

## **Debts Outstanding**

Emrys Vaughn

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## Debts Outstanding (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 getting a little weird that you're still reading these things, you know. I mean, if you read the dedication you can at least tell yourself that you're just checking if it has your name in it, but the disclaimer? *Why?*

Emrys Vaughn

This one is dedicated to you. Yes, *you*, personally. I don't even care who you are, this one is for you.  
Happy Wednesday.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

### Chapter One

I was awakened by trumpets the day the gods came to town.

Waking someone up with music isn't necessarily a bad thing, of course. Done right, it can actually be quite pleasant.

This was not done in that way.

It started with a fanfare, a literal fanfare like you would expect to hear when royalty visits or something. It quickly progressed from one trumpet to what sounded like a dozen, backed by maybe twice that many drums. Again, nothing intrinsically wrong—except that they were playing at about a million decibels and it was way, way too early in the day for that.

By this time, Snowflake had her head stuck between my knees and was covering her ears with her paws. Because at least one of us had to be paying attention, I poked my own head out to see what was going on.

Needless to say, there were no musicians in my laboratory. This did not appear to perturb whoever was responsible for the music.

Exactly as I stuck my head out, the music concluded, all the instruments coming to a massive crescendo that wrapped up with a cymbal clash that left my ears ringing.

Before I could really adjust to the lack of sound, it started up again. More specifically, Morgan Freeman started talking, in cinematic surround sound. He said:

"I present the Harbinger of Chaos, the Crafty in Lies, the Prince of Destruction, the Master of Disaster; by the grace of himself King of Jotunheim, of Midgard, and of Niflheim; Duke of Utgard and Hyperborea; Sultan of the frozen seas; first among giants; sovereign of the most honorable and most renowned Order of the Serpent, sovereign of the most noble Order of the Mistletoe, and sovereign head of the most illustrious Order of the Small But Extremely Numerous Pointy Objects; the Father of Beasts, the Son of Lightning, His Lowness Lord Loki."

I sighed and put my head back down. Of course it was. Who else but Loki would, given the kind of power required to do something like this, actually use it to do something like this?

As the echoes of his introduction were fading, Loki himself appeared in the center of the room. Even knowing, insomuch as any mortal really can, what he was, it was still disturbing. There was no sound, no flicker of motion, no brush of magic against me, no gate to the Otherside, nothing. One moment there was no one there, and then the next there was, and in between? Nothing.

"Rise and shine, everybody!" he roared, somewhere between "psycho drill sergeant" and "grumpy camp counselor." "Drop your cocks and grab your socks, folks, it's time to go kill something!" Thus settling *that* particular dichotomy, I suppose.

There was a pause, during which no one seemed particularly inclined to do any rising or shining. "What are you doing under the table?" Loki asked a moment later, his voice returned to what I thought of as his normal. Which is to say that it was light and happy with, in this case, a touch of curiosity underneath. Loki always sounded amused to me, and also always had this edge of madness somewhere beneath that that made it impossible to be near him without being afraid.

But you never let them see you flinch. And, more to the point, at the moment my life depended on Loki's continued amusement, which meant no groveling, and in fact no expressions of respect or fear at all. That would just bore him, and in many cases a bored god is worse than an angry one. At least all the angry gods do is kill you.

Thus, rather than anything you would expect of somebody dealing with a terrifying old god, I shoved my head deeper into the pillow. "At the moment," I groaned, "I'm mostly regretting the sleeping I'm not doing, thanks very much for that."

"And you're sleeping under a table because...why, exactly?"

It being apparent that he wasn't going to give up and go away (I didn't expect him to, but a guy can dream, right?), I lifted my head enough to glower at him. He was wearing what I thought of as his default body, a tall Nordic man with rugged good looks, reddish blond hair, and eyes that resembled more than anything else a forest fire in progress. "If I leave the cot in the middle of the floor," I grumbled, "I keep having to move it around. Here it doesn't get in the way."

Loki considered that a moment. "You're sleeping," he said slowly. "On a cot, under a table, in a laboratory. At noon. And your only blanket is actually a dog." He stopped and thought some more. "You know," he said eventually, "I would love to make that more pathetic for you, but I'm not entirely sure how. I don't suppose either of you has a suggestion?"

I glowered some more. "It is way too early to deal with this," I said to him, Snowflake conveying wordless agreement in my head, and put my head back on the pillow.

"Winter. It's *noon*."

"Yeah?" I muttered. "That means I've had less than five hours of sleep. Come back around four and maybe we can work you in."

"Oh," he said, clearly amused. "But, as I've already said, it's time to rise and shine. You know what that means, right?"

"No, but I'm afraid I'm about to."

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"It means," he continued as if I hadn't spoken, "that if you aren't standing and out from under that table in nine seconds—both of you—I will stand you."

I didn't want to find out how he planned to do that. Snowflake and I both made it to an ambulatory state in record time.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, snagging my cloak of shadow from the table and throwing it on over my tank top. I didn't much care about formality—Snowflake had, obviously, seen it all before, and something like Loki would probably have a hard time even telling the difference—but I kept the cloak's quasi-pockets loaded, in case I needed to run for it some morning. Given that Loki was present, I figured I couldn't *be* too paranoid.

"You owe me," he said brightly, opening my various cabinets and looking through them idly. They were locked, and warded, and in a couple cases also booby-trapped. He showed no more notice of my protections than I would of a spider web. Actually, that's not accurate; I brush spider webs out of my way, and Loki didn't even seem to realize that something had *gotten* in his way. Scary.

I considered pointing out that the favor I'd bought turned out to be rigged, and had in fact seriously endangered both my life and Aiko's. Then I reminded myself that pissing off the Harbinger of Chaos, et cetera, was a very bad idea. "I need a little more information than that," I said instead.

"Sure," he agreed. "I'll show you."

I knew what was coming after that, and I tried not to blink, but I didn't have the choice. It wasn't even a matter of that whole eyes-drying-out stuff that makes you blink all the time. No, my eyes just closed without my brain getting involved at all.

When I opened them, as I'd expected, we weren't standing in my lab. Where, exactly, we might be was a question I wasn't prepared to ask. I hadn't felt a thing, so we must have used the same means of transport that Loki relied upon for screwing with me. Strangely, it wasn't any clearer what had happened when I experienced it than when I watched it from the outside.

So, essentially, saying where we were was impossible. I had no idea how far we might have traveled in that instant, and there weren't any landmarks that I could see to orient on.

The immediate vicinity was a little easier to place. It looked like a parking garage, one which was eerily empty. Nobody likes parking garages, and I'm no exception. In fact, I like them less than usual, because I can sense the aura of fear and distrust that inevitably sinks into them clearer than most folks. Nobody really feels safe in a parking garage, and over time so much thought and emotion becomes a part of the walls and the air.

It also wasn't hard to see why the place was abandoned, or why the aura was nastier even than most places of the type. I mean, parking garages aren't expected to have the nicest ambience, but there are still certain things you expect. Generally speaking, for example, you expect that regardless of how scary all the dark corners and strange angles might be, nothing bad will actually happen while you walk

to your car. To help reinforce this impression, you expect that you won't stumble across the evidence of somebody else who wasn't so lucky.

The blood would make that pretty hard here, I think. I could smell it like a physical presence, reminding me uncomfortably that I hadn't eaten yet, and not even a human with a human nose could ignore the reek of blood. It was pooled and spattered on every surface in sight, including parts of the ceiling. Fresh, too; a few hours old at the very most, and I was guessing more like minutes or less.

The source of the blood, likewise, wasn't hard to figure out. I mean, generally speaking when you have that much blood and that many corpses together, it isn't hard to say that the one goes with the other. I counted nineteen bodies, arranged in various poses. Most of them looked rather ignominious.

Death, I reflected, often was.

"Why do I need to see this?" I asked, staring at Loki and trying to pretend I couldn't smell the blood. About that time, I finally got my head clear enough to notice that only the two of us had been transported. Snowflake, presumably, was still at the lab.

He grinned, taking no more notice of the macabre scene than if they'd been ants. "Because I'm retaining your services," he said brightly, as though it were so obvious he wasn't sure why I was actually asking.

