but it wouldn't make that failure any less inevitable. Short of divine intervention, there was no way I could pull it off.

And that...well, that was where the problem came in.

Most of the time, when someone says they need divine intervention, it's just a figure of speech. A way of saying that it can't happen. I mean, everybody knows that God doesn't work like that.

That's not the case for me. I've met gods, plural. Occasionally, for reasons of their own, they've helped me. It's never been fun, and it's never been safe, and it's never gone the way I wanted it to, but they have helped me.

I could try that route again. This mage might be able to stump me, but nobody hides much of anything from Loki Lie-Smith. He could tell me exactly where to go. Hell, if he felt like it he could arrange every person there to suffer a mysterious case of mass spontaneous combustion. I doubt a being on his level would even notice if the bastard tried to stop him.

The price would be terrible. I was already in debt to him, a debt I took on in exchange for a favor that turned out hardly to be worth it. And that had been from accepting a favor offered. For me to go asking...well, nothing says *I'm desperate* quite like that. He would know that he could ask the moon of me, and I would have little leverage for bargaining.

I thought about it, I really did, and for once Legion and Snowflake both had the sense not to interrupt.

Then I shook it off. I still had more than twenty hours. There was no need for desperate measures quite yet.

Kyra, recognizing my urgency even if I was still reticent about discussing details over the phone, made it to my lab in record time. I still didn't have my shotgun, for obvious reasons, but I'd more than made up the lack in other arenas. I even had Tyrfing, on its heavy studded sword belt, stashed neatly

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

under my cloak. It shows up whenever I call—but not always exactly where I want it or expect it, and generally when I know trouble's coming it's better just to wear it.

Snowflake, who was still boiling over with emotion from my recent absences, piled into the front seat with me, rather than sprawling across the back as usual. It was a touch cramped with her stretching up from the passenger footwell and across my torso to shove her head out the window, but I didn't object as strenuously as I might have. To be honest, I'd missed her too. Strange, how you don't think about how much a part of your life someone is until they aren't there for a while.

"Start driving," I said to Kyra, slumping back into the seat. Considering how long I'd spent sleeping, it seemed utterly unfair how tired I still felt. Oh, I know that I should expect it given what I'd been healing, but still. So not fair.

"Where are we going?" she asked. I knew that she was curious about what was going on, but she was also intelligent. She knew that I would tell her, and she knew that if I was talking about something else first there was a reason for it.

Normally I would say it was exceedingly stupid to pull that kind of stunt with a werewolf, doubly stupid with a strongly dominant werewolf, and gratuitously idiotic when dealing with an Alpha. In their world, imperious behavior is something that happens to other people, usually because of them. Fortunately, there *are* certain benefits to being the Alpha's best friend.

"Nowhere yet," I said, rubbing my temples. I guess my headache was at least distracting me from the bullet wound, but that's a pretty damn pathetic silver lining. "But I reckon, y'know, moving target and all that."

She did as I asked, but shot me a concerned glance as she did. "Is somebody chasing you?"

Right. She didn't know the specifics of what was happening, of course. I hadn't spoken to her since before that Otherside jaunt. Terribly rude of me, really, especially given that Enrico was one of her people.

All of which would have been too much to say. So I stuck to, "Yeah. Look, I need a favor."

"Anything I can do," she said immediately. She meant it, too, which was the scary part.

I shouldn't have that kind of trust. It isn't wise.

"I need somebody found."

"Got any leads?"

"No," I admitted. "You remember the mages that tried to abduct me from your place?"

"Sure. We looking for the female or the male?"

"Female. Last sighting probably last night or very early this morning. She was driving a black SUV, conspicuous as hell." I pulled a slip of paper out of my pocket, on which I'd written down the plate numbers as soon as I'd seen the vehicle (paranoid, remember? It has some distinct drawbacks, but it's not without upsides either) and passed it to her.

"Gotcha," she said, cutting across several lanes of traffic and turning into a parking lot so that she would have her hands free. "What should they do if they find it?"

"Report," I said immediately. "No recon, definitely no direct action. This guy's serious bad news."

"Wait, what guy?"

"Tell you in a minute."

She frowned, and I could tell that she didn't like it one bit, but she didn't argue, for which I was grateful. I didn't have the energy to argue right now, and it was imperative that this process be started immediately.

She made two calls, the details of which I won't bore you with (no, really, there wasn't any secret information in them that would give something important away—they really were exactly what you would think), and sent a few text messages, and that was that.

And *that* is the beautiful thing about allies. Alone, I couldn't hope to find anything, not within my time frame and probably not at all.

Kyra, on the other hand, had just set roughly thirty werewolves, their extensive contacts in the police department, the criminal organization I'd never encountered but which (apparently, I had only heard the vaguest of details) the pack had deals with, and who knows what all else on the trail. That's a lot of manpower, and between them they covered pretty much all the bases for investigation. If there was a trail to be found in this city they would almost certainly find it.

I could probably have called Conn and had most of the world receive, if not the same treatment, at least a cursory examination. I didn't want to do that, though, because I'm always nervous about asking favors from the Khan and because the layers of bureaucracy involved would almost not be worth it. Better to start here, and if that failed I could always go to my other contacts.

"Are you going to tell me what's happening now?" Kyra said in a tone which, although still quite pleasant, nonetheless carried a definite reminder that regardless of how much the Alpha likes you it's wise not to push it too far. There are appearances to be kept up, after all; if there had been anyone else present, I doubt I'd have been able to get away even with what borderline impudence I had.

"Absolutely," I said, glancing down and slightly sideways and making sure my voice was in no way challenging. Neither of us cared about such things by this point, of course, but the display of submission would help to soothe the dominant-werewolf impulses she was experiencing.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

What a werewolf feels and gets the impulse to do, often an extremely strong impulse, don't necessarily have anything to do with what she wants to do. It's enough to make me glad I'm not a pureblooded werewolf, frankly; I still get the urges, but they don't seem to affect me as much as average. You learn to deal with it, on both sides, but still.

"However," I continued, "it's rather a long story, and I'm bloody starving, so...." Snowflake made a sort of enthusiastic yipping sound, reminding me that she also hadn't been eating regularly in quite some time.

Kyra snorted and started the car again. "Of course you are," she muttered, softly enough to be indecipherable to a human but not enough to suggest that she didn't intend us to hear it. "You two, I swear."

We wound up eating takeout, because neither of us knew a restaurant nearby that would let Snowflake in the door and she was in no mood to be separated from me at the moment. Which, incidentally, was (in addition to being true) a most excellent cover for my own disinclination to discuss this in a public area.

Oh, it would have been safe. The Watchers were crazy skilled, granted, but they were still a bureaucratic organization, and I believed The Watcher when she said that they were dealing with serious manpower issues. The chances that whatever faction of them I was dealing with, if in fact that was the enemy here, would have ears in whatever restaurant we wound up in was functionally negligible. It's just that I was pretty sure there wasn't such a thing as too careful.

I've never been too fond of Chinese food. I don't really know why. It's just...meh. It all tastes the same to me. Fortunately, hunger makes everything sweeter, and I tore into the mystery-meat-and-assorted-vegetables-in-anonymous-sauce with a vengeance.

"So since when did you go from the prey to the missing persons specialist?" Kyra asked, arranging her lo mein and soup fastidiously on the ground. We were sitting in a park, which was small and somewhat dilapidated but had a few decent cottonwoods and, most importantly, was otherwise empty. Snowflake, who'd already consumed a sizable amount of food, was napping beside me, where she could use my leg for a pillow.

I shrugged. "Got press-ganged. Couple days ago now, her boss asks me to help deal with this cursing crap and I figured, what the hey, I've already got a personal motivation, why not?" I left out the part with the kidnapping; it would only have upset her. "She's been helping out. Then this morning I got a message from the guy responsible saying he has her captive and she's dead unless I get there in a day or less."

She sighed. "Only you," she said, her tone the sort usually reserved for swearwords. "*Only* you, Winter."

"I blame you," I muttered. "I used to be just a carpenter, you know. But no, you had to go asking me for help. All your fault."

She chuckled. "So what is the story with that curse, anyway?" She sounded casual, but I wasn't fooled. I have too much experience with werewolves to be fooled that easy.

"You remember the witch I took down last summer? The one that killed the vampire?" She'd gotten me involved in that one too, as I recalled.

"Sure."

"Starting to look like this is a revenge kick of some kind," I said, nibbling on an eggroll. It didn't seem to be toxic, so I went ahead and ate the rest of it. "Somebody who wasn't happy that we offed him. He's been going after people with a direct connection to me or to the Inquisition."

She frowned. "You got a list?"

"Yeah." I pulled the much-folded sheet out of my cloak and handed it to her. It was a little harder to read now, thanks to my bloodstains all over it, but I'd taken the time to go over it again with a pen at the lab and it was still mostly legible. Besides, as bad as her handwriting is, I don't think Kyra has the right to judge most anyone's penmanship.

She got about halfway down. Then, "Michael's on here?" she asked suddenly.

I stared for a moment. Then I blinked. "Yeah. I guess that with what happened to Enrico—"

—Kyra's face was, for the barest instant, suffused with the bestial rage that reminds me why werewolves are seen as monsters, and the plastic fork snapped between her fingers—

"—I sorta forgot there were actually two werewolves on there." I paused. "Shit."

She already had her phone out again. "He hasn't reported anything like the symptoms Enrico did," she commented, sounding almost idle if you didn't know how to recognize the growl lurking underneath.

My back was aching again, and I rubbed at it—ineffectually, I might add. "Has there been a period, in the last week or so, where you didn't hear from him for a day or more?"

She frowned in thought. "I think so," she said eventually.

"Ask him where he was."

Less than two minutes later, she hung up and told me what I already knew from eavesdropping on her conversation. "Ten minutes after you left my house. He doesn't know what happened between then and when he woke up the next night in a hotel on the other side of town."

And Jacques had already known about it. That was some impressively fast work. In fact....

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

Was it just me, or did that mean he knew *before* Michael was cured?

And that was when the next piece slotted into place. "Thanks," I said, finishing up shoveling food into my face. "Call me if you find anything. And remember, don't try and take this guy solo."

"What will you be doing?"

I stood and gave her a feral grin. "Preparing. Come on, Snowflake."

On the way out of the park, we encountered the first assassination attempt since that exploding lightbulb in the beginning. This one was a Goldbergian setup in which a spider web served as the tripwire. Because really, who *wouldn't* use a spider web as a tripwire if they could?

Anyway, breaking the spider web triggered a dart launcher, which I dodged easily. Then, as best as I could piece it together later, the impact of the dart against the tree opposite somehow triggered a deadfall. We dove forward, Snowflake easily outdistancing me, and I caught the few pieces of stone that I didn't dodge in another net of thickened air.

I'm still not quite sure whether it was the triggering of the deadfall, the impact of the rocks on the ground, or maybe even my own use of magic that caused the next stage to activate. What I do know is that, just when I was starting to exhale in relief at surviving another trap, the next one fell. As in, literally; everything beneath the first three inches of dirt had been removed, and somehow then the supporting structure was removed so that the ground collapsed. While I was standing on it.

Let me tell you, twelve feet of vertical drop when you're not expecting it is nothing to scoff at. Especially when the bottom of the pit is lined with, you guessed it, freaking punji stakes. I managed, by dint of phenomenal good luck, not to get impaled. Hooray. I was not lucky enough to escape what I was confident would be some spectacular bruising patterns, however.

Snowflake, who had been far enough forward to escape both the deadfall and the pit, laughed. Well, in my head it sounded like laughter; audibly, it was more of an amused whining sound.

Oh shut up, I muttered irritably, standing up and brushing myself off. Glancing around, I saw that the pit was only about seven feet across, showing that once again my unknown adversary had been able to predict my reactions with uncanny precision, and the walls were also lined with sharpened stakes.

It was pretty strenuous, but I eventually managed to climb out, using the stakes as handholds. When I finally reached the top, Snowflake was still laughing.

"It isn't funny," I said crossly.

No, she said, even her mental voice threatening to be overwhelmed with amusement. *It's hilarious. Man, you should have seen your face.*

I thought for a second. Then, "No, I don't really think so. I mean, I could maybe go for the timing being a little bit funny, but hilarious? Pfft. The thing with the pangolin and the honey badger was way better if you ask me."