"No."

"No?" he asked, curious.

"No," I repeated firmly. "Our deal was that I got to choose what form the favor would take. I'm not interested in this. Ask for something else."

He nodded thoughtfully. "You are, of course, correct. If that's what you decide, so be it." He pulled a pack of chewing gum out of a pocket that hadn't existed before he reached for it. It smelled like artificial flavor pretending to smell like fruit of some kind. Loki popped a stick into his mouth and glanced at me slyly.

I sighed. "What?"

"Well," he said, chewing the gum. Loudly. "I have a bit of a philosophical question for you. I've been wondering, if somebody thinks you're working against them, does it matter that you actually aren't? See, they think they've gotta defend themselves against you. Except then you have to defend *yourself* against *them*, right, because otherwise they'll paste you. So, essentially, you actually are working against them. You see what I mean?"

I did. I mean, it wasn't hard, right? "You son of a bitch," I sighed.

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He grinned. "Well, naturally. So, as you might have guessed, I'm appointing you my representative in this matter. And, while you are of course free to decline this position, I think it's only fair to tell you that you're pretty much the last to know. Which means that everybody else already has their sights on you. And, I'll give you some free advice here, these aren't the nice kind of people, if you know what I mean."

I glowered some more. I'm not much of a morning person at the best of times, and this was approaching a new record for the worst way to be woken up after too little sleep. "I don't suppose you could tell them you changed your mind?"

He grinned. "Well, sure. But really, would *you* believe me if I said something like that? Yeah, didn't think so."

I sighed. It was, of course, entirely possible that he was lying. He was Loki, after all; lies were kind of his thing. But I didn't think he was. This whole setup reeked, in addition to fresh blood, of exactly the kind of casual cruelty that Loki would find hilarious. Besides, I believed him when he said that he usually found lies less useful than truths. Once you see through a lie, it loses its power over you; the truth doesn't have that weakness. "All right," I said reluctantly. "What do you want?"

He grinned. "I thought you might say that," he said, seeming to have no difficulty with the fact that he was blowing a bubble at the time. Maybe he'd forgotten that a normal guy needed to use his mouth to speak. "It isn't complicated, really. There've been three murders now in Colorado Springs, I'll give you the details later. I want you to find who's responsible—in the proximate, I mean, not like who's cosmically responsible or something. Do that, and return anything stolen from the victims to me, and we're even."

"Three?" I asked, looking around again. "What about these guys?"

He looked around as if puzzled, and then laughed. "Oh, right. Nah, this was a gang fight in Mexico. I just brought you here for, you know, atmosphere."

I sighed. How very...him. "Do I get any more information?"

"Of course," he said happily. He reached into his coat pocket. Somehow, from a pocket barely big enough to fit your hand into, he pulled out one of those big manila mailing envelopes—without, I might add, any folds in it—and handed it to me. "There you go. That should be everything you need. Remember, all the stolen goods are returned to me directly. Mess it up and I'll flay you with a butter knife." He winked, tipped a cowboy hat that didn't exist until he reached for it, and snapped his fingers once.

It sounded closer to a firecracker than a normal snap. I recoiled instinctively, blinking, and when I opened my eyes again the smell of blood was gone.

*I hate him.* Snowflake was rubbing her head against my thigh as though to reassure herself that I was actually there.

"Me too," I sighed, slapping the envelope down on the table. "Looks like we're seeing some more action."

*More? Don't we get to wait a while? I mean, it's only been three weeks. That's a little much, don't you think, even for you?*

"Yep. Tell you what, how about you go find Loki and tell him so?"

She sniffed, but didn't respond otherwise, which I was calling a victory. I opened the envelope and pulled out a bunch of papers, paper-clipped into three groups. The first two were both brief, unsatisfyingly vague dossiers, complete with photos.

I gave them a cursory glance-over, pretty much just reading the names and looking at the pictures. It was still a bit early in the day for me to be doing any serious analysis. I hadn't even gotten dressed, for crying out loud.

As I finished each page, I set it down on the floor for Snowflake to read. She was still adjusting to the loss of her right eye (and the burn scars ensure that she gets more looks when she goes out undressed than I do), but she wouldn't have much difficulty reading a few sheets of paper. She did pretty much the same thing I had, albeit with a little more difficulty turning the pages, making the occasional interested noise.

Then I got to the third stack, and stared. It was just like the others, a thin stack of documents detailing a man's life in the vaguest terms possible. I didn't read it, because I froze as soon as I saw the name at the top, Humberto Rafael Escobedo. It wasn't the sort of name you forgot, and I knew it, even though I'd only met the man once or twice. It also wasn't the kind of name you saw every day, and I didn't think I needed to worry about it being a duplicate.

Humberto had been a werewolf.

Loki, whatever else he might be, has impeccable timing—absurdly so, even. Which is why I wasn't surprised when, just as I started to swear at that realization, the phone rang.

Twenty minutes later, Snowflake and I were driving across the city.

That, in itself, was a pretty crazy thing. I mean, I'd spent something like thirty years without a car. I'd gotten so used to not having a vehicle that having to either walk, call for a ride, or take public transport (good luck with *that* in Colorado Springs) anywhere I might want to go.

Except that I'd received a pretty decent sum of money recently, I think because the group responsible wanted me to like them. It didn't work, because I don't consider twenty-five grand an adequate substitute for a friend's life. But my distaste didn't stop me from spending it, and about a week ago I'd picked up a decent used car.

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Which is how I wound up driving a forest green Jeep down the street, while Snowflake hung her head out the window and mentally urged me to speed up. She wasn't in any particular hurry; she just likes the feel of the wind in her fur. Having experienced it, I didn't especially blame her. There's a reason dogs stick their heads out the window.

I knew when we'd made it to the right place, because I saw Kyra's wreck of a car parked on the street. My ride wasn't pretty, but hers made it look like a vintage Caddy. I had no idea how she kept that thing running by this point, given that I was wondering about that when I met her, quite a few years before.

I got out of the car, hands tucked into my cloak. I'd thrown some clothes on underneath it, and shaped the pseudofabric into the classic trench coat to cover the armor, giving me at least some semblance of respectability. Snowflake, too, was dressed up; she'd elected to go with the plain black silk eyepatch today, and I'd even clipped the leather leash to her collar, so as not to freak anybody out walking down the street.

Kyra was standing in the doorway of a fast food restaurant. She was wrapping up a conversation on the phone as we approached; I didn't overhear anything informative, but from the authoritative tone I was guessing the person on the other hand was one of her werewolves. "Hey, Winter," she said, dropping the phone into her pocket.

"Hey," I said. "This the place?"

"Yeah," she said flatly. That, right there, told me that this was pretty bad. Kyra's seen, and done, and experienced, a lot of bad things, and she's good at not showing any emotional reaction to them. For her to sound like that made me think that whatever had happened to Humberto, I could safely say that it would be fairly horrible, even by my standards.

Kyra must have cleared things with the policepersons there, because they let me and Snowflake by without protest. They didn't look happy about it—the police and I don't have the best relationship in the world, because of reasons—but they didn't stop us. Kyra, like most Alphas, keeps on good terms with law enforcement, using bribery, probably blackmail, and a healthy dose of sheer force of personality.

Anyway, they let us by. Unlike most of the crime scenes I'd encountered in my life, they'd already been here and set themselves up, with the yellow tape and everything. There was nobody there but us, Kyra, and a handful of cops. The employees weren't being allowed in, and I think it would probably have taken a lot to keep the customers there.

I'd sorta expected us to go in, but we didn't. Kyra led us around back of the restaurant, to a small alley. It was there, right in front of the service entrance, that we encountered what was left of Humberto.

I stared. Then I gagged. Then I stared some more. Beside me, Snowflake was doing more or less the same thing, for once too shocked for words. *That's a bad way to go*, she said finally, sounding subdued.

*Yeah*, I agreed, staring at the body. *Very bad*.

Humberto had been crucified. Literally crucified, nailed through each of his limbs to a two-by-four. The whole contraption had then been leaned against the wall next to the door.

It was neater than I'd expected. Not much blood, barely enough to smell it. I guess that's not surprising, all things considered. It wasn't like the wounds were particularly large.

That isn't to say that they weren't painful. I wasn't exactly an expert, but I was pretty sure that crucifixion was supposed to be a terrible way to die, and I was also pretty sure that this specific case was nastier than most. For one thing, rather than simple iron nails, the killer had used what looked railroad spikes.

Spikes which had, of course, been either made from or coated with silver. Even if it hadn't been utterly predictable, the smell of its magic was unmistakable. It was highly charged, too, enough to make me itch from three feet away.

You don't bleed to death if you're crucified. You suffocate. You have to lift your own weight to breathe, and eventually fatigue, pain, and thirst make that impossible, and then you die. It was, by all accounts, an intensely unpleasant death. That's why the Romans used it as a means of execution in the first place.

Looking at Humberto, I could believe it. His features were twisted into a veritable rictus—a word I've never really had occasion to use before, and yet which seemed entirely appropriate to the occasion. I mean, I've never been quite clear what defines a rictus, but I was confident that this was an example.

He'd been dead too long to stink of fear and pain. But I still fancied that I caught a ghost of it on the wind, and I wasn't entirely sure it was my imagination.

"How long ago was this?" I asked Kyra quietly. Speaking loudly seemed...disrespectful.

"The deliveryman found him about half an hour ago," she said, not looking directly at the body. I could hear the burgeoning anger in her voice. "But we don't know yet how long ago he actually died for sure, or even whether he died here."

I sighed. Loki must have known that I would be getting involved with this regardless. Given that it was Kyra's problem, it was pretty unlikely that anything else would happen. Which meant that that whole scene in the parking garage had been...what? Him screwing with me, the way it seemed he always was? Or was there something deeper going on?

"Who's your contact in the police?" I asked, absentmindedly rubbing Snowflake's ears.

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"Sergeant Frishberg. She's...how do I put this...."

"Chief officer of werewolf affairs?" I suggested brightly.

"Something like that, yeah. She's the unofficial head of the freak squad." Freak squad being the unofficial term for the unofficial group of cops who had been unofficially assigned to deal with all the weird, freaky, and/or supernatural stuff that, unofficially, nobody else wanted to touch with a pole. Most of them didn't want to either, which is why the freak squad consisted mainly of those who pissed off higher-ups and couldn't find a way out of it.

It didn't help that the government still hadn't done *anything* to acknowledge the werewolves, on any level. They hadn't even bothered to deny that they exist. Strangely, Conn seemed quite happy with that outcome. For his part, he still hadn't allowed anyone to do anything that might remove that last veneer of plausible deniability. Over a year after his big public reveal, nothing much had changed. It had sure as hell been a lot less of a shock to the system than I'd been expecting, and I was starting to suspect that the whole thing had been a con of some sort.

"How much do you trust her?" I asked.

Kyra shrugged. "Enough? You have to give me some basis for comparison, here. She's helped me out with some sticky situations, and she's reliable enough that when I need a hand disposing of evidence or forging documents she's the one I ask. But she's willing to let me bribe her in the first place, which doesn't exactly scream trustworthiness in a cop, you know?"

I nodded thoughtfully. "True. On the other hand, it's not like somebody like me can go all kosher and aboveboard in the first place, is it?"

"I guess not. You have something in mind here, or did you just want to ask random questions for no reason?"

I shrugged. "Loki's decided to start screwing with me again, wants me to be his thug in some kind of spooky hoedown. He says this," I indicated Humberto's body, "might be related. I thought the police might be the next source of info to look at, so..." I trailed off.

She grunted. "You turn anything up, you bring me in on it." It wasn't a request.

I tried anyway. "Look, I know you're tough, but this is something else, you know? I mean, we're talking about *Loki*. He scares other *gods*, for crying out loud."

She looked at me levelly. "If you find out who killed my wolf," she said, enunciating in that extra-clear way usually reserved for the mentally impaired, "you will bring me in on it." She paused, and in her eyes was something of the black humor that was her hallmark before...before. "Besides," she said mischievously. "You really think you can keep me out of this?"

"Well," I admitted, "no."

"Thought not," she said, laughter hiding in her voice. She passed me a business card for one Sgt. Kendra Frishberg, which I casually slid into my pocket. The werewolf paused to spend a moment ruffling Snowflake's ears, and then walked out toward the street, already pulling her phone back out.

I stayed a few moments longer. I hadn't told Kyra that I could smell magic. I wasn't sure why. Some instinct just said that it would be smart to keep it to myself for now, and I didn't argue. I might have, if it hadn't been such a strange scent.

There were only so many scents I associated with magic. There was the disinfectant of a pure human, the musk-and-lavender of a werewolf, and the blood-and-spice tones of vampires. And, well, that was about it. Oh, there's variations on the theme, of course. Mages can range from straight disinfectant to something much closer to bleach, and have all kinds of undertones depending on personality and what magic they're actually doing. And then, if you smell deep enough, you can actually pick out individuals based on delicate variations in scent, and sometimes even something of their moods and thoughts.

Granted you have your oddballs. I'm one of them. I smell a little like werewolf, because I am a little like werewolf. But I also smell more strongly than most wolves of freshly spilled blood, and then there are tones of ice and freshly cut grass that aren't quite like anything else I've run into. In my experience, my scent is totally unique.

But even so, there was a limited range of what magic could smell like. This didn't fit any of the categories. There was a hint of human disinfectant, but it was far from the strongest note in the medley. That position was held by something dark and cold, the smell of shadows and silences. It was unlike anything I'd encountered before, arousing the telltale tingling sensation of magic less in my nostrils than in my throat. It made me want to sneeze.

If I didn't have a well-stocked cupboard of poisons, I don't think I would have caught the last scent. It was sweet, vaguely floral, slightly exotic, not especially noteworthy unless you happened to know it was nightshade.

What did that mean? I didn't have any idea. I'd never encountered a magical signature in which human was a subtle undertone rather than the dominant scent. Likewise, the primary note, which stubbornly resisted all efforts to equate it to a physical smell, wasn't anything I'd encountered before. As for the nightshade, well, aside from the obvious, I had no idea what it was indicating.

So yeah, I didn't feel too guilty for not telling Kyra. What was I supposed to say? "There's something here but, you know, I really have no idea what it might be or what it means?" I was pretty sure she could figure that out on her own.

Still, it was creepy. It bothered me, and I didn't linger long. Snowflake stuck close to my heels as we left the alley, and I could feel her unease.

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I was too scared to eat.

That, right there, should tell you quite a lot. I mean, can't sleep, can't joke, can't close my eyes without seeing monsters, that's one thing, but too scared to *eat*? That was new. I'd been inches from death more times than I could remember clearly, and the fear had faded, but this? This situation filled me with an unfamiliar, very rational kind of fear.

People say that they're willing to die all the time. And it's meaningless.

It's meaningless for a lot of reasons. First off, of course, the vast majority of people who say that are wrong. They aren't necessarily lying; a lot of people really *believe* that they're willing to die for a cause, or a person, or an action figure for that matter, but when push comes to shove they can't do it. So the first problem you have is sorting out the ones who really *aren't* afraid of death.

Then you have to realize something else. This is that, realistically, death isn't all that scary. I think most people, on some level, realize that death is inevitable. We get so worked up about it that teens pretend they think they're immortal, but at the end of the day we all recognize that people die. So, when forced to confront that fact, we recognize that dying is essentially something that we don't have a choice about. "Choosing" to die now rather than later is akin to choosing to eat your spinach before your dessert; ultimately you *will* have to eat it regardless.

Anyway, I think that's why you get so many people willing to sacrifice themselves. You see it all the time: zealots willing to die for a cause, mothers for their children, soldiers for their countries, all kinds of people dying just for a paycheck.

That's why it isn't a big thing, really, to say that I wasn't afraid to die. Why should I be? I mean, I've seen a lot of death. A whole lot, ever since I was a kid. They say that familiarity breeds contempt; I don't know if that's quite right, but I do know that it was hard to be afraid of something as familiar as death.