She considered that. *The one with the refrigerator? Nah*, she said eventually. *There wasn't even any blood that time.*

I paused. "You mean there's blood this time?" I asked cautiously.

Sure, I can smell it from here. You must have nicked yourself on one of the sticks or something.

Now that she'd brought my attention to it, I could smell blood too. I sighed. "It wasn't the sticks," I said glumly, twisting around to get a look at my back.

Thankfully, the patch was mostly holding. By which I mean that, rather than a gaping hole big enough to stick a few pencils clear through me, the fall had torn a small hole in my back less than an inch deep.

That was the good news. The bad news was that, even after whatever it was that Mohammed had done, the silver wound was still stubbornly resisting my efforts to simply seal it. Getting at it was more than a little bit of work, but eventually Snowflake and I (Kyra was already gone, in case you didn't guess that) managed to get a bandage of sorts on it. Lucky me, I'd even thought to pack a rudimentary first aid kit into my pockets. Normally I didn't bother, because any wound I can take the time to bandage I can take the time to heal, but I'd kinda been expecting something like this.

And I'd just gotten fresh clothes from the lab, too. Some days are just so unfair.

I didn't hear from Kyra on the way to the shop. I was sorta grateful for that, actually; I had a couple things to get done first, and I knew that when there was a lead she would be wanting to chase it ASAP. I couldn't blame her for that, but it made it simpler that things were going the way they were.

Kris was minding the desk when I got there. She looked up and tried to plaster the classic hi-how-can-I-help-you customer service smile over the bored expression underneath (I say "tried to," because she's even worse at that than I am) when she heard the door. Then she saw that it was me and, in a flash, was out from behind the desk and racing toward me. "Winter," she exclaimed. "Where have you *been*? You wouldn't answer your phone, and nobody knew where you were."

"Easy," I said, holding up my hands to keep her from hugging me. "I'm a little tender." My lips twitched. "You aren't careful there, somebody might get the idea that you cared."

"Of course not," she said. "I'm just saying that if you pull that kind of stunt on me again I'll kill you and bury you in the backyard so I never need to worry about finding you." The way she said it was almost creepy, friendly and cheerful and so deadpan I was almost afraid to ask if she was joking. Actually, it reminded me a little of Laurel smiling her little-girl smile and petting her sword.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Seriously, though," she continued. "Where were you? And why wouldn't you answer your phone?"

"Something came up," I said lightly, flipping the shop sign to CLOSED. That, as much as anything, told her that it was serious. I think it's critical for a shop to keep regular hours if it wants to attract customers, and I'd made it clear that I didn't approve of closing the shop during business hours unless there was an emergency or something.

We got Doug from the shop—he'd been running the router, and hadn't heard a thing—and I explained the whole situation. Except, you know, all the parts I left out. I firmly believe in editing the story to the audience, particularly when it comes to supernatural nasties. Part of what I left out was to remove extraneous details (i.e., traveling the Otherside and learning that Mohammed was a djinn). The rest was because I wasn't ready to trust anyone, including myself, with the information (i.e., Mr. Nobody the senile mage and my growing suspicion that this mess was in fact part of a bigger picture that I wasn't quite seeing).

As they listened, an interesting change went over their expressions. Doug went from his baseline of vaguely cheerful, to a closed expression showcasing nothing of what was going on in his head, to something that could only be described as grim. Kris, who was of a naturally more, ah, *mercurial* temperament, looked progressively more and more angry.

"Do you want our help looking?" Doug asked when I'd finished, his voice as closed and uninformative as his face. Not, I noticed, that he was actually offering to help.

I shrugged. "Maybe if you really want to, but I wouldn't bother. If the werewolves don't find something in this city, it's because there isn't something to find. No, I was more wondering if you might want to pitch in when we find him."

Doug hesitated. Kris, eyes gleaming with a very dangerous amount of emotion, did not. "This guy hurt Katie and Erica?" she asked, her voice deceptively calm. Like a lot of the more impulsive, expressive people I know, it's a bad sign for Kris to sound calm when she should be emotional.

I noticed that she did *not* mention Jimmy. It's a crazy little gang they have, and I have no idea how they stay together when so many of them hate each other so much. I guess it's not really my business, but wow, those people are nuts. Like, more than me.

"Yeah," I said in answer to her question. "I'm sure of it."

She smiled nastily. "I'm in."

Doug looked torn, and for once it was easy to see what he was thinking in his face. On the one hand, he hated violence, and he didn't really believe that this was the right thing to do. On the other hand, he couldn't stand the idea of seeing his friends hurt, not when his presence might have prevented it. He might not count me in that regard—I'm not quite sure, and I've never had the courage to ask, even

indirectly—but Kris most definitely qualified, as did most of the people who would come along to help *her*.

I felt bad for him, really. Just not enough not to ask.

"Fine," he said eventually, and unhappily. "Fine."

I smiled broadly. "Wonderful," I said. "I'll be in touch. Spread the word, and be ready."

The two of them left almost immediately—to get their gear, presumably, and to round up the rest of the gang.

That left me in an interesting position, namely have nothing to do. I considered a lot of options, but none of them really worked. Going out looking myself was a waste of time and energy. I resemble a werewolf quite closely in my fanatical devotion to food, but not even I could really eat again that soon, however much it might have helped the healing process. I was at the shop, but I couldn't make anything useful in the time available. Normally the work itself would help to calm me and make me feel better, but I couldn't even convince *myself* that that would be effective. I was too worked up, too invested. I'd run into a lot of bad things in recent times, but this one hit close to home.

I couldn't go home, of course. I didn't have a home to go to.

Eventually, I said screw it and took a nap on the floor of the shop's showroom. It wasn't especially fun, but I had my cloak to use as a pillow, and I was tired enough to be grateful for it. Snowflake, who is always grateful for an excuse to sleep, lay down in front of the door, and with that security I took a break from the world.

Chapter Thirteen

Three hours later, my phone rang, providing the tragic but necessary end to my break.

The pack had found something.

Kyra came to pick me up personally. I found that highly amusing, in an odd sort of way. Even with all the minions at her command, she took the time to play taxi driver herself. It was funny, okay?

"The van was ticketed on parking violations up on the north side of the city," she said without preamble.

I stared. "And it took you this long to find that?"

She smiled a sharp, thin, predatory smile. "Of course not. I didn't see a reason to bother you until I had something better than that." She pulled out into the light middle-of-the-day traffic.

I waited for a moment, until it became clear that she wanted to be prompted. "What do you have?" I asked, rolling my eyes. Snowflake chuckled.

"My team scent-tracked someone from the car," she continued. "It took a while—whatever it was, they were expecting werewolves."

I snorted. "Gosh, you think? Maybe it's because, gee, they're after me."

She shrugged. "True. Anyway, they backtracked like crazy, covered their tracks with pepper and silver, the whole deal."

I winced. Salting your path with silver was a nasty trick to play. It meant that any werewolf trailing you could, at unpredictable intervals, expect to get a noseful of burning agony, which would at the least render them incapable of following a scent for several minutes, and might (depending on the dosage and the charge) even injure them. It was also, needless to say, quite expensive.

"But they followed it?"

She shrugged again. "Reasonably well. Mostly by not following it, if you get what I mean."

I did. They would have looked for anywhere that didn't have the scent, complete with strong smells and toxic dust. It was harder than following directly, and more manpower-intensive, but when you already had the target localized it could be a frighteningly effective tactic. It was especially good at finding someone trying to leave multiple trails by backtracking.

Don't try and hide from werewolves. It won't work. Granted it isn't quite as stupid as *running* from werewolves—they have the same chase instinct as mortal canines—but not by much. When you go to ridiculous lengths like this guy had, it just makes the game more exciting for them.

"Did they find him?"

She glanced sidelong at me. "Sort of. You should probably take a look for yourself."

About twenty minutes later, and with more than fifteen hours left on my countdown, we were walking down the street, to all appearances a couple idle people walking their dog. Not that there was much of anyone else on the street; I wasn't sure whether it was just that this wasn't a high traffic area, or if Kyra's people were actively warding people away. Probably both. It helped that this part of town was mostly industrial.

Kyra was wearing a trench coat, which in my experience is never a good thing. It meant that either she was armed for bear underneath and didn't want anyone to know it at a glance, or that she was wearing nothing underneath because she wanted to be able to change at a moment's notice. I was guessing the latter; Kyra generally prefers fur for combat.

"This is where they lost him?" I murmured to her.

"Yeah," she said, equally softly. Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed another pair of people leaning against the wall chatting whose eyes were a little too focused to really be as engrossed in their conversation as they wanted to seem. I recognized one of them as one of the female werewolves from the pack. Sentries, which meant that there were probably at least another two I didn't see.

"The trail is pretty clear coming down this street," she continued. We were, she said, about two miles from where the SUV had been found as the crow flies, although the actual path they'd had to follow was significantly longer. "Then, at the next intersection, massive dump of scent-blockers. Not just the pepper and silver, either; he dumped cinnamon, monkshood, the works. On the other side, nothing."

I grunted. "No dust? Or did the wolves get his personal scent?"

"They did," she confirmed. "And both of them stop right there."

"If he could conceal it totally," I mused, thinking aloud, "stands to reason he wouldn't have bothered with the scent bomb this whole way."

"Unless it's a decoy," she concluded. "Take up our time following a fake trail. None of us has a perp to compare it to, so I don't even know that this is the right scent, just that it goes from near the car to here and somebody didn't want it followed."

"True," I acknowledged. "But he could just as easily be assuming we'll go with that and leave off now. That way he gets the satisfaction of seeing us turn around when we're just a few blocks away. Seems like the kind of thing this guy would get off on."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"But he's gone out of his way not to leave traces before," she countered. "Between that and your history of seeing through that kind of doublethink, stands to reason that he's expecting you to think that. Best camouflage is not actually being there, right?"

I nodded sourly. "Do you have any other leads? Anything at all?"

She shook her head. "Still looking. We have an APB out for her description, and if there were any sightings in the right time frame we should be getting reports. I have wolves who know the scent searching the major thoroughfares. Airport security came back negative already." She paused. "Do you think we should arrange roadblocks?"

"Not worth it," I said absently, most of my attention on the problem facing me. "He could bypass any active measures like that."

Like I said. Smart people don't mess with the pack. They tend not to have much middle ground between "No response necessary" and "Retaliate with overwhelming force," and when they decide to hit back it can be pretty devastating.

"I take it you think I should try my methods?" I asked, more or less rhetorically. She'd already made it clear that I wouldn't be here if I didn't have something to contribute. I would have been a bit peeved about that, actually, except that I'd really needed the rest. This gunshot crap was way overrated.

She smiled, still with a little of that hunger underneath but not quite so openly predatory as she had been earlier. She wanted his blood—all of the pack would, after he'd dared to kill one of their own and assaulted another—but she had it under control. Later...well, let's just say that I wouldn't want to be that guy after five minutes in a room with the werewolves. I've seen what happens when somebody makes a pack that pissed off at them, and I was guessing that even a forensics team wouldn't be able to identify the body.

Hell, they'd probably only give even odds that it was human.

Seemingly without a cue of any kind, another werewolf came walking around the corner, a grocery bag in his hand. I didn't recognize this fellow, but the purpose in his movement was unmistakable, and once he got closer the scent confirmed it. Werewolf, through and through.

He handed the bag off to Kyra as he walked past us in the other direction, masking the exchange with a sudden coughing fit. Very casual, very low-key; he was good at this game. I wondered if he had some kind of background in theater or something, or if he'd picked the skill up on the job.

Kyra, in turn, slipped it into her coat and turned us neatly off the main street into an empty alley behind an outlet store of some kind. Flooring, I think. It wasn't hard to see why nobody else was there. There was another man at one end, ostensibly on a smoke break, who paid just that little bit of deference to Kyra that marked him as one of hers even if I couldn't smell him over the cigarette, and the stray dog at the other end was clearly more than just a dog. I wouldn't want to be the delivery guy trying to get past those guys, either.

I wasn't used to Kyra showing her power this openly. She must have called in the entire pack for this; I hadn't seen this many werewolves all at once since we took down Garrett.