Don't get me wrong. I didn't want to die. Why should I, after all? My life is pretty nice these days. I've got friends, a steady romantic relationship, work I enjoy and which has decent pay. Life's good, and I have no desire whatsoever at this point to leave it. I don't want to fall in the sewer either; that doesn't mean I'm scared of manholes.

Death didn't scare me. *Loki* scared me. He scared me like crazy. There was nothing, but nothing, you could put past *Loki*.

That, really, is the scary thing. The unpredictability. *Loki* might give you a fortune, just to see what you did with it. Or he might sell you into slavery. Or keep you alive for a thousand years while you're eaten alive by fire ants. Or all three, one after another or all at once. Worse yet, you would never see any of it coming.

That was scary. That was the kind of fear that crawled inside your skin and made itself at home. It slipped into my organs, climbed around in my bones. Some kinds of fear are fun—the adrenaline rush

of an amusement park, say, or its darker cousin that you only ever find when people are fighting to the death. But then there are long-term fears, based less on hormones than on simple logic, which aren't much fun at all. Things like hospital visits, or waiting for the torturer to finish his lunch break.

Loki scared me like that. And, most disturbing of all, there wasn't anything I could do about it. If he decided to kill me, I'd never know it. I'd just die.

Which is why, rather than go find something to eat like I'd been planning, I called Kyra's sergeant right away. Kyra's name was enough to get me a meeting in an hour.

Snowflake and I were, of course, more than half an hour early. That's the kind of thing you do when you're paranoid. There was no way I was going to meet a cop, crooked or otherwise, without casing the joint first.

She showed up almost fifteen minutes early. Perversely, I was satisfied to have been justified in my caution. Snowflake had advised getting some takeout rather than going straight there—huskies are *never* too scared to eat—but I'd thought that every minute might be valuable.

Sergeant Frishberg wasn't hard to notice. Oh, she wasn't in uniform or anything like that. She just wasn't Enrico. He could have walked straight up to me and clapped me on the shoulder and still caught me by surprise, and I *knew* him. Next to that, she wasn't that great. There was something about her bearing, I think, that gave her away.

I'd had her meet me at the park—I mean, the open space, a fact which Snowflake had mockingly reminded me of—not far from where my house was before it burned down. Ostensibly, this wasn't an unreasonable location. It was public—a fact which was driven home by the absurd number of cars in the lot, even so early in the season. On the other hand, you could be in sight of a lot of people without any of them being able to hear you, making it a reasonably safe place to have a private conversation.

It was also about as close to natural as you could get without getting a lot further from the city proper, which would make magic significantly easier for me. And, because it was pretty close to my old home, I knew most of the predators in the area by...well, not name, because most animals don't *have* names in the human sense of the word, but the equivalent. If I needed help and had more than about a minute to get it, I could probably arrange something along those lines. A fox isn't dangerous, generally speaking, to an adult human. Several dozen foxes, coyotes, feral dogs, and raptors can be. I'd hate to ask something like that of them, but in an emergency it was entirely possible.

I was reasonably confident that she didn't know about those parts, unless I was getting played already. I probably wouldn't have to take advantage of it—but let me tell you, it was pretty comforting to be able to set up a potential confrontation on my choice of ground for once. I don't normally get that privilege.

Snowflake, who was out scouting around because she's much, much sneakier than me, picked the sergeant out in the parking lot and trailed her up the main path to where I was waiting. I'm pretty

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sure the cop had no idea she was being followed. For a husky, Snowflake is pretty good at not being seen when she wants to be.

I got a decent glance at her through Snowflake's eyes as she was walking up. She was casually dressed in a white T-shirt, cargo shorts, and hiking boots. I could pick out a dozen or so hikers in the immediate vicinity wearing practically the same clothes. The rest of her appearance was a fair bit more unusual. Her last name sounded vaguely German to me, but her features were far from classical Western European. The skin, a few shades darker than a tan, made me think she might be Hispanic or Native American, as did the straight black hair, cut short enough not to impair vision. Her eyes, though, reminded me of Aiko more than anything, and the kitsune looks about as Japanese as they come. Frishberg was taller than average for a woman, and fit, but neither one exceptionally so. On the whole, it was hard to draw any real conclusions from her appearance.

I met her, as we'd arranged over the phone, near the main building, not far from the lot. She was looking at one of the informational displays they had set out, and doing a reasonably good impression of a tourist. I walked up next to her, all casual-like. "Lovely weather we've been having lately," I commented, not looking directly at her.

She glanced at me out of the corner of her eye. "Isn't it," she agreed blandly. "Walker sent you?"

"In a manner of speaking," I agreed.

She grunted noncommittally. "What do you need?"

I glanced around to make sure nobody was in earshot. "Information," I said, passing over a blank business card on which I'd written the three names of interest. To anyone watching, it was an utterly innocuous sight. "Files, incident reports, anything you can scrounge up. Delivered to Kyra posthaste."

She glanced at the card very briefly as she took it and put it in her pocket. "Five grand," she said, her tone leaving no room for argument.

I kept myself from wincing. I could, just barely, afford it on what was left of the Watchers' money, leaving me enough from other sources to get by. It wasn't an enormous issue—but I'd spent too long too broke to take it lightly. "One now," I said, pulling out a small envelope and passing it over as well. "The rest on delivery."

She nodded sharply. "Fair enough." She made the cash disappear as well, the motion as buttery smooth as a street magician. "Three hours."

Better, I had to admit, than I'd expected. I nodded once, and we shook on it before she left.

Snowflake found me about five minutes later, just far enough from the beaten path that nobody would notice. *That went well*, she said. She had, of course, been watching through my own eyes the whole time.

*Yeah*, I agreed. *Guess I didn't need to worry this time.*

She butted my thigh gently, a wordless reassurance that I was justified. Besides, it wasn't like I'd spent any munitions on it. *What now?*

I ruffled her fur. *Food.* I still wasn't hungry, but I knew that I needed to eat. I would rapidly become ineffective otherwise, after all, and it isn't wise for a werewolf of any stripe to get too hungry. That's how bad things happen.

Chapter Two

About two hours later, after a solid meal that wiped out most of the rest of my cash in pocket, Kyra called to say that Frishberg had delivered, and been paid out of the pack's bribery account. She phrased it exactly like that, too, which made me laugh. Trust werewolves to have an account set up specifically to make bribing officials more convenient.

We picked it up at her house, reimbursing her three grand while we were there (I figured, given that I was at least partially helping them out, the werewolves could cover the last thousand), and then took the whole stack back to the lab for study. It was, thankfully, a lot more complete than Loki's dossiers.

I read them all, in detail, a few times. I compared them to each other. I made what guesses I could about the parts that wouldn't make it into the official report. I took my time about it, being sure not to miss anything. I knew that if I did, it would, inevitably, turn out to be the crucial detail that the entire thing turned on. That's just how my life goes. It took me about an hour.

Then I threw the whole stack down on the table in frustration. "This makes no sense," I complained loudly, extending a tendril of energy as I did.

Something like black fog shifted on the surface of the bones in the corner of the room. "Whassat, Boss?" something said in a voice that resembled, more than anything else, a snake sliding across flagstones. It was perfectly intelligible—which, given that the speaker had no body beyond a canine skeleton, it really shouldn't have been—but it sounded nothing like a human voice.

"This," I said, gesturing disgustedly at the mess of papers. "This makes no sense whatsoever."

*True dat*, Snowflake agreed sourly. She was lying on my feet, eye firmly closed. She'd given up on trying to extract anything valuable from the police documents almost fifteen minutes earlier. *I think Loki's screwing with you.*

Legion, who had been about to speak—don't ask me how I know that, because I have no idea; the demon just had a way of making it known—paused. "Loki's mixed up in this?" he asked, a touch of something almost like fear in his voice.

It takes a lot to scare a demon.

"Yeah," I said bitterly. "I'd almost agree with you," this addressed to Snowflake, "except for one thing. He cashed in his favor for this. Loki's random, sure, but almost all of the stories paint him as crazy self-interested. Would he throw away even a minor debt for a practical joke?"

*Well*, she admitted, *maybe not. But seriously, this is nutty.*

"Hey," Legion interrupted. "I get that at least one of you was born in a barn, but could you maybe pretend you've at least heard of manners as a concept?"

"Three people murdered in the past two weeks," I said, shuffling the papers back into a stack. "One of them was a werewolf, probably today. Somebody with freaky weird magic crucified him with silver spikes. Before that was some random criminal. Convicted twice on theft, and they think he's done a lot more. Got shot outside his apartment last week. Then the first one, almost two weeks ago by now, owned a pawn shop. Stabbed twice in the chest. There's all kinds of weirdness around that one that make me think magic, but by now the residue would be too degraded to be worth checking."

Legion waited a moment, until it became clear I had nothing more to add. "What's the connection?" he prompted, for once forgetting to be offensive. The demon enjoys a challenge, intellectual or physical.

*Exactly*, Snowflake muttered.

I sighed. "Yeah. Pretty much. The connection is, Loki said this morning that there had been three murders in the area, and he wanted me to get to the bottom of it. He implied that there was a theft motive. Beyond that? I got nothing."

The demon stared at me. "You must be joking."

I rolled my eyes. "About which part?"

"I'm not sure. I mean, I *would* have said that the idea of you taking work from Loki was ridiculous, but then you're moronic enough you might just do it. Then there's the implication that Loki gives a shit about theft, but that seems a bit too dull for even your sense of humor."

I thought for a moment. "You know," I said after a moment, "that's true. Why the heck *would* Loki care about a few murders?"

Legion's eyes, sparks of intensely bright blue light, never moved. The impression that he was rolling them at me was nevertheless very clear. "Why are you asking me?" A moment later, after it became clear that a chagrined response was not forthcoming, he said, "I take that to mean you are not joking."

I sighed. "Alas, as much as we might all wish otherwise, I am not." I pushed the stack of papers over toward the demon. "This is all I've got. If you notice something, tell me."

Unfortunately, I hadn't been exaggerating. There really was quite simply nothing to connect the three incidents. The first, the pawnshop owner, had been a middle-aged woman named Shannon Plumber. No criminal record, no known associations, no significant outstanding debts. It was almost disappointing. I mean, nothing against pawnshops, but you sort of *expect* them to be dens of iniquity and criminal behavior.

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In this case, however, the relative mundanity of her life was more than compensated for by the exotic nature of her death. Shannon had been stabbed twice in the chest. Both wounds were apparently made with the same weapon, and it was a good bit larger than the usual knife. In fact, the coroner's report indicated that the best guess they had was a sword—*not* something you encounter commonly these days, unless you live like me. The place had then been ransacked, but apparently nothing had been taken. The inventory was complete, and the cash was still in the register. They hadn't even stolen the woman's wallet.

That, right there, was enough to make me think it was a little bit weird. I mean, swords aren't the weapon of choice of your typical street punk, and to leave without at least grabbing the money was even stranger. It didn't stop there, though, because they'd also found evidence of fire damage. Not "fire damage" as in "attempted arson." There were just places—on the walls, the floor, and the ceiling—that were badly scorched. The marks hadn't been there before the murder.

So that definitely reinforced my impression of weirdness. Patchy fire damage like that made me think of, say, Jimmy Frazier, a burgeoning fire-specialist sorcerer who had a fondness for throwing goutts of flame in a fight. Such blasts were likely to char whatever they hit, but usually didn't have the duration behind them to really set something alight.

The real kicker, though, was the damage to the ground, both inside the shop and on the sidewalk out front. That part *wasn't* random and disconnected. Instead, it formed a distinct pattern where the fire had been.

Namely, footprints. Human footprints, to be exact.

So that definitely suggested a killer with some kind of magic. I mean, the police had some theory about a loony using a blowtorch or something, but I just wasn't buying that. It made no sense to me at all.

So basically, what I'm saying is that I could have sorta connected that to Humberto. I mean, both killed with magic at scene, check, werewolf means involvement with supernatural, I could see there being a connection and I could see Loki taking notice. The one in between ruined that for me. He'd been a totally normal guy, as such things go. Steve Potts, age twenty-seven, was a dime-store hoodlum. Involved in nine kinds of petty crime, never managed to get up the ambition to go big. Killed in a drive-by shooting as he was walking out of his apartment complex, police figured gang-related.

There was nothing weird or remarkable about that. Nothing. No evidence that magic was involved, no connection to either Humberto or Shannon. Further, Steve wasn't the kind of guy who would have something *worth* stealing, not by Loki's standards. Loki wasn't the sort to get involved for anything of less than earth-shaking, gut-freezing, hide-under-the-bed-and-pray magnitude.

I was pretty sure that there wasn't a god out there who would trade away a favor to investigate some random gang shooting. I was also entirely sure that was the name that Loki had given me. The

chances that two guys with that name would die violently in a couple weeks in Colorado Springs were pretty much nil.

So, long story short, I was left with a magical killing without a motive, a motivated killing without magic, and a werewolf who'd been brutally murdered for, as far as I could tell, no damn reason at all. The only hint I had was that something had apparently been stolen, something valuable enough that Loki would want it back, and no theft had been detected at any of the murder scenes.

Proceeding from there was, needless to say, a difficult prospect.

By the time all that was sorted out, it was almost sunset. That, in turn, meant that I had an appointment to keep.

I used to have a very, ahem, *close* relationship with a kitsune named Aiko. That changed a few weeks ago, when she helped me out of a bind against the wishes of her extended family/feudal overlords. I mean this not in the sense of any change in our emotional attachments, but rather in a purely physical sense. (I was just clearing my throat earlier, you know. No need to get all upset about it.)

Think of it as being a little like a long-distance relationship, except turned up to eleven. In a normal long-distance relationship, at least these days, you can call, text, write, and email as many times a day as your significant other (or others, I'm not judgmental) is willing to tolerate. Worst case you can probably reach them physically within a few days, because they're only a few thousand miles away and modern transit is a wonderful thing.

Aiko was in a sort of reverse-house arrest in an entirely different dimension. They did *not* have cell phone service. That meant that communication was pretty minimal. We used air spirits as go-betweens, but they were incredibly annoying to work with. In addition to having a frustrating name—air spirits aren't actually spirits, and they aren't made of air—the things have an extremely limited mentality. They aren't much good at time, for example, which is why we used sunset as a marker—it's a lot easier to distinguish something like that than, say, a clock, especially for nonhumans.

Transportation was even harder. It required a lot of work on her part, because she had to make two different gates just to get somewhere she could open a path from the Otherside to Colorado. It also required me to hike a ways out into the sticks, and obviously the whole thing had to be perfectly timed.

All of this meant that I hadn't seen her for about two weeks. Now, ordinarily I would have said that wasn't a huge deal. We were both adults, in the most technical sense of the word; we could cope.

However, I *also* couldn't call and cancel. I didn't have the good relationship with the air spirits that she did, and that meant that my chances of calling up one I knew, convincing it to do what I asked, *and* getting it to understand any message more complicated than "Not coming" were pretty much nil. Without receiving some kind of word from me, she would immediately jump to the conclusion that

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something had gone catastrophically wrong and I was in need of immediate assistance, or possibly vengeance.

There were all kinds of ways *that* could go wrong. I mean, Aiko isn't the most stable person around at the best of times, and she'd previously demonstrated a willingness to go to remarkable extremes for one of the handful of people she cared about.

So suffice to say that I felt like it would probably not be wise to ditch that rendezvous without a very good reason.

Besides, it wasn't like I was making any kind of progress on this. Maybe she would see something we hadn't. I don't know that I would say that Aiko is smarter than Snowflake or me, and definitely not Legion. But she *is* better at thinking around corners, and more than once she's seen a fact or opportunity I wouldn't have just by approaching things from a radically different direction.

Which is how I wound up hiking through the same park I'd met Sergeant Frishberg at. Aiko's gate location here was way, way off the beaten path, somewhere I'm not sure I was even allowed to go. Theoretically, of course, I approve of that, because it seriously decreases the chance that anyone would see something they shouldn't. On the other hand, it also meant that getting there involved a decent hike, especially when you're wearing most of a suit of metal armor and carrying several weapons, and there wasn't anything like a groomed trail most of the way there.