I squatted down near the middle of the alley, closed my eyes, and slipped into a light trance state, mentally questing for any animals nearby which might have information pertinent to the cause. It was harder in the middle of the day, when most of my kind of animal were asleep while waiting for better hunting times, but hopefully I could get something.

Kyra knew how the system worked, so while I was doing this she was opening the package of hamburger meat that the other werewolf had fetched from the grocery and dumping it out on the pavement. You don't *need* a bribe to convince an animal to come, exactly, but we were far enough away from my usual neighborhoods that the predators here probably wouldn't know me very well. And, in all honesty, even with familiar animals the bribe helps a lot. Most animals have very clear priorities in life, and food generally tops the list. (Except when it loses out to mating, but *that's* a whole different story.)

I could feel, in that state, all the werewolves around. And it terrified me.

There were a *lot* of them. I felt more than a dozen different sparks of predatory light. And all of them, every one, was thinking bloody thoughts. I didn't know how much of the story they knew, but Kyra had told them that the target had killed one of the pack, and they burned with the need to avenge him.

That's the problem with antagonizing a pack of wolves. First you have the initial flash of rage. But then, as it starts to settle down into a solid flame, it gets into the pack bonds. They aren't as strong a connection as some versions of the story would have you believe, certainly not strong enough to allow true telepathy, but when it comes to transmitting instincts and emotions they are par excellence.

Once an emotion gets into the pack bonds, usually it dissipates. That's why the pack helps werewolves who would otherwise succumb to those impulses keep control; the exposure to the feelings and instincts of their packmates, who aren't experiencing that urge, helps to ground them.

But right now, the whole pack was feeling the anger. It didn't even matter how they had felt about Enrico, personally; someone had hurt the pack, and any werewolf would feel wrath at that. And so when that anger gets into the psychomagic connections, it doesn't fade, it amplifies, feeding on the fury of all those werewolves and resonating with it. It grows and grows until, at some point, it takes on a life of its own, and the wolves start feeding on it instead. The positive feedback loop thus formed can easily explode out of all proportion, and when it does...well, there tends to be a lot of wreckage when it's all over, and the biggest obstacle to identifying the bodies is figuring out how many there actually are.

It takes a lot to drive a pack berserk like that. This one wasn't there yet, not even close. But I could feel the beginning stages, and that was plenty scary enough.

I say all this so that you can understand, at least to some degree, what I felt in Kyra. She was the first thing I felt, of course, when I started browsing; she was standing right next to me, after all, and

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

even if I hadn't spent that much time around her recently we still had a fairly solid bond. Her mind brushed up against me, a familiar feather-light touch that smelled of shadows and secrets. The hint of blood that I'd always found in her scent was weaker than before, superseded by something a little like salt, the real-life analogue of which I wasn't clear on. Not seawater, I would have recognized that. In any case, I could only assume that it was a positive change.

But inside? Well, let's just say that Kyra didn't feel as much like I was used to down deep as she did on the surface. I could feel that anger in her, the bone-deep reaction of a werewolf to something that dared to threaten the pack, an enemy with the gall to strike at their own. Perhaps even more unnerving, I could feel her feeling it, recognizing and reacting to it.

She was Alpha, the linchpin, the keystone, the stable axis around which the pack moved. A lot of her function was to keep that kind of thing from happening. It was the Alpha whose job it was to spread a stabilizing influence through those bonds, to keep a controlled and justified killing from turning into a massacre. Kyra was up to it—she might not seem it, but she's one of the more capable people I know, and she has very good control over her emotions. She has to; she'd have been dead before I met her, otherwise.

But it was a strain, and I could feel that strain in her. It was hard, when I was inundated with sensation from so many other sources, to feel much of anything myself, but even in my current state I felt a flicker of sympathy. Poor Kyra. I never wanted her to have to deal with that.

I managed to keep well away from the other werewolves. I didn't particularly want to know what was running through their minds at the moment. There weren't very many animals around, probably because that part of the city isn't the best place to find scraps of food. I caught the edge of a stray dog, just a fragmentary impression of a smell (I didn't have enough time to identify it, but he found it quite intriguing), and then skipped across the eyes of a flock of pigeons on the building overhead, each of which saw a slightly different section of the street. Useless. I mean, really, when you're reduced to *pigeons*, well, that's definitely a bad sign.

The task was not in the slightest helped by the fact that the steel ring I used as a focus for animal-oriented magics had been in my house, or that the moon was essentially new. Under ideal circumstances I could have extended my senses more than a mile from my position, and I'd shown that when desperate enough I could reach almost twenty times that, but currently I had to stretch just to touch upon the first werewolf we'd seen.

I'm not sure how long I spent like that. Time is, at least for me, really hard to judge without a body to measure it against, and I was too dissociated from mine to use it right now. Most of the time we judge time by heartbeats and breaths, by the soreness from sitting in one position, by our own boredom. But currently I couldn't feel any of my own physical sensations, and my emotions were...off, to say the very least. But it felt like a while before anything that I could use surfaced to my touch.

It slipped away instantly, and I felt a sudden surge of frustration. I immediately soothed it away, of course; magic is all about focused intent, and when you want to do something delicate there's

nothing more disastrous than spikes of strong emotion. Once I was sure that I wasn't about to lose the delicate bodiless trance state I was in, I stretched out toward that mind I'd touched again. It's hard to express that process in English; it wasn't a matter of physical location, which I couldn't even detect. It was more a process of aligning my thoughts to those that I was trying to connect with, making our minds similar enough that I could exert my power to convince the world that they were actually the same.

Eventually, after a long and frustrating process, I managed it. The animal—this presence was definitely animal—was slippery, sliding in and out of my grasp, and it took me a while longer to figure out what it actually was.

A raccoon. Of course. That explained a lot of the difficulty I'd been having, actually; coons are more scavenger than predator, which makes them less than ideal for my purposes. I can maintain the contact well enough, but actually melding with scavengers (or, even worse, *herbivores*) is much harder for me.

I couldn't get close enough for actual sensation. But this was the best option there was, depressing as that was, and I teased at it, trying to get the raccoon to come closer. Animals don't have discrete thoughts to speak of, let alone language (Snowflake being the distinct and probably non-animalian exception). But the message I conveyed was simple enough; you could pretty much distill it into come/food/here, where "here" meant a primal sensory impression of where I was and how to get there.

It took another minute for that to sink in, but eventually I felt the slightest shift in the mind (curiosity?), and relaxed. I sank back into my body gratefully—it was a nice trick, but I'm always a little nervous in that state. It was nice to go back to actually having a body to call my own.

Less nice was the fact that, once I actually did settle back into it, it was eager to let me know that it wasn't happy with me. My knees ached, as did my back where I'd been shot.

Kyra and Snowflake were still there, thankfully. "Anything?" she asked when I started moving, fingers flying over her phone. She didn't bother glancing in my direction.

"Maybe," I said, stretching. "Anything on your end?"

She grimaced. "Nothing useful. Somebody's blocking me."

"Blocking you? What do you mean, 'blocking you?'"

She shrugged. "City police are still in, but I can't get anything going on a wider scale. It isn't just a general thing, either; somebody's keeping this specific investigation grounded."

I grunted. "Not surprising. I'd wager the Watchers have more contacts than any of us."

"The Watchers?" she asked sharply. "Is that who we're up against?"

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"I don't think so," I said slowly, only then putting the guesses that had been accreting over the past however-many days into words. "The one I talked to struck me as more of a practical, no-nonsense type, which would normally mean she'd straight-up murder me if she wanted to, not pull this kind of complicated stunt. I wouldn't be surprised if she's keeping things quiet, though. They don't strike me as the kind of organization that likes a lot of attention."

She grunted thoughtfully. "Could be, I suppose."

Right about then the raccoon showed up. He was a surprisingly healthy specimen of the breed, a sleek-furred fellow of about twenty pounds. The pack must have had some kind of instruction about what to expect, because the werewolf in skin let him past without complain. He was utterly fearless, too, ignoring me, Kyra, and Snowflake and going straight for the meat on the ground.

"Hey, not yet," I said, reaching out and resting my fingers lightly on his back. He, like I would expect from most wild animals, immediately spun and bit at my arm. Fortunately, between the calming influence I was exerting and the fact that his teeth failed to gain purchase, after the initial hostility he was content to hiss and glare at me balefully.

Not the best circumstances under which to make first real contact, but then not the worst either. Skin contact made it much, much easier to extend myself into his mind proper, slipping inside his skin. Amusingly, he wasn't quite sure what to make of my hand on him; he'd had plenty of interactions with humans before, but never anything this calm and positive, and he wasn't clear whether he should approve of the light caress or not.

Other than that, his senses provided no novel info. Especially given that he was primarily interested in the hamburger anyway. That, incidentally, was why I usually kept the package sealed and out of sight until *after* I had what I was looking for. I managed to get him thinking about the previous night, but I had to keep dragging his attention away from the meat.

Raccoons are mostly nocturnal, and I actually had no idea why this one was awake right now. Fortunately, he had also been awake last night. His memories, like those of all animals, were fragmentary and disjointed, one sensory impression after another with no real connection between them, and muzzy even after such a short time. I've done this a lot and I knew how to interpret them pretty well, but it was still tricky. Especially given that I wasn't sure what time period I was looking for.

Making things yet worse was the fact that, as it turned out, this area wasn't at all a part of this fella's normal range. After just a few moments, I gave up entirely on finding a memory of what happened when they got to the end of the trail, and focused instead on finding *any* snapshot memory of the people I was looking for.

In what I would most likely call a miracle before I met Loki, I actually found one. It was truly fragmentary, just the tiniest glimpse from thirty feet away, but it was definitely there. They made a hard couple to miss, the lanky Watcher in her red cloak slung over the shoulder of a shorter figure shrouded in black cloth. I groaned inside when I saw that. Didn't this guy *ever* lighten up?

Anyway, I figured that was all I would get from the raccoon, so I slipped back into my own body. "They were here," I said shortly. "Or on this trail, anyway."

Kyra nodded. "Where'd they go, then?"

I grinned and stood, leaving the coon to his meal. "Let's go find out, eh?"

There was no sign of what might have happened when they reached that last intersection. None. There was a scent—I wasn't walking along in fur snuffling the ground, but I still caught the occasional hint of pepper—and then there wasn't. Nothing in between, no transition, nada. Not that I'd been expecting anything different—Kyra's people were too good to miss something obvious—but it was still pretty darn disappointing.

"Found it yet?" Kyra asked me. Her tone was joking, but underneath I could hear the same frustration I was feeling. It isn't often a werewolf's prey gets away; they tend not to be used to disappointment, especially not Alphas.

"Not yet," I said, chewing on my lip. "Don't suppose there are any cameras on this intersection?"

"I would have told you already," she said, the faintest hint of...disapproval, for lack of a better word, in her voice.

I nodded. Of course. I wasn't the only person with a brain here. "I'm kind of inclined to say the crossed to the Otherside. It'd be the smart thing to do. Which is a shame, because I don't know if it's even possible to track that." And we'd been doing so well, too.

She cocked her head to the side curiously, one of those canine mannerisms that make werewolves seem a little odd without quite setting off alarms in normal people. "Only kind of?"

"Yeah," I said, frowning. "It's just...this guy isn't doing the smart thing, you know? The smart thing, the logical thing, would have been to kill me, not to play games with us. Heck, he already shot me once, and he straight-up told me he didn't want me dead yet. That isn't the sign of somebody making intelligent tactical decisions." I shrugged. "What's the point playing a game like this only to cheat at the last minute?"

Kyra didn't have an answer for me, and for a moment we walked in silence. It wouldn't do to be seen to show too much attention to the endpoint of the trail, after all.

It was Snowflake who eventually stumbled on the obvious answer we'd overlooked. *Who owns those buildings?* she asked me, mental overtones carrying the smooth assured feel of someone who is confident she already knows the answer to the question she just asked.

I blinked, then grinned. "Clever," I said, and relayed the question to Kyra.

"Why didn't I think of that?" she asked aloud. "Let me get back to you on that one."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

About half an hour later, I was sitting in another park (I was feeling more paranoid than usual, and it's hard to sneak up on me when I'm surrounded by animals) when Kyra walked up. "When this is over," she said, her voice trembling with excitement and that same edge of barely-suppressed wrath, "the dog gets a T-bone on me."

Said dog, who was sleeping on my feet, deigned to flick an ear but otherwise didn't respond in either spectrum. "I take it," I said dryly, "that you've got something."

She handed a piece of paper to me. It wasn't hard to figure out what she meant, either. One of the shops right next to where the scent trail gave out—the same damn tile store I'd summoned the raccoon out back of, in fact—was owned by one Jon Arnson. It had been closed for more than a year, but Jon hadn't made any moves toward selling it, and in fact nobody'd heard from him for quite a long time now. Apparently the feds wanted to have a long talk with him about a little thing called tax evasion, but they couldn't seem to find him either. Oddly enough, they hadn't actually taken any action on the matter.

"You know," I said, "I think maybe this is a little suspicious."

"Careful you don't hurt yourself there, jumping to conclusions like that."

At least Snowflake laughed.

There was a short silence as we all considered the information—I'd relayed it to Snowflake, of course, so that we would have her input as well. She'd already demonstrated that dismissing her just because she had four feet was *not* smart, after all.

"My wolves won't be very effective in an enclosed space like that," Kyra said eventually.

That had been my first thought as well, and was more than likely why he'd chosen it. Out in the open, a whole bunch of werewolves could easily surround you, and at that point even a mage would go down fast. Indoors, though...well, no matter how clever and magical you are, when there's thirty of you you can only go through a doorway so fast, and that creates a bottleneck that a ranged attacker can exploit for massive damage. I had no doubt that whatsisface was prepared to use that advantage to the max.

"Can we get Aiko in to do some scouting first?" she asked, once it became clear I had nothing to add to her previous statement.

I grimaced. "She's on a mandatory visit home. I can't get word to her, and I doubt she could make it anyway." A fact which was increasingly worrisome to me, especially since I still hadn't heard from her at all.

Kyra grunted. That was one of the nice things about working with her; she wasn't going to complain, or moan about how bad things were, or wish they were better. *Life's shit, get over it* was

more like her attitude. "Nobody else is sneaky enough to get in and out without setting off alarms," she said, her tone more of a flat statement than anything else.

"True," I agreed sourly. Which meant that we'd be charging blind into a location where the enemy was knowledgeable, and they'd had who knew how long to fortify it. That isn't a good position to be in. Plus it would be exactly what he was expecting.

What we needed, I reflected, was a game changer.

"I have to go," she said. Alphas lead from the front, or else they don't stay Alpha long; no werewolf respects somebody who's afraid to fight.

"I'm not backing out," I said dryly, "if that's what you meant." Snowflake didn't bother to say anything, just raised her head and growled softly, glaring straight into Kyra's eyes for a moment before she laid her head back down and returned to dozing.

Kyra nodded, unsurprised. "I think that leaves us about five slots to fill. More than that, we'll get in each other's way more than it's worth."

"Sounds about right," I agreed. "We should probably have at least one person other than me go in human, just in case we need another pair of hands."

She cocked her head sideways. "You're going human?"

I shrugged. "I'm more accustomed to it. Besides, Tyrfining trumps teeth most days." So did a gun, of course, but most serious mages prepare for stopping bullets. I don't think much of anybody is prepared for stopping a werewolf wielding a wickedly powerful sword forged by dwarves specifically for overcoming any form of defense. How could you, when most people don't know it exists and I don't think anybody knows exactly what it is and isn't capable of?

"Okay," she said after a moment. "I get you. Then I want at least one person on lookout, so he doesn't run right out the door behind us."

"Better make it two or three," I advised. "One person on each door, and another on the roof with a gun."

She nodded. "Right. Can you think of anything else?"

I grimaced. "Not really. This is a terrible plan, you know."

She shrugged. "Yeah. But we can't afford to back down now, can we?" I understood what she was saying. The thought was something like "someone hurt the pack; we can't afford the loss of face, even if redressing it means losing even more pack members."

And that right there is, in a nutshell, why werewolves haven't taken over the world.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I clapped my hands once, decisively. "That's it, then. We go in at dusk." It was around noon now, so we'd have a few hours yet to finish preparing, get the team in place, and rest up for the epic battle. Plus my power was greatest at dawn and dusk, and while it wasn't a huge difference I wanted every scrap of advantage I could get.

For me, preparation was an interesting experience.

I try to avoid fights, especially large-scale ones with other supernatural critters. But, in all honesty, evidence suggests that I'm really bad at doing so, and it's happened enough times now that I had a certain amount of ritual built up. Mostly it consisted of spending a lot of time sharpening, polishing, and oiling pointy things, and checking the contents of my pockets a few dozen times as I tried to distract myself from the monumentally stupid things I was about to do.

That was where I ran into problems. I didn't have an appropriately private location to engage in such activity anymore. Oh, sure, I could have gone to the lab, and in fact I considered the idea, but it didn't much appeal. The thought of Legion mocking me incessantly during what might be my last hours was not an attractive one.

I supposed instead of distracting myself I'd have to be proactive about reducing the stupidity where possible. There was, after all, no one else to do it for me.

It was bittersweet to say the least.

There were a few things to do, at least, which kept me from going utterly insane with boredom. I convinced Kyra that, as Robert was itching for some payback but still wasn't fully healed, he should play watchman on the front door, and then had a few words with him. I couldn't be sure, but I thought that he would go along with what I was planning.

Other than that, there wasn't much to do. I made a few calls. I sharpened my knives. I paced anxiously around my shop. I tried to whip out a quick stored spell, but I couldn't focus enough to do work of that complexity.

So, in true lycanthropic tradition, I ate a couple pounds of raw meat and got some more sleep, my dog sprawled across my chest. Food and rest are what a werewolf needs to heal, and I wanted all the healing I could get right now. Not that I got much rest; I was uncomfortable to say the least, and spent most of the time staring at the ceiling and thinking of all the ways this plan could go horribly wrong. But it's the thought that counts, right?

Chapter Fourteen

It was very quiet as I walked up to Jon's old tile shop.

The sun was just now slipping below the mountains, staining the skies bloody crimson and throwing our shadows out behind us like flags, but it was already past working hours. Not far away the flood of rush-hour traffic was still snaking down the freeway, but here the streets were almost eerily silent. There were no cars in sight, no people walking the streets. High overhead, a lonely hawk circled against the backdrop of the setting sun, its piercing cry echoing through the sky.

Behind me came monsters.

Werewolves are pretty creatures, if you look at them in the right way. But it takes a special mind to see it, and even to me a werewolf in fur is a scary creature as well. A hundred and fifty to three hundred pounds of wolf with appropriately sized fangs and claws is not a comfortable sight. They can pass for dogs most of the time, but only because they make an effort to seem tame, combined with a healthy dose of people's own refusal to see what's in front of them.

They were not making an effort now. Kyra and her three wolf-skinned compatriots didn't look like dogs tonight. They looked like what they were, terribly dangerous people who straddled the line between man and monster, and who tonight didn't have much care for which side they landed on. Even if you know werewolves, even if you like werewolves, even if you *are* a werewolf yourself, that isn't something you can look at and feel nothing.

The two who looked—mostly, more or less—human weren't much better. One of them had a pair of old-school revolvers belted on over his jeans and a classic .30-30 Winchester lever action slung across his back. It looked ridiculously antiquated, but I knew better than to make fun of him; old weapons kill people just fine, most of the time.

Besides, I know Edward Frodsham. He was in Wyoming and Colorado during the Gold Rush, which gives you some idea of how long he's had to practice, and the results are...kinda scary, actually, even to me. I never saw the greats shoot a revolver, but I doubt they could have been much better than he is.

The other werewolf was taking a decidedly more military approach. That much was obvious, even if it was hard to tell exactly *what* military he might have in mind; the body armor and assault rifle were aggressively modern, but the submachine gun clipped to his waist looked like the classic Uzi from the fifties, and his trench knife could have seen service in the first World War.

The four werewolves in fur weren't nearly as visually distinctive, which was to be expected. One was a brown male a little lighter than Kyra's walnut, one a sleek and fast-looking female with cinnamon fur, and the last was a hulking grey-black brute with startlingly blue eyes who had to weigh at least two-fifty. He wore probably close to sixty pounds of the plate armor werewolves use occasionally without

seeming to notice the weight, and I don't doubt that I could have ridden on his back without straining him appreciably. Werewolf cavalry; now *that* is a scary thought.

We all met up around two blocks from the target. The werewolves, none of whom except Kyra I was familiar with, introduced themselves (the cowboy called himself Bill, and the soldieresque fellow was Ryan, if you were wondering).

Great, Snowflake said. Nobody said the Wild West Show was coming.

I was distracted by struggling to restrain my laughter at that—but not so distracted I didn't see Bill's lips twitch. Interesting. The only werewolf I'd known to hear Snowflake before was Conn, and he's...well, *Conn*.

Kyra took the lead from there. She, like the cinnamon wolf and Snowflake, wasn't wearing armor. In Snowflake's case this was because it wouldn't have fit a sanely-sized dog (I was going to have to get a custom set made, as often as she got into scrapes beside me), and I was guessing that the other werewolf found speed and agility to be a more effective defense than any amount of steel plate; I'd seen that type of lean, sleekly muscled wolf before, and they can be unbelievably quick.

Kyra's case was a little more interesting; I knew that she liked having a layer of metal between her hide and the enemy, but she couldn't use it anymore, not with her wolves along. Alphas can't afford to show any kind of weakness in front of the pack, and wearing armor suggests that you're afraid to fight without it. That was also, incidentally, why she was leading this party; the Alpha is the first wolf to encounter the threat, always.

Ryan came next, his metronomic jog and perfect posture further supporting the idea that he was ex-military, followed by the brown wolf. Then came Snowflake and I, loping along side-by-side, followed by Cowboy Bill. The huge dark wolf playing rear guard, where his massive bulk would present a serious obstacle to anybody attacking from behind, giving the rest of us time to react. The other female, as I had expected, ranged out around us as a scout rather than sticking in formation. As anticipated, she was startlingly fast even by werewolf standards, easily running circles around the rest of us.

Now, it might have occurred to you that this was a rather military, orderly procession, given that we were still quite a ways from the actual location we were looking for. If so, you are entirely correct. It may have also occurred to you that a mage with time to prepare and a general knowledge of what was coming his way could have prepared all manner of tricks, traps, and ambushes throughout the entire region. This statement is also entirely correct, and is why we were ready for a fight.

We didn't encounter it, nor did we run into anybody else. You could only explain so much with the location and time of day, and I was betting that Kyra had more of her people keeping bystanders away. Anybody who did see us probably concluded, quite rationally, that we were a bit more trouble than they wanted to buy.

By the time we made it to the store, I was starting to get a little nervous. I mean, nobody had tried to kill us. That was suspicious as all hell.

By prior agreement, when we made it to the target we fanned out so that I was at the front door proper, with a semicircle of werewolves splayed out behind me. The door was the logical location for any ambush, while the choke point slowed us down and whoever was on the other side had plenty of time and knew exactly where we would be, and even Kyra had been forced to reluctantly admit that I was the best close-quarters fighter we had. Tyrfing was a pretty massive advantage in that regard.

"Do you want to do this quiet?" I asked, watching the door carefully in case something hit it from the other side hard enough to send it at my face in pieces. And yes, that's happened to me.

Kyra snarled, deep in her chest, and laid her ears back flat against her head. A chorus of answering snarls went up from her pack, even those that were still firmly in the embrace of bipedalism, and I could practically feel the weight of all those eyes on my back.

I'm guessing that's a "no", Snowflake murmured, amusement mingling with anticipatory bloodlust in her mind. She didn't have the same deep-seated fury driving her that the wolves did, but...well, let's just say that the husky enjoys violence more than I think is entirely healthy. And I ain't exactly a pacifist myself, if you get my drift.

You think? I sent back, slipping my sword free from its sheath. Another murmur went up from the werewolves, one of...appreciation, I guess, is the closest I can come to an accurate description. They might not be able to consciously sense magic the way I did, but Tyrfing was coming out to play, and that's not something anyone ignores.