But we made pretty good time, Snowflake and I. There was no way I was leaving the husky alone, not when freaking *Loki* had as much as warned me that scary things would be after me at any moment. I wasn't sure whether I was more concerned that they would get her to use as leverage, or that something would eat my face while she wasn't around to watch my back, but either way, if I had a choice she wouldn't be leaving my sight for a while.

Conveniently, she had the exact same attitude toward me. She's a bit clingy at the best of times, courtesy of being a dog, and several times now I'd been kidnapped and threatened with death while she wasn't around. She had no intention of letting something like that happen again.

So, several minutes before sunset could really be said to be underway, we were waiting at a small alcove in a rock face, well away from anyone else and further protected from prying eyes by a screen of bushes. They were just now leafing out, but the branches alone would do a decent job of concealment.

I passed the time by riding the mind of an owl overhead, just beginning his nightly rounds. It was an excellent view, of course, and there was little chance that I would miss the surge of magic that marked the opening of a gate to the Otherside. Even if I somehow did, Snowflake wouldn't, and she had ways of getting her point across.

The sunset was decent—not incredible, but decent. The mountains to the west helped, of course; it's hard to have a really *bad* sunset against a backdrop like that. The owl managed to snatch a

mouse or something similar, too, and the rush of adrenaline and the taste of blood were both quite satisfying, on a visceral level.

Definitely better than a waiting room, overall.

Finally, just when the last colors were fading from the sky, I felt the press of fox-and-spice scented magic. Snowflake gave me a mental prod, but I was already moving. I slipped out of the owl's mind with a sort of nonverbal *Good hunting*, and back into my own body.

Portals aren't nearly as dramatic at the "exit" terminal as from the caster's side. Instead of an irregular oval of absolute nothingness cut into the air, all we saw was a faint haziness in the air directly in front of the rocks. The husky and I steeled ourselves and then stepped forward.

Portals *are* every bit as unpleasant from both ends. In fact, I think it might actually be a little worse this direction. There was an instant, an instant that seemed to last years, during which we were...not falling, exactly. That implies orientation, direction, gravity—all things that were notably lacking in the interval between leaving one world and entering another. But there was a sensation of movement, terribly fast movement without any frame of reference I could understand. I had no senses, during that moment, not in the classical sense at any rate. But if you tack together every unpleasant thing you've ever felt, the stench of rotting meat and the flash of a strobe light six inches from your eye, pain of bones grating on concrete and the mindless roar of heavy machinery in your ear, if you imagine experiencing all that at once without the insulation of your body between you and it, if you put all that together you have some idea what it's like to step through a gate to the Otherside.

I lost a few minutes, on the other end. I always did. It was like the sheer awfulness of the trip hit some kind of reset button in my mind. It didn't do a thing to keep me from experiencing every last bit of how horrible the crossing was, which always strikes me as a bit unfair. But once I made it out, there was just a blank spot.

As usual, the next sensation I received directly was of being doubled over against the nearest available surface (a tree, in this case, which was a distinct improvement over some), panting like I'd run a marathon, and feeling like I was about to learn firsthand what your digestive system looks like when it's operating on the outside of your body.

Snowflake was, if anything, worse off. She was currently curled around my feet whimpering to herself, and all I could feel from her mentally was an overwhelming wave of nausea. I had no idea why it affected her so much more strongly than me; often the opposite was true, and I'd never worked out a pattern for it. I never asked questions about how that whole system worked, beyond those which were necessary for my own attempts to replicate the magic involved. Those attempts had yet to bear fruit, and it wasn't something you wanted to rush, but I had hopes that after another year or so of serious practice I might actually be able to open portals for myself. Until then, though, I had no intention of asking any more questions than were absolutely necessary.

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I was afraid that someone might actually answer. Call me a coward if you want, but I've found that when you aren't sure whether you want to know about something, the wisest solution is to just not ask. If I'd known *that* my whole life, there are all kinds of horrible things I wouldn't have to live with knowing. My mother, for example. I learned pretty early that asking someone how they'd known my mother was a *really bad idea*, because most of the time they were only too happy to tell me. In disturbingly graphic detail, usually.

"You're not going to throw up again, are you?" Aiko asked, crouching just on the edge of my peripheral vision to rub Snowflake's neck comfortingly. "Only, you know, I showered just last week, and I reckon it should last 'til Friday at least."

Would it be weird to say that, in spite of my current state of nausea, I felt happy to hear her voice? I honestly have no idea. I never really learned how normal people communicate beyond the point of mimicry. I think that's probably a large part of how Aiko and I ended up together. Who else could put up with someone that emotionally misshapen?

Case in point: not one of us acknowledged the fact that it had been weeks since we'd seen each other, nor in fact would a casual observer likely have recognized that there was any emotional involvement between us whatsoever. I sat against the tree and waited for my head to stop swimming. Snowflake lay at my feet, eye tightly closed and paws over her ears to block out sound. Aiko jumped, caught the low-hanging branch of a gargantuan maple, and effortlessly pulled herself up to sit on it like a wooden fence.

"So what's the crisis?" she asked, leaning back on the branch as though sunning herself. There wasn't any sunlight in this forest. There never was in Nightside Faerie. That wasn't particularly important. Aiko has never much bothered herself with little things like reality.

"What makes you think there's a crisis?" I asked, perhaps a little bit defensively.

She laughed. "That's what I like about you, Winter. There's *always* a crisis. It keeps things exciting. So, really, what's up?"

"Well," I admitted, "there's sort of a crisis."

*How often do you find yourself saying that?* Snowflake wondered, apparently coherent again. Aiko was, of course, laughing so hard I almost would have worried she'd fall off, except that I knew the fall wouldn't faze her. Besides, her balance is literally superhuman.

"It isn't funny," I said crossly. "Loki's sticking his nose in again."

The laughter cut off abruptly. Aiko is at least as scared of Loki as I am, with reason. "Oh. Can I have the lab after you kick it?"

"Very funny. I don't suppose you'd be interested in actually *helping* me?"

"Course," she said cheerfully. "Granted, there isn't all that much I can do from over here. Chocolate ice cream!"

I blinked. "What?"

"Ice cream," she repeated. "You have any idea how hard it is to find ice cream on the Otherside? It's ridiculous. Anyway, what did you want me to do?"

I shrugged and pulled the police documents out, tossing them up to her. Embarrassingly, I had to use a bit of air magic to actually get them there; like most paper, they weren't exactly aerodynamic. "Loki wants me to investigate those," I said. "And recover any stolen property."

She grunted, flipping through them. "Pretty random."

"Frustratingly so," I agreed. "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do at this point."

"I'm guessing you can't drop it?"

"No," I said sourly. "As much as I'd love to, Loki apparently told all the parties involved that he was contracting me to deal with it. Meaning they'll be trying to kill me whether I do anything or not."

"Well," she said, still reading, "I suppose you can always go with that. You know, just wait for somebody to make a go of it and then squeeze 'em for info."

"That's a great idea," I said sarcastically. "Because I'm sure to win that fight. And everyone tells their hatchet men why the hit's going down, right?"

"Good point. So what do you reckon was stolen?"

"What makes you think anything was?"

"Well, it's obvious, right?" I stared blankly. Aiko sighed and then continued. "Look, it's pretty clear that whoever was going through that shop was all kinds of upset. He wanted something, right? Why else would you trash the place like that?"

"But he wasn't in it for the money. So whatever it is, it must have more than just cash value." I shook my head. "I already got that. But how do you explain the rest?"

"Simple," she said, black eyes alight. "He didn't find it. Maybe someone else beat him to it, maybe it was just sold already. Either way, he doesn't want the owner talking to anyone else, so he offs her."

"And the kid?"

She shrugged. "Maybe he was the buyer. Maybe he was just unlucky, and whoever had it realized it was too hot to handle so they dumped it off on him."

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I nodded along. "Reasonable enough. What about Humberto? Doesn't really fit the pattern, does he?"