I swept the sword in a single vertical slice, cutting through latch, deadbolt and chain with little effort. At that point the door was held shut by nothing but laziness, but I went ahead and kicked it in anyway. 'Cause, you know, some things you just have to do, right?

I launched myself through instantly, Tyrfing in my hand and power held ready for use at a moments' notice, and it was the only thing that saved my life. The blow that would otherwise have shattered my spine and left me dying on the ground merely clipped my trailing leg and spun me sideways to impact the wall.

I got only a momentary glance at what had hit me, mostly just an impression of big, grey, and ugly. But I heard it roar as I was pushing myself to my feet, and that gave me a decent idea of what scale we were talking.

That roar, a primal pissed-off declaration of challenge, was so loud it vibrated in my chest and hurt my ears like a rock concert. It *shook the ground beneath me*. I heard several werewolves whine and snarl in pain just from the impact of the sound on their sensitive hearing.

Spinning to face the doorkeeper, I was greeted with a picture out of nightmare. It stood fully fifteen feet tall hunched over, and was so wide that it still managed to look stocky. It seemed to be made of stone, and judging by the cracks in the floor where it had just missed me it was about as hard.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

It didn't have a weapon. It didn't need one. A single love tap from one of those massive fists would break me in half.

I knew what this was. It was a golem, a construction of stone and magic created to serve its master. They were commonly used as foot soldiers by the few mages who had enough skill or natural talent to make them, and it wasn't hard to see why.

The golem was currently duking it out with half a dozen werewolves at once. And, unquestionably, hands-down, no contest, it was winning.

They were fighting well, I have to give them that. It was beautiful, in a savage way, beautiful like a wildfire. They were a marvel of fur and muscle, flashing teeth and constant motion. As I watched, Kyra ducked away just as its fist struck the ground with another earth-shaking *crunch*. Even as it swung at her, the scout hit it from behind, the big guy attacked its arm, and Ryan went at its other side with his trench knife. It might seem odd that such an obvious gun-nut would go for a knife instead, but I reckoned he was thinking the same thing I was, which was that a bullet relative to the golem's size would be little more than an annoyance.

It reminded me, more than anything else, of watching a fight in the movies. Real-life violence doesn't have that choreographed beauty—but this was a pack of werewolves, and they were connected so deeply that when they were running on instinct they operated like a single individual. Every motion of every wolf was perfectly timed, placed, and coordinated.

It just wasn't good enough.

The golem disregarded all of them entirely. Ryan's knife skipped off its skin, striking sparks but not penetrating a bit. The wolf behind it tried to bite its ankle where the Achilles tendon would be on a human, and made no more progress than he had. She dodged aside when it kicked back a moment later, but obviously it hadn't suffered for the experience, so I was calling it a draw.

And the big wolf? He tackled its arm with fangs and all four limbs...and it just picked him up. Better than three hundred pounds, most of which was preternaturally powerful muscle actively fighting him, and it just lifted him into the air. It seemed to take about as much effort as I have lifting a can of soda.

I had a brief, unpleasant flashback to Aiko's demise in a similar manner. Illusory or not, that scene was going to stick with me for a while.

Rather than attack him, though, the golem just tossed him aside. It just flicked him away like a bug, sending that massive werewolf a dozen feet through the air before he skidded a bit further across the floor.

The thing was such a marvel that I had to respect it, even if it was trying to kill us. Individually, its attacks weren't all that dangerous; it was quick, but it was still huge and that meant every motion took longer to complete than a human's would. The werewolves were having no difficulty dodging—but

eventually they would get unlucky and trip, or zig rather than zag, and even one full-on impact would likely be lethal. Moreover, the wolves were burning tons of energy with all that quick and unpredictable movement. They were tougher than humans in pretty much every way, but even a werewolf's stamina is limited. They were bound to get tired eventually, and then a mistake was inevitable. It was a war of attrition that the golem couldn't lose. As a fighter, it wasn't all that—but when it comes to keeping people out, it was pretty hard to beat.

All that happened in less than a second, while I was orienting myself. Then I launched myself back into the fray, letting out a wordless, snarling cry as I did.

It was fast. Not just faster than anything that size had a right to be, but faster than *anything* had the right to be. It heard me coming and turned, disdainful of the weight of another werewolf dangling from its leg. I saw its face for the first time. It didn't have one, just a blank slab of basalt. No eyes, no mouth, no features at all except for an inscription of some kind on its forehead. I wasn't sure how it had roared.

I growled and stopped, maybe five feet from it, Tyrfing held in both hands before me, weight on the balls of my feet. That close, it couldn't turn its attention away without my having the chance to strike, but I was just out of its range, meaning that it would have to move before it attacked me.

It was an obvious challenge, and it took the bait. Why not? It wasn't like it had to worry much about the werewolves. There was still one clinging to its leg, after all, and he was having to scabble just to keep from falling off. The chances of those teeth penetrating enough to hurt it were miniscule, and I was pretty sure that bullets would just ricochet.

It took another step forward, moving with a quickness entirely inappropriate in what appeared to be a creature composed entirely of stone, and swept one fist at me in a roundhouse that was guaranteed to pancake whatever it hit.

I am also quick. I ducked under the wild blow, though I had to drop almost prone to do so thanks to the sheer size of its fist, and came up swinging.

I was braced on both feet, and feeding my inner werewolf all the magic I could. I was wielding Tyrfing—*Tyrfing*, which cut stone and steel like cloth—with both hands, and swinging it like a baseball bat as hard as I possibly could.

It was the kind of strike that could one-shot a troll, is what I'm getting at here.

Tyrfing sunk into its flank. Like, all of three or four inches—maybe even enough to cover the whole blade. Compared to the raw, overwhelming bulk of the golem, I estimate that was roughly the same threat a papercut posed to an adult gorilla.

It drew back, and for all my superhuman strength I had only two options: come with, or let go. I chose the latter, because I figured that grappling this titan was a cruel and unusual way to commit suicide.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

It drew back up to its full height. Things looked pretty bad. Tyrfinn was embedded in its flank but my strongest attack hadn't even inconvenienced it, and the werewolves that were still attacking it relentlessly were having about as much effect as a mosquito might on an enraged elephant. It had every reason to be confident.

It let out another earthshaking roar—I have no idea how, since it didn't have a mouth—as I stumbled back, thinking frantically. *Plan B*, Snowflake shouted frantically, rendered almost incoherent by terror, *where's the Plan fucking B!?*

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I kept moving backward, far enough that I wouldn't be the primary threat anymore, and stuffed both hands into the fabric of my cloak. It responded to the panicked urging of my will, a tangible current of shadow bringing several objects to my grasp.

I pulled them out and fiddled with them a bit. Then, shouting "Clear!" at the top of my lungs, I chucked them forward.

The werewolves were intelligent, and also at least as desperate as I was. They scrambled away from the golem at top speed. I closed my eyes and covered my ears, warning Snowflake to do the same as best she could.

I don't have a lot of experience with explosives, so I don't really know how they work or what kind of effectiveness you can expect to get out of them. But I did know that Aiko's grenades were a custom model, and I suspected that not all of their effectiveness was due to mundane chemical reactions. One of them produced a pretty good boom, and could take out a sizable chunk of wall.

Six of them going off at once was, believe you me, impressive by any standards. The sound hit me like a pressure wave. It didn't match the sound of werewolves snarling, golem bellowing, concrete shattering, and guns shooting. It dwarfed them, took that whole mix and, laughingly, showed them what a *real* noise sounds like.

Explosives are terrifying in a way that swords and guns will never be. A sword can be blocked, and even bullets can be dodged if you get lucky enough. This wasn't like that. You couldn't dodge it, or fight it. All I could do was turn my back, shield my ears as best I could, and ride it out. It was more like a sandstorm than what I thought of as conventional weaponry. You didn't fight it; you hunkered down, waited for it to end, and prayed to every god you could think of that you might survive the experience.

It was humbling, is what I'm saying, and the knowledge that I was the one to bring it about didn't do much to abate that feeling.

I was tossed from my feet and flung through the air by the blast—a *fun* experience, by the way, when you have your eyes closed; falling blind is a real treat. I felt shrapnel hit me in a dozen places as I tumbled across the ground. It felt a bit like they describe being disorientated while underwater; I couldn't, in all the chaos, tell up from down, let alone get it together enough to try and protect myself.

When, after mere moments that seemed to last a subjective eternity, it finally ended, it took me a moment to recognize it. My ears were ringing so loud that it seemed like I was still hearing the explosion, and when I stood I staggered drunkenly, dizzy. I was almost scared to look at the destruction I'd wrought.

The golem was gone. All that was left of the thing were chunks of stone scattered around, ranging in size from dust to blocks twice the size of my head—the source, I suspected, of the shrapnel that had hit me, and I shivered a little when I saw it. I had gotten incredibly lucky not to have been utterly pulped. The ground hadn't fared too well, either, the grenades having carved out a literal—if, in all honesty, rather shallow—crater in the concrete. The ceiling was high enough to have escaped damage, but some of the ducting would probably never be the same, and one of the exterior walls had a gaping hole in it.

I gulped. Granted I'd been operating under the assumption that explosives were used to demolish stone on a daily basis, that was the whole reason I'd used the grenades against the golem, but...wow. I hadn't intended quite that amount of destruction.

For what it was worth, Tyrfin was unfazed. The sword was stabbed into the floor at the very center of the crater, radiating an aura of satisfaction.

Miraculously, none of us had been damaged by the explosion, either. Oh, there were some bruises, and nobody looked happy, but a quick visual survey showed that all the werewolves were still there, as was Snowflake. They were all looking at me, rage temporarily overwhelmed by shock in their eyes.

I guess Ryan was more accustomed to grenades than the rest of us (no surprise there) because he jogged over to me before any of the rest of us had gotten our heads together enough to move.

He said something. I couldn't hear him over the ringing in my ears. I attempted to indicate this by tapping the side of my head. Unfortunately, I appeared to still be having some coordination problems, because I wound up smacking myself instead.

Ryan got the message. He moved closer and, about three inches from my ear, all but shouted "What the fuck was that?"

I grinned feebly. "Grenades?"

He rolled his eyes. "I knew that. I meant, 'what the fuck were you thinking?'" The *moron* was left unstated, but conveyed itself quite clearly all the same.

I shrugged. "I was thinking that if something didn't change that thing was going to kill us and nothing we'd tried so far was doing much."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

He opened his mouth, then glanced back at the rubble and nodded reluctantly. "Point," he said, with equal reluctance. "But there's no way somebody didn't hear that. We're going to have cops beating down our door in about a minute."

The ringing was finally starting to fade, thankfully, although my right ear still wasn't working right. My healing meant that I would probably recover eventually, but it appeared I was going to be operating half-deaf for the rest of this gig. "Have somebody call in a hostage situation," I suggested.

He blinked. "Are you sure that's a good idea?" he asked dubiously. I could see, behind him, that Kyra and Snowflake were jogging over to join us, although the other wolves were staying behind, I thought to tend to various injuries obtained from the golem or the explosion.

"No," I said, making sure to speak loudly enough that Kyra would hear. I needn't have raised my voice, given that werewolf hearing would ensure that she heard me regardless, but it was polite. "It's a terrible idea. But it's the only thing I can think of to keep them from coming in until we deal with things." Meanwhile, *Are you okay?* I asked Snowflake.

Fine, she replied, sounding—God help us—*excited*. *When can we get some more of those things? That was awesome.*

"So," I concluded, "unless we're calling this off, we have to do something. If you have a better idea that's wonderful, but otherwise 'hostage' is the best I can think of for making sure we have time to finish this."

He hesitated. Kyra growled a negative. Ryan looked like he wanted to argue, for which I couldn't blame him—werewolves can cope with a lot, generally, but things that shrug off their attacks like raindrops aren't included.

But Kyra was Alpha. Her word was law. And, when push came to shove, he wasn't willing to question that law. He kept to sullen silence.

"Great," I said. "You make it happen and get ready to move ASAP. I'm going to scout around."

As I more than half expected from the first time I saw her, it was the cinnamon wolf that actually found the path, less than twenty seconds after the explosion. That was good; we were currently operating under a serious time limit, and I needed us to be moving well before the cops arrived if this plan was going to work.

We all gathered around the stairway in silence. Well, most of us did; as it turned out, the huge wolf had broken a few bones and was in no condition to continue, and Cowboy Bill was limping pretty badly from a shrapnel wound to his left thigh. They left via the hole I'd blown in the wall, bringing us down to six.

The stairway we were looking at was a weird mix of the prosaic and the remarkable. I mean, it isn't all that uncommon you find a staircase in the back rooms of a store leading to the basement storage area. But it is uncommon that said staircase is little more than a tube of concrete, with layers of wards around the threshold, and a solid steel trapdoor waiting to be dropped over the top.

We stared at it. Werewolves, generally speaking, aren't much when it comes to feeling magic, but you would have to be blind, deaf, and unconscious not to notice this. The air around the wards fairly hummed with lethal promise, and the air shimmered like a parking lot at noon in July. Anybody who set of those wards was going to be one crispy critter, and the way they were rigged would unleash the full extent of their power if anyone so much as touched a toe to the top step. Even better, they wouldn't be especially discriminating, turning the entire room into a blast furnace that would leave nothing alive.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I licked my lips nervously, then said, "Clear the room, please." Ryan, the only one present with a language-capable mouth, looked like he wanted to argue. I met his brown eyes with my amber ones, and he looked away fast. Moments later I was alone in the room.

I didn't waste time. As soon as the last tail cleared the door, I drew Tyrfing from where I'd returned it to the scabbard on my belt. I dragged the blade across the palm of my hand, cutting just deeply enough to draw blood. Every drop that touched Tyrfing's blade vanished, drained almost instantly into the sword, but more dripped down my fingers and splattered onto the wards, where it immediately began to steam and hiss.

Like I said. Blood magic is scary, risky, stupid stuff to play around with—but when you need power badly enough that you don't care what the cost is anymore, it's exactly what the doctor ordered.

I didn't have the time to be subtle and clever. I took all the power I could hold, drew it in from the air around me and the shadows in the corners, from the blood dripping off my fingertips and the anger boiling quietly beneath the surface of my mind. I inhaled, the magic I was holding leashed pressing against my skin from the inside.

And I huffed, and I puffed, and I blew the house down.

I couldn't outsmart this guy. His wards were a thing of beauty and grace, elegant weaves of power interwoven into a whole that outstripped any spell I could spin by an order of magnitude. That was why I was taking a Gordian-style approach instead. Tyrfing slammed into the ground, which didn't do nearly as good a job of resisting the blade as the golem had.

Tyrfing was more than merely metal, and its edge could cut more than matter. It was forged by dwarves to be an instrument of destruction, and I don't know if there's anything that can really stop it indefinitely. It sliced into the magic of the wards as easily as it had the concrete.

They triggered instantly, of course. That was a given. The structure of the wards snapped, and the energy they had been holding flooded out, trying to produce heat and flame enough to turn me into a greasy stain.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I didn't let them. Once the potential for heat became actual, it would be unstoppable, way more thermal energy than I could hope to counteract. Until that happened, though, they were just magic, just something that *could* become real. And that I could control, sending a massive wave of my own magic to swamp it out before it could finish the process of activating.

It didn't work, not completely. Purely energetic stuff was far from my forte, and it was inevitable that some would slip past me. The air in front of me turned to fire and death in an instant, rushing forward at me.

I couldn't afford to break my concentration, or I would have a lot more than this to worry about. I spared just enough energy to throw an arm up across my eyes, dropping Tyrfinn so as not to stab myself in the neck, and otherwise kept right on grounding out all the power I could.

It hurt, when the flames hit. It hurt a lot. But pain was not a stranger to me, and I refused to allow it to stop me. I endured.

Several long moments later, the fire died out, and the last of the magic faded from the air, taking with it the smell of hot metal and bleach. I cautiously lowered my arm and let the last scraps of the power I'd gathered go, staggering a little with the expenditure of magic.

The room was smoldering a little, but not as much as I'd expected. There just wasn't much there to burn—concrete takes a lot of heat to set on fire, and while it was charred black in places it was essentially intact.

There was one notable exception. Where I was standing, and in a circle for almost five feet in every direction, the floor hadn't been burned. It was, rather, covered in a sheen of ice. Frost had formed on the surface of my body, covering all exposed skin in a layer of the stuff. My face had been burned—I knew it had, had felt the flame lick my face and struggled not to scream with the pain of it—but it didn't hurt now. The skin, which had been burned off, had been replaced with ice, close to my face as a second skin. Even my eyes were covered in a thin layer of ice, which melted away when I blinked and reformed a moment later.

Even stranger, the ice seemed to dull the pain. I could still feel it, but it was distant, almost like I'd been dosed with a topical anesthetic.

Creepy. Useful, but *deeply* creepy.

I called the werewolves back in, less than fifteen seconds after they'd left. They looked at the fire damage, and then at the frost, and then they saw me.

Only Snowflake had no fear in her eyes when she saw my face.

"Come on," I said, both a hint of a growl and something eerily like a winter breeze hiding in the depths of my voice, and jerked my head at the staircase. Kyra, well aware of how little time we had remaining, didn't wait for me to ask twice before bounding down.

Snowflake and I brought up the rear once again. Once we were down, Ryan slammed the trapdoor shut behind us. The steel door must have weighed better than a hundred and fifty pounds, but he lifted it like nothing. "In case the cops try to follow us," he explained, and took off after his pack.

I didn't argue. But I did use Tyrfing to cut off the bolt before I sheathed it. Just in case.

The staircase was incredible. After around the first thirty feet, it turned from concrete to stone, masterfully cut and joined, and the fluorescent lighting was replaced by odd, glowing orbs of some white stone I didn't recognize. It just kept going, one flight after another, twisting and turning back on itself in ways that didn't always make sense.

I'm not sure how deep that staircase was. The steps were unevenly spaced, generally shorter than I would expect, but sometimes they had to be higher than was allowed by code. I lost track around three hundred, and we kept going for quite some time after that.

This is insane, Snowflake said, bounding down the stairs just below me. *Nobody builds shit like this.*

No, I replied. *Jon probably hired trolls or dwarves or something to make it. Heck of a hideout.*

By some miracle, we didn't encounter any dangers on the way down the stairs. There were no more golems, no wards, not even a tripwire. I wasn't sure what to make of that. I mean, of course it was good that we weren't being threatened at every step, but...well, I kept thinking that that could only mean that whatever was coming up next was big and bad enough to make up for the lack.

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what was so big it dwarfed a fifteen-foot-tall monster made from solid granite that laughed at Tyrfing.

When we hit the bottom, we saw the first signs of opposition in a while. Two creatures—constructs, they had to be, made by this nutter from the stuff of the Otherside—lying dead on the floor. They were hideously ugly things, roughly humanoid slabs of muscle topped by horrific fanged mouths more suitable to a grizzly bear than anything bipedal. They were obviously made for violence, not any aesthetic purposes, and the grievous wounds they'd sustained did nothing to improve their looks.

They were each two hundred or more pounds of claws, teeth, and muscle, more than a match for any human without serious armaments. But four pack werewolves driven nearly berserk with rage had outclassed them rather badly. It was hard to tell with any precision what had happened here, but there was no sign that any of the wolves had been injured, and each of the constructs had been ripped to pieces.

The werewolves, of course, were long gone, down the long tunnel before us. They had outstripped us easily on the stairs, and were obviously too deeply in the grip of the mad rage of a werewolf whose pack has been challenged to wait for us at the bottom.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

"Shit," I said, jogging down the corridor after them. I wanted to run, but I'd been pushing myself hard with all the magic and acrobatics, and I was starting to come up against my limits. That added another layer of urgency to the situation. If this wasn't over soon, I might not be *able* to finish it. "I told them not to try and take him alone." Snowflake, matching my pace easily, growled deep in her chest, either unwilling or unable to express the extent of her reaction in words.

We passed several more corpses, or pieces of corpses, as we went. It was hard to tell precisely what had happened to them—constructs are unstable, and decay very rapidly once they're destroyed—but I still didn't see any blood, or anything else to indicate that the werewolves had been hurt.

The corridor—it seemed impolite to call it a tunnel, given the artistry that had gone into making it—continued for what felt like a very long time. The constructs came thicker as we progressed, until after around three hundred yards they were coming in groups of ten and fifteen, and the werewolves hadn't had the time or attention to spare for absurdly grotesque overkill anymore. I started seeing bullet casings where Ryan had had to resort to modern weapons, and in places there were tufts of fur and blood to mark where their numbers had been so overwhelming that one of the wolves was injured. A while after that, I heard the unmistakable snarls of werewolves in battle ahead.

Snowflake and I picked up the pace. After another twenty yards or so the corridor opened up into a room, the first we'd seen since we descended the stairs. We slowed down a little as we emerged, high on the wall of a chamber I'd have sworn couldn't possibly be buried under the city. And stopped, stunned, to stare at the scene in front of us.

The room was more stone, boggling the mind with the amount of work it must have taken to cut and fit it all, and had to be about a hundred yards square, and thirty tall. We were just below the ceiling, standing on a narrow ledge that turned into an equally narrow stone staircase that switchbacked down the face of the wall.

In what I judged to be the exact center of the room, four werewolves stood back to back. Ryan's assault rifle had gone by the wayside at some point, and he was holding his trench knife in his right hand and the Uzi in his left. He was facing us, Kyra at his back. The cinnamon wolf to the left was limping, her left foreleg crushed too badly to bear weight, and only the fourth wolf didn't look significantly the worse for wear.

Surrounding them was a mass of constructs. They weren't outnumbered five-to-one, or even by a factor of ten.

From what I could tell, there were more than two hundred constructs in that seething horde. Fifty of them for each of the werewolves.

I stared for a moment from my perch, stunned. In my most pessimistic moments I hadn't expected that there would be this many enemies here. We couldn't hope to take that many. The six of us could kill thirty apiece and there would still be enough to bring us down through the sheer weight of numbers.

On the far wall, highlighted by a literal spotlight, was the bait. Laurel was stuck in a contraption remarkably like that the Watchers had held me in, the only immediately visible differences being that she was still wearing that dull red cloak (not a kindness to leave her clothed, given that once soaked clothing becomes more of an inconvenience than anything), and that she was bound with simple hemp rope instead of fancy handcuffs. She was clearly conscious, surveying the scene with an expression of such fury as to impress werewolves, but incapable of affecting things from her current position.

On the other wall, to my right, framed by another spotlight, was a small but literal throne. It was made from more stone, and though it was hardly larger than an armchair, its positioning on a small dais and the mastery of its construction left no doubt as to its nature.

Seated on the throne, wearing a simple old-fashioned suit, was a familiar face, the very same one my instincts had been going haywire warning me about from the first time I saw him. Crazy, even with everything I'd seen, the suit combined with the baldness and the jovial expression made him look like a jolly businessman.

It fit, too, that was the worst part. I'd assumed that he was a Guard, but all he really said was that he wasn't a part of the Watchers. There'd always been that anger toward me, too, buried much of the time but not hard to see. And then there was the fact that Watcher had made no mention, none at all, of who he was or what his role might be.

Strangely, the constructs weren't attacking. I would have expected them to swarm forward and overrun the wolves, but they were standing dead still, forming a perfect ring about two feet from Kyra's nose. That could only mean that the bad guy didn't want them to move yet, and *that* could only mean that he wanted something.

I wasn't sure what I was going to do yet. But I *was* pretty sure that I needed to be down there to do it, and pronto. So I scooped Snowflake into my arms and jumped off the ledge, pushing off as hard as possible so as not to land on the staircase below. Eighty feet down—no problem. I stretched out my will, thickening the air we fell through and forcing it to press up against us, slowing us down. Eighty feet down, but we hit with no more speed than if we'd fallen ten or so. I dropped Snowflake just before we hit so that she wouldn't be crushed; like a cat, she landed on all fours and came up snarling. I, being somewhat less like a cat, hit the ground and rolled to disperse energy, but I also finished the motion with a snarl on my face.

Only to freeze as I realized what was going on.