She frowned. "Well," she admitted, "no. Got a better explanation?"

"Well, no. So...what? You think I should be trying to figure out what it is they're chasing?"

"Best way I can think of to figure out who's involved," she agreed. "Besides, it sounds like you have to get your hands on it anyway. Might as well be now." She hopped lightly down to the ground. "Now come on, I found a really cool waterfall around here."

Walking through Faerie is a memorable experience. From what I understand, it's one of the more hospitable-to-humans sections of the Otherside. But if so, I honestly don't want to see the inhospitable places, because Faerie's still really freaking weird.

Let me give you an example of what I'm talking about. The clearing Aiko used for her gate was about ten yards away from a path—a standard clearing, about twenty feet across with a little stream running through it, the water of which glowed deep blue. Said path was little more than a game trail winding through the trees, except that the ground shone with a soft silver light where the nearly-full moon touched it. It wasn't a reflection, either; the gravel and dirt actually glowed when struck by moonlight, while the rest of the path was pitch-dark. So there was a constant, slow dance of light and darkness on the path as tree branches, moving gently in the perfectly still air, alternately revealed and obscured the ground.

That, right there, would be creepy enough. But there were all kinds of other things, too, in case a traveler might not be unnerved already. The scents of pine and night-blooming flowers were thick in the air, and shifted every other step, which was normal enough...except there wasn't a breeze to change. There was the occasional sound, somewhere off in the woods, of a wolf howling, which didn't bother me, and also of animals whose cries I didn't recognize and which I suspected had no names, which did. You could walk for ten minutes down that path and, looking back, see that you'd covered less than twenty feet—and then the very next step might move you several hundred yards.

It was mad and disturbing and disorienting, is what I'm saying. Adding to that was the fact that whenever the light of that too-bright moon touched me I felt the wolf inside me stirring, urging me to change and run down the Faerie path in a skin infinitely better suited to this world. I wanted to run, to hunt, to chase and kill and lap up the blood, and God help anyone who got in our way because they would most certainly need it.

That wasn't too disturbing. Werewolves, and I am functionally identical to a werewolf in this regard, get that feeling every full moon night. But it *wasn't* the full moon, not quite yet, and in any case it shouldn't have felt that strong. I definitely shouldn't have only been feeling it when I was in the moonlight; that kind of thing doesn't really matter to a werewolf. If the moon is full, it makes no difference if it goes behind a cloud.

So what I'm getting at here is that, while Faerie was undoubtedly a magical wonderland of mystery and fascination, it wasn't a very *friendly* wonderland. I suppose you could think of it as the geographic equivalent of straight habanero; it might taste delicious, but it wasn't anyone's idea of comfort food.

It was also the kind of place that was perfectly designed to trigger paranoia and the feeling that you're being watched in pretty much everyone. I'd been in the Midnight portion of Faerie three times now, because Faerie's pretty much the closest part of the Otherside to my world and therefore gets a lot of use for travel. Every time's been slightly different, but the same underneath. Repetition hadn't made it any easier to cope with.

So when, after about half an hour of walking, I started to feel twitchy and unnerved, I would have chalked it up to general paranoia and an eerie environment. Would have—but Loki had already warned me that there would be people looking to take me out. So rather than dismissing the feeling, I paid very close attention.

There was nothing there. I couldn't detect a single thing with any of my senses, not so much as a twig out of place. And yet, in spite of everything logic and my senses were telling me, the sensation of being watched grew stronger rather than fading.

Nothing happened. Nothing happened while we ambled down the moonlit path, none of the three of us saying much. Nothing continued to happen as we turned off the path into the deep woods, where the trees overhead blocked out most of the light and we were forced to navigate in large part with senses other than vision. As we walked through the forest, occasionally laughing at each other when we stumbled, there was still nothing happening.

It could drive a guy crazy, all that nothing. Especially when, this whole time, I only grew more convinced that there was nothing there, and my instincts only grew more adamant that someone, or *something*, was watching us.

The waterfall was, as Aiko had promised, worth seeing. The moonlight glittered off the surface of the slow-moving water and the crystalline rocks, turning the whole world into a dazzling patchwork of constantly shifting light. The waterfall itself was nearly fifty feet tall, and so wide that the enormous pines didn't meet above it.

It helped, of course, that while the river involved must have heard that water was supposed to flow downhill it was apparently something of a rebel, and firmly believed that Isaac Newton had missed a few things.

We spent nearly an hour there, I think, though the moon never moved and of course no mortal timekeeping device would work in Faerie. It was...cathartic, perhaps, would be the best word. For that one hour, it didn't matter that Loki was far from the only deity taking an unhealthy interest in my life. It didn't matter that several of my friends had died, and most of the ones who were left were very nearly

as frightened of me as for me. It didn't matter that I had cost Snowflake her eye, and Aiko her home, and Enrico his life.

It was nice, to forget all that for a little while.

"So I guess you probably need to be leaving," Aiko said. "Work to do and all that."

"Yeah," I agreed, perhaps somewhat reluctantly. We were currently walking on another path, one which was at roughly right angles with the last, having just exchanged forest for rolling hills covered in what I knew would be razor-sharp grass. It might have made more sense to leave by the same way we left, except that apparently it was a really bad idea to retrace your steps on the Otherside, and in Faerie in particular. When Aiko said that, I didn't ask why. Granted, it's entirely possible she's just screwing with me, but I don't see a need to test that hypothesis.

"Kay. There should be somewhere up here to stop and make a gate for you."

Aiko kept talking after that, but I missed whatever it was she said, because Snowflake had stopped dead still in the path. She was a perfect picture of whatever the opposite of relaxation is in a canine—ears laid back, hackles up, teeth bared and growling softly. At the same time, I got a sudden surge of alarm from her mentally, a spike of emotion without words attached.

You don't survive as many assassination attempts as I have by being complacent, slow to react, or indecisive. The instant I felt that first rush of alarm, I froze as well, throwing out one arm to stop Aiko, and gathered magic to myself.

In the very next instant, with only the gentlest *whir* of motion, an arrow slammed down into the path directly in front of us.

It was dramatic looking, a long black shaft tipped with a very sharp-looking broadhead. The fletching was more black, natural feathers if I was any judge. I couldn't tell, in the dark, what metal the arrowhead was made of, but it sure as heck wasn't steel.

It was sleek and deadly and it slammed into the ground at an oblique angle exactly where I would have been standing if we hadn't stopped.

We all stared for just an instant at how close that had been. Then, after the briefest of hesitations, I burst into action. I called Tyrfing and unsheathed it in the same motion, thickened the air around us as much as I possibly could, and extended tendrils of my less mundane senses out into the air perhaps twenty feet in every direction.

Like I said. If you're indecisive in the face of danger, you tend to come down with a nasty case of dead.

There was a brief pause. Then a male voice spoke. You notice I don't say it was a *man's* voice, because I wasn't sure that it was. It was loud, but oddly sourceless, seeming to come from everywhere and nowhere at the same time, and beyond a vague impression that the speaker was standing to our left—the same direction the arrow had come from—I couldn't have said where he was.

"Lucky timing," he said, his voice thick with an accent I couldn't quite place. Irish, perhaps. "Wonder how much luck you have left?"

As he finished speaking, I felt something stir the air—in the opposite direction as the voice had come from. The arrow was, of course, perfectly aimed, and it had too much momentum to be slowed more than slightly by my pathetic shield of air.

Human reflexes couldn't have pulled it off. Werewolf reflexes couldn't either, and in any case a werewolf shouldn't be fast enough.

But somehow, just as the arrowhead punched through, I reached out with Tyrfing, feeling as though I were moving through molasses, and swatted it away. It felt easy as breathing, almost casual. Moving as slowly as I felt, it flew to the side and embedded itself somewhere in the grass.

There was another pause. "Well, well," the voice said, coming from somewhere behind us this time. Aiko tensed, just now registering what had happened. Snowflake was snarling quietly in her throat. "Maybe not all luck, at that. How many can you do, then?"