A third spotlight had come on, centered on Kyra, and the bad guy (I really needed a better name for him than that) was laughing. It should have been inaudible, but somehow cut across the distance between us and the snarling wolves without any trouble. The acoustics—or, quite possibly, the magic—of the room must have been arranged such that anyone on the throne had their sounds amplified.

"Wolf!" he exclaimed, sounding just as jovial and just as quietly, homicidally furious as ever. "Jolly good of you to make it! I was afraid you'd miss the fun."

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

That was when I realized what was going on, and a quick glance confirmed it. Yep, the constructs were slowly pressing closer to the wolves. And, when I looked over at her, Laurel was slowly sinking into the water. The rope contraption she was in was lowering steadily into the water.

He saw, when I realized that, and laughed again. "I see that you recognize the choice you are faced with, Wolf. Do you try to kill me? Or do you free the person you came here to help? Or will you try and save your friends? I assure you, you have only enough time for one of these things."

Chapter Fifteen

"For crying out loud," I muttered. "Isn't there *one* cliché this guy doesn't love?" I was thinking furiously, even though I think we all knew what I'd choose. He would be well defended in his throne, I knew that.

And, at the end of the day? Laurel didn't matter to me. Kyra did.

I drew Tyrfing slowly, the ringing of the blade challenging and sharp. I don't know whether Tyrfing is really sentient, as I understand the concept anyway, but it can definitely convey a message. This time it sounded cruel and hungry, it sang blood and vengeance on the air. I tensed, readying myself for the attack.

And then I smelled something else. Magic, just the barest touch of it on the air, scented like disinfectant touched with decay and a hint of regret. At the same time I felt another mind brush against mine, and Aubrey's voice seemed to whisper in my ear. His message was short and to the point, and very welcome.

I grinned ferally. Time for *him* to learn what it's like when somebody thinks circles around you. "You know something, buddy?" I asked, advancing slowly on the slowly tightening ring of constructs. My senses were exceptional by pretty much any standards, but I had to keep him distracted or he would notice the same thing I had. "People like you, you always make the same mistake, you know that? You think people like me are suckers. You think we're losing at your game, right?" I grinned wider, picking up the pace. Beside me, Snowflake was growling softly, and I felt her anticipation in the back of my mind. She knew what Aubrey had just said to me.

I was almost at the edge of the horde now. "I'm guessing it never occurred to you," I continued, tightening my grip on the sword, "that I just didn't feel like playing."

And then things started happening.

I broke right, as fast as I could, transferring the sword to my left hand as I did. I stuck my arm out like I was clotheslining somebody as I raced past the line of constructs.

Tyrfing cuts stone the way lesser swords do silk. Bone didn't slow it down a bit. And, in a dazzling lack of creativity, he had made all the constructs exactly alike. The same size.

The same height. Dipshit.

I was close enough to the ring that Tyrfing, fully outstretched, severed the first construct's head completely, and cut deeply enough into the second's neck to kill it. And they were packed together like sardines.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

I wasn't even *trying*. And I still left thirty constructs dead on the ground before I broke off and charged at the mage, Snowflake running along beside and slightly behind me.

I was close enough to see his eyes widen, when the chaos broke out behind me. Given that I wasn't actually looking myself, I wasn't sure what was happening. But I heard a sudden rockslide-roar, stone screaming as it was forced to do things that stone was never meant for, followed by the hollow *woompf* of fire magic.

As I'd expected, there were wards all around his throne, runes and sigils cut into the stone of the floor which flared to life at his gesture. They burned with light throughout the spectrum, cold and flowing as the Northern Lights, and they smelled of bleach and anise.

There were more layers than I'd expected, admittedly. I'd figured on his having perhaps three or four warding spells around his throne. But, when he activated them, I counted no fewer than *nine* circles of light. That was probably about eight more than I could handle.

I never did learn how not to do stupid things. So rather than back down, run away, and try again later, I kept charging.

I couldn't smash my way through all of these wards the way I had the one at the top of the stairs. There wasn't any point to even trying. That meant that conserving my power became crucial, and that meant recognizing what I could and couldn't survive.

The outermost circle of runes had a subtle note of old dust to it which reminded me of the smell in Abdul's room. So, hoping like heck that meant it was a similarly mental effect, I ran straight into it, Snowflake at my side.

I got lucky. It was, indeed, mental witchcraft bound into that ward. The second my foot touched the light of the runes, I was assaulted with a wave of depression too great to withstand. His spell unleashed lethargy, lassitude, and apathy in equal measure, and my knees buckled under the weight of it.

A human would have been knocked unconscious. A werewolf, even an enraged werewolf, would have been incapacitated by the impact.

But he'd forgotten two critical factors here. The first was that I had Tyrfing, freed of the scabbard which served to contain its magic, in my right hand. The sword was terrifying, in large part because of the effect it had on me. Any anger, any hatred, any smallest urge to violence, was magnified a thousandfold by the weapon. When I'd thought Aiko dead, the resulting storm of emotion had kept me from anything resembling rational thought, prevented me from seeing even the most obvious logic clearly. Now, well, the mage's magic could blunt the force of that feeling, but it couldn't overcome it.

The second thing he overlooked, or possibly just didn't know, was that Snowflake wasn't just a dog. There was something else inside her, a purely mental entity that lurked in the depths of her mind. He was a wolf, once, but prolonged exposure to a demon and shamanic magic could change anything. In

his case, the result was a being with little to no resemblance to an animal. He was why Snowflake thought in words rather than instinctual feelings and images, and even before he completed the transition to what he was now his mental presence had been strong enough to challenge a demon-possessed mage.

These factors weren't enough to protect us from all of the force of the emotional assault. We moved only slowly, shuffling our feet along at the pace of a tortoise on high-speed film. It felt like there was a weight attached to the end of my sword, dragging the tip down toward the ground, and every step was a fresh effort. But we moved.

As we did this, the witch's mask collapsed. All joviality gone, his face was turning red from fury and strain, his lips drew back from his teeth in a snarl. He pointed his finger over my head, making motions as though trying stab the air. I smelled his magic, a sharp, vinegary odor, even if I hadn't a clue what it was supposed to do. Whatever it was, it didn't seem to be aimed at me, which made it something I had no attention to spare for.

This whole time, the sounds of a furious battle roared behind us. Earth cracked, fire burned, werewolves snarled, wind howled, guns barked. I desperately wanted to turn and see what was happening, but that was also something I couldn't spare the time for. The world narrowed to the stone in front of my feet. And then, at last, we were across the ward, and the lethargy faded.

The next line was a firetrap. The same smell, the same magic as what we'd seen before, and I attacked it the same way. Tyrfing disrupted its structure enough that I was able to ground out most of what magic triggered successfully. I shielded my eyes from what remained, and accepted what burns I still got as a fair price to pay, while Snowflake hid behind me.

A few feet closer, another ward. Ice-white light loomed up in front of me, and I knew from the structure of the spell that this was a kinetic barrier. It was one of the simplest defenses in the books, and while I couldn't make one strong enough to bother with, I knew how it worked. The idea was to weave magic into a structure that would prevent anything from crossing the line it demarcated. If anything attempted to do so, it would exert simple kinetic force in equal measure, essentially turning empty space into a wall. Enough force would overload it eventually, but I didn't have a tank or an hour to work with, so I would have to do this the quick-and-dirty way.

I set Tyrfing's point against it and leaned on it. The tip of the sword slowly sank into empty air a tiny fraction of an inch. Then the mage, glaring down at us with murder in his eyes, clenched his fist. The barrier surged with renewed power, and Tyrfing's glacial forward progress stopped.

I grimaced. Then, tightening my grip on the hilt, I leaned against it harder, all my weight resting on the sword now. I didn't have to cut myself to find the power in my blood, because the patch on my back had ruptured a while ago; blood was already oozing down my back beneath my cloak. I took the power, ripped it ruthlessly from my own life force, and, operating more on instinct than any logic or experience, sent it into Tyrfing.

Blind Eye (Winter's Tale)

The sword's mirror finish gleamed a little brighter. Then, suddenly, the barrier fell, destroyed by Tyrfing's edge and magic. I stumbled and then faceplanted, unable to stand without the resistance. Tyrfing clattered away, its loss only serving to slam home the exhaustion I felt further.

I tried to push myself back to a standing position, and couldn't. I just couldn't. I had, at long last, hit my limit. My body just wasn't listening to what I told it.

A size ten work boot slammed down next to me, filling most of my field of view. Then a hand with the approximate strength of an elephant closed around my cloak at the nape of my neck and, with about as much effort as I used tying my shoes, hauled me to my feet.

Doug didn't smile. He didn't approve of violence, and he wasn't the kind of guy who would be so overwhelmed with adrenaline as to smile anyway. But he nodded to me, and his eyes were not unfriendly.

On my other side, Katie had already advanced to the next warding line. She had a wand (looked like hazel to me, but I could be wrong), which I could tell was a crude but reasonably effective focus. Probably for shadow magic not unlike that I used, given that that was her specialty. "I could use a hand here," she growled back at us, sounding strained.

Doug glanced at me, checking that I could stand without assistance, and then walked forward to help her. I brought Tyrfing to hand and, once again, used it as a cane, its point sinking into the stone when I put my weight on it. I managed to hobble forward, Snowflake tight by my side helping me to keep my balance, but there was no need for me to participate. I felt the next ward, another kinetic barrier, collapse just before I got there. The runes were covered in unnaturally thick shadows, choking out the light, and small roots were growing within them.

Four down, five to go. The sounds of battle behind me were slowing, and it didn't sound like the constructs were winning. Twelve mages, even twelve mediocre self-trained half-educated mages, are a significant force when they have the advantage of surprise, and I didn't doubt that the last of the enemy would be mopped up shortly. Laurel, having been freed by now from that ridiculous Bond villain-mechanism, would be throwing her weight behind us shortly. The enemy couldn't flee without abandoning his wards—I could see a couple more corridors leading out of the cavernous room, but, in an embarrassing oversight, none of them were next to the throne—and he didn't have good odds of getting away before one or another of us brought him down.

We were winning. He was living on borrowed time, and he must have known it.

Which is why it's only natural that that's when the fight changed.

He had spent so long on the defensive, I had all but forgotten it was possible for him to be proactive about defeating us. But in that moment, he reminded us very clearly of that.

The first assault was brutal, unexpected, and terribly efficient. It was intelligent, too, which was worse. Snowflake and I were both insulated from a great many effects, and we'd demonstrated an ability to shrug off a lot of his magic like raindrops.

Doug and Katie didn't have the same protections.

Both of them dropped in an instant. They were convulsing violently, and it was clear that neither of them was going to be able to stand under their own power, let alone fight. That left only a dog and me to fight a true mage in the center of his power, and I could barely walk.

And then he dealt with that problem. I wasn't sure quite what kind of magic this guy specialized in, but it was clear that he had a certain amount of skill with fire, and it was fire that he used against us now. He must have been more clever than I thought, too, because he didn't even try to hit me. I was accustomed to functioning through pain, and I knew I could heal almost anything given enough time; I wouldn't have been stopped by a little fire.

No, he attacked Snowflake. A gout of fire, the pale violet of a burning potassium and too bright to look at, covered the distance between him and my dog in the space of a blink. It was well-aimed, a perfect headshot on a moving target.

The fire did as fire does, and Snowflake burned as huskies burn. She screamed, out loud and in my head both, and pawed desperately at her head, reason overwhelmed by pain.

And then I was reminded of something. Snowflake *wasn't* accustomed to pain. I'd gone out of my way to keep her from being injured. Oh, she'd suffered bruises, cuts, scrapes, sprains, and so on, and that might seem like a lot to you. But if so, it's only because you live in the modern world. Humanity has become so civilized that pain is a stranger, an intruder in your life, and actual injury nearly unthinkable.

When you've been shot and stabbed, when you've clawed your fingers to stubs and been casually tortured during an interrogation, a bruise doesn't even register anymore. The truth is that those are small pains, as such things go.

Having your face lit on fire isn't a small pain.

Snowflake and I were tightly bound. We'd spent, at this point, more than a year together, and that was long enough for my magic to build a soul-deep link between the two of us. Unless we specifically make an effort otherwise, we can't *not* feel what the other is experiencing. Normally, that isn't a problem; we've gotten used to it to such a degree that we don't even have to think about it anymore.

She didn't have the presence of mind to block that now, and I didn't have the energy. Her pain, and the animal terror it aroused, echoed into my mind.

I collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut. I don't just use that because it sounds good, but because it's accurate; I fell without thinking about it, without controlling the movement at all. My head

bounced off the ground, a pain I hardly felt through the agony of having my face melted, and my limbs sprawled randomly. Tyrfing remained standing, and of course I dragged my hand across it in my fall, because bad luck is what Tyrfing does and I'd spent entirely too much time around the naked blade for safety recently.

I fell in such a way that I could see what was going on in the fight, which was some small consolation. Thought couldn't penetrate to me right now, but I still saw, and even in some way understood.

The constructs were all but gone. Many of them were knee-deep in stone where, prodded by Brick, it had folded and crawled up their legs, and those were being executed one-by-one by my allies. Others had been incinerated by Jimmy's violent fire magic, entangled in strands of shadow, battered by the feeble winds Erica could call so far underground, or—because the Inquisition understood that not every solution was magic—shot repeatedly. The rest had for the most part been shredded by the werewolves, or by the wolf and bear which were the Inquisition's combat shapeshifters. Laurel, as I'd expected, was in no danger. Kris, naked and paying no attention to that fact and carrying a large knife, was currently fishing her out of the water, having already cut the ropes. The cinnamon wolf, too injured to fight effectively, was over by the stairs with Mac, while Ryan watched over the pair.

Overall, we still looked fairly good. Snowflake and I were done—definitely for the context of this fight, quite possibly permanently, but the constructs were too, and that gave us the advantage of numbers. That many mages could take out the remaining wards no problemo, and once they did I didn't give the bad guy good odds. It would take all his concentration to incapacitate a single werewolf with his magic, and that would leave plenty of available force to kill a small army, let alone one man.

Which is why, once again, he changed the game.

I never felt anything, not the slightest whiff of magic, nothing. I never felt the magic, because there was no magic to feel.

He didn't need magic. Just good planning and preparation, and a little less cohesiveness within the pack than there should have been.

The last werewolf—the brown one, the one I didn't know, the one without any noteworthy characteristics, the one I never looked at twice—moved suddenly. He launched himself at Kyra's back.

I didn't think that he was stronger than her. But he didn't need to be. He hit her from behind with no warning at all, and she never saw it coming. Moreover, he *was* wearing armor, and I could see that there was a tracery of silver on the surface of the steel.

He knocked her down. And then, in the instant before she realized what was happening, he threw himself on her. No playing around, this time; he went straight for the throat.

My best friend was about to die. Nobody was close enough to act before he ripped her throat out, and that was something not even a werewolf could expect to recover from. Kyra would die, and I was helpless to do anything but watch.

The sound of a gunshot came from over by the stairs. The werewolf staggered sideways, confusion clearly visible in his posture, and then stumbled.

Silver, it had to be. Nothing else would have had such a profound effect. Good to know that I wasn't the only one who'd planned for betrayal. Ryan looked as shocked as I felt, but his reactions had been fast enough to get the job done.

Kyra, visibly furious beyond the limits of sanity, stalked over to the traitor. Meanwhile, the rest of them finished with the constructs—I don't think most of them even noticed that little byplay—and Laurel and Kris came to where I was being one with the floor. Snowflake had managed to stop, drop, and roll the fire out by now, but she was in no shape to fight, and neither was I.

They caught up to me about the same time I got the reflected pain under control enough to think again. Laurel, soaking wet but with her sword belted on again, and holding my ginormous new shotgun in her hand, helped me up. Leaning on Tyrfing again, I limped forward, the others following closely.

They were behind me, so I didn't quite see what happened next. But I felt a sudden surge of magic, and heard a thump from behind me.

Turning around, I saw that Kris had hit the floor, sound asleep. Between her and Laurel, the kinetic barrier had snapped back into place, cutting us off from the rest of the fight.

"Thank you, Laurel," he said. "I think this charade has gone on long enough. Shall we end this?"

"Let's," she said, raising the shotgun to her shoulder. "You have no idea how glad I am to be done pretending to work with you."

He paused, confused.

The gun wasn't pointing at me.

"Don't be a fool, Stark," he said. "You can't back out now. The Watchers committed to helping me avenge the death of my brother."

She grinned, the expression every bit as disturbing as I'd come to expect from her. "Yeah, well, the Watchers changed their minds."

"That's absurd," he snapped. "The political fallout from my clan would be disastrous. Your position is already precarious."

"No one outside this circle can hear a word we say," she said. "And the only witnesses aren't likely to be sharing information with your clan." She paused. "For the record, I normally wouldn't engage

in this kind of banter. But I dislike you too much to shoot you before you understand just how badly you screwed up."

The other mage nodded. His expression was a little tight, but not exactly worried, as though he still hadn't quite processed what was going on.

"First off, your brother was breaking the laws. We *know* that he was breaking them, and the only reason we didn't kill him for it is that Wolf and his people beat us to the punch. To turn around and ask us for help avenging his death after that was *incredibly* stupid. I just want to get that out of the way."

"It was intended to be a statement. I felt that Jon would appreciate the irony."

It was still stupid," Laurel said dismissively. "Then there was the *way* you went about it. The curse you had me laying out was very close to the edge of the laws, and ensuring that it did no real harm was a lot of work, which didn't do much to endear you to me. Besides which, targeting innocent people with something like that? That is *fucked up*. So yeah, I'm going to enjoy this."

And then, without any pause, she pulled the trigger.

A seven-gauge shotgun is a powerful weapon. Thanks to the way that shotgun bores are measured, it's almost twice the size of the more common twelve-gauge. Loaded with buckshot, that kind of gun can do a hell of a lot of damage.

The results when such a shot is aimed at someone's head from a distance of less than fifteen feet were predictably messy. To say that the mage was decapitated would be an understatement.

"Sorry about all that," Laurel said, handing me the gun. "Like I said, I normally wouldn't be this much of a drama queen, but that asshole really pissed me off."

"That's fine," I said numbly. "So this whole thing was just so that you would have an excuse to kill him?"

"Pretty much," she said. "I don't really get involved with the political aspects of our work, but I know that things are delicate right now. The Li clan is one of our biggest contributors, and we couldn't really afford to alienate them at the moment. Had to maintain plausible deniability and make sure the credit went to someone with a legitimate grievance."

"Makes sense."

"Good. Your backup did better than I was expecting. You told them where to show up?" I nodded. "Thought so. Our guy would have made sure they were here anyway, but it's good that you dealt with it. Says a lot about you. I must say, Mr. Wolf, it's been a pleasure working with you. That tunnel over there's the escape route; it exits about twenty miles away. I'd appreciate it if you gave me a bit of a head start; it'd be awkward if you were to run into me on the way."

And then, still seeming quite cheerful, she walked off. The barrier melted away before she reached it, and she sauntered off down the tunnel before I could ask another question.

Snowflake was alive. I cannot express the degree of relief I felt when I saw that.

One of her ice-blue eyes was milk-white instead, not unlike a fried egg and equally as blind. I cannot express the degree of pain I felt when I saw that.

Mac had done her best, but even magic has limits. Restoring the skin somewhat, encouraging healing, limiting inflammation and pain, all of these were things she could do. Repairing something with the complexity of an eyeball when it was practically melted out of the socket is not.

Realistically speaking, Snowflake was almost certainly never going to see out of that eye again. I knew that. She knew it, too, and while she covered the distress she felt at the prospect, I knew better.

The rest of us, though, came out of it fairly well. The three werewolves, between Mac's magic and their own, looked to be in much better shape than when I'd left. They wouldn't want to get in a fight right away, but they weren't going to have difficulty walking out either. Of the fourth, the traitor, all that remained was a pile of meat and bone hardly recognizable as having been a canine. I saw a few tufts of brownish fur, and did not look further.

It was a long walk out of there. My back hurt, and I was absolutely exhausted.

But eventually I walked out into the cool night air, and looked at the moon, and let out a sigh of relief. I couldn't say I'd handled it well, I couldn't deny that damage had been done, but it was over, and I was still alive.

Epilogue

Shockingly, the police never connected any of us to the hostage situation and explosion which was briefly national news, a gift horse which I did not examine, after all the crap we'd been through. I believe they eventually concluded that the criminals argued amongst themselves and all ended up buried in the rubble. Said rubble came from Brick collapsing the staircase behind us with his magic, and left little evidence to challenge that conclusion. We all made it out alive, and only Snowflake was permanently injured.

Snowflake and I have been staying at the lab. It is a distinctly nonideal living situation, sleeping on a cot underneath the worktable and cooking my meals on a Bunsen burner, when I cook at all. Mostly I don't bother these days. If I'm not eating out and I'm not eating at a friend's, I just warm some raw meat in the microwave to split with Snowflake. It tastes like crap, but so does my cooking, and I've nearly given up on pretending to be a normal human being. It's not like I have to worry about *E. coli*.

Occasionally, I get an invite from Kyra to take over one of the guest bedrooms, or Anna offers to let me share her apartment, and I'm sorely tempted. Then I remember what happened to Enrico, and I say no.

When I first came back to the lab, I found several things I did not expect. The first was a lovely blue vase filled with forget-me-nots and a letter written on vellum (vellum? Come on, who uses vellum?)

Aiko's handwriting, utterly inappropriate on vellum, came as a welcome surprise. I won't bother you with the details of the message, because they are frankly none of your goddamn business. There are, in fact, only two things you need to know about what she wrote. The first was that she had, indeed, been punished for her indiscretion in openly interfering with a Watcher on assignment, never mind all the mitigating factors. She isn't allowed to leave the Otherside for the next ten years, although she did imply that there was a possibility of parole. The second thing is that the valediction was *I love you*.

I love you. Neither of us had ever actually spoken those words to each other. I think we were afraid of them. I think we had good reason.

Just three words. You wouldn't think they would bring tears to my eyes. You wouldn't think Legion could resist a comment when he saw it.

Funny, how often I'm wrong about these things, eh?

The second thing I found was my amulet. I had given it up for lost in the fire, but there it was on my table, shiny as the day it was made, and I should know. Under it was a single sheet of parchment, because apparently it was "Use utterly anachronistic writing materials day," on which was written in masterful calligraphy the following:

Winter,

I saved this for you. It seemed a shame to let it burn. Congratulations on your recent victory. I have taken the liberty of informing certain individuals of recent events; as a result, I think you will find your reputation to have increased significantly.

-Loki

The third, and by far the least important to me, was a fat envelope with no return address which was also left on the table, the implication being that there were way too many people who could walk through my wards at will. It contained a brief, unsigned message congratulating me on not dying and stating that I could consider my rep with the Watchers made, and that work would be made available if I desired it, on an irregular and entirely unofficial basis. Also included was a personal message from Laurel Stark saying that she was extremely sorry for the events of the past several weeks. Apparently the intention was never to cooperate with the bad guy, but the Watchers had been politically pressured into assisting him.

The last thing in the envelope, and what made up most of the bulk, was twenty-five thousand dollars in nonsequential used bills. I tucked it away for a rainy day, and burned everything else they'd sent. I then disposed of the ashes very carefully in a place that couldn't conceivably be traced back to me and which I wasn't fond of, because you can't be too careful with these things.

I have a bit more acceptance in the pack now. They know that I will protect them, that I am an ally. I have a bit less acceptance as well, in another way. The werewolves fear me, and they fear for me. They saw me do too many things that were too scary not to. Kyra doesn't look at me with fear in her eyes, but she is one of a small minority.

But that's all right. I mean, I'm never going to belong to the pack. I had my chance at that, and I turned it down. At least now I know that they won't be causing any trouble for me. They're far too scared of what I might do to them. Machiavelli would probably be pretty happy with my situation.

Which, admittedly, is piss-poor compensation for the loss of my friend, my house, and any hope I might have had of fitting in with pretty much anyone. It's thin consolation for knowing that one of the few genuinely good people I know thinks the things I've done are so horrible that I could plausibly be a doppelgänger using the original Winter's identity to get away with heinous crimes. It's not something I ever aspired to in the first place.

But hell. It beats nothing, I suppose.