That was all the warning we had. It was enough. The first arrow, coming from directly behind us where the voice had been, was never a threat. Snowflake, demonstrating skills honed in combat and long hours of Frisbee, managed to jump and, incredibly, catch the shaft of the arrow in her mouth. The second, launched almost simultaneously from the opposite direction, I batted aside as I had the first. The third, which came once again from the right-hand side of the path, I just barely managed to slip aside from. It sliced through the shadowstuff of my cloak, but skipped off the armor underneath, and the shadows merged again almost instantaneously. The fourth I simply ducked away from, and it flew on past me.

"Promising!" the mysterious voice shouted, from somewhere above and behind us—in a tree, most likely. "You're too good not to fight. I'll be seeing you later, Wolf!"

I waited, but it appeared he was gone. Tyrfing dropped from my hand. I hadn't felt it in the press of the moment, but the magic—not to mention the incredible, impossible speed—had taken a toll. I was suddenly, staggeringly tired. I don't mean that figuratively; I literally staggered to the side and then dropped to the ground.

*WINTER!* Snowflake shouted, her mental voice panicky, horrorstruck. I turned, terrified to think of what I might see, and looked at her.

I was not disappointed.

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Snowflake was unharmed—like me, she'd managed to somehow avoid every bolt. Aiko was not as lucky. A black-fledged arrow was sticking out of her abdomen. As I watched, the kitsune crumpled to the earth, her expression a horrific blend of shock and agony.

I crossed the distance between us very, very quickly. "Don't move," I said quickly, using a pocketknife to cut away her shirt so that I could examine the wound. Hopefully it wasn't as bad as it looked.

The good news is, it wasn't. The bad news is, that was because it was worse. The arrow, still in the wound, had acted as a plug. Otherwise the blood would already be starting to pool around her. The arrow had punched halfway through her abdomen, just to the left of her navel.

My heart sank when I saw that. It had punctured the small intestine—there wasn't really any doubt of that. It was the kind of wound that, while it might take its painful time about it, was consistently lethal. A werewolf under the full moon, or with the support of a pack, could survive it. A normal person who got modern medical care—promptly—*might* have a chance. But I don't know that I would bet on it.

Aiko was not a werewolf. As a kitsune, she was stronger and tougher than most women her size, and possessed of inhuman stamina and grace. But underneath she was as fragile as anyone else.

"We have to get you to a doctor," I said immediately. "How—"

She cut me off, lifting one hand to rest on mine. When she spoke, her voice was so weak that a human wouldn't have heard a thing.

But I am not a human. And, for better or worse, I heard her. "Don't bother," she said. "Poison," she said. And then, heartrendingly, "Don't beat yourself up about it."

And then her eyes slipped closed. A spasm of pain went through her body, and her hand slipped off of mine.

I stared for a moment. *No*, I thought. *Not you too*. It took me a second to realize that I'd spoken aloud. "No," I repeated, standing up. I glanced at my pocketknife, and something occurred to me. Something very, very bad.

*Winter*, Snowflake said, sounding sad and lonely and terrified. *Winter, I don't think this is—*

I tuned her out. I stood, took a few steps away, and dragged the knife across my hand, where I wasn't wearing any armor. I felt the pain, but it seemed to come from very far away, and my awareness of it was more rational than visceral. The blood covered the blade, ran down my hand, dripped from my fingers to the ground.

"Twilight," I said, sliding life and magic into the words. My voice was shaking and unsteady, but for all that it was deep and full of power, and in it I could hear the screaming blizzard winds, the howling of wolves, the rumble of stone breaking in the deep cold.

In the mortal world, there likely wouldn't have been any outward sign of what was happening. But this was the Otherside, where nothing was what it seemed and everything seemed what it was, and the power and the fury in my voice evoked power and fury in the world around me. The sky overhead boiled with newborn storm clouds, in which lightning crawled and thunder roared an answer to my voice. The trees shook with sudden wind, and even the earth seemed to tremble.

Was it real, or in my head? It was hard to say, on the Otherside, quite what the difference was.

"Lady of the air, hear me," I continued, louder now. The *boom* of thunder followed on the end of the words. "Mistress of the whirlwind, listen to me." *Boom!* "Sylph of the Twilight Court, come to me!" I finished in a shout. The magic poured out of me in a rush, leaving me almost too tired to stand, and half a dozen lightning bolts crashed down at once, blinding and deafening me. Snowflake whined, sounding somewhere between awe and horror.

I felt it, when she came. There was a sudden twist of power in the air around me, something that wasn't quite magic like I used, smelling of moving air and ozone. A moment later, a buzzing androgynous voice spoke behind me. "It was not necessary to shout."

I turned, bowing my head. "It seemed prudent." Looking up, I saw that it was indeed the same sylph I'd met before. She was naked, clearly displaying the total absence of any distinguishing sexual characteristics, although I knew this sylph was female. She had metallic silver skin that shone brightly in the moonlight, huge emerald-green compound eyes, and translucent insect wings ten feet across. "You owe me," I said.

She inclined her head very slightly. "That is correct," she said, emotionless and inhuman.

I indicated Aiko, who appeared to still be conscious, and in a lot of pain. "This kitsune requires medical assistance," I said carefully. I was playing with fire here—or, more accurately, lightning. "Save her, without significantly or permanently altering her mind or soul, and we are even."

The sylph cocked her head sideways, further than a human spine could bend, and turned those huge gemlike eyes on Aiko. Snowflake, still too terrified for words, was trying to hide inside my cloak, and whimpering. "I have halted the progression of the taint in her blood," the sylph said after a moment.

"Not good enough," I said immediately. "The poison needs must be removed permanently, and she requires attention for the mechanical injury as well."

There was a pause, during which the only sounds were Snowflake whimpering, a sort of buzzing noise from the sylph, and the hallucinatory sound of rushing winds that seemed to affect me whenever I was close to her. "I can provide transport to a location in which this assistance will be rendered," she said after a moment. "And will also arrange payment for said assistance. Will this be sufficient?"

I bowed my head again. "I believe so."

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There was another pause. "This action is of greater than sufficient value to balance my debt."

"I will owe you one favor of your choice," I said, "of comparable value."

Pause. "This is acceptable." The sylph turned and, with a wave of one silver-skinned clawlike hand, opened another gate amid the reek of wind and ozone. She produced as well a glowing green jewel of some kind, inscribed with runes. "Give this to the female you encounter there. It will serve as payment in full for required healing. Inform her also that a large dose of deathstalker venom is present in the kitsune."

I took it, wincing slightly at the electric shock that went through my body when it touched my skin. Then, carefully not saying "thank you" or anything like it—acknowledgment of debt is a very bad idea when dealing with the fae—I turned to leave. I picked Aiko up, very careful not to jostle the arrow still sticking out of her abdomen more than absolutely necessary. Then I carried her through the gate, Snowflake tight on my heels.

I can only imagine how horrible that transition must have been for Aiko, given that she was already seriously injured and poisoned. For me, and also for Snowflake, it was bad enough. Worse, by far, than that between Colorado and Faerie.

I managed not to drop Aiko or otherwise make her condition any worse, which I felt was a sizable accomplishment all on its own. I managed further to not puke all over myself, which seemed like dedication above and beyond the call of duty. Other than that, the less said about that gate the better.

Usually the first sensory data I receive after a gate is olfactory in nature. That's how my brain works, plain and simple. This time, it was auditory.

"Gibberish gabble babble gobbledygook!" a woman said loudly, sounding very not happy. Or, at least, that's what it sounded like to me. I expect that if I spoke whatever language it was she was using it would have been a perfectly coherent and eloquent complaint.

I opened my eyes to the painful glare of a dimly lit, windowless room. The woman berating me was...visually striking, you might say. She was maybe all of five feet tall, looked like she'd read the chapter on anorexia and thought that it sounded like a marvelous idea, except maybe a bit underachieving, and had skin several tones darker than you typically saw in Colorado, or probably most other places outside Africa, and redder than any skin I could remember seeing in my life.

"I'm sorry," I said carefully. "I don't understand you."

She switched to English midtirade. Literally, I mean; it sounded like she didn't bother to finish her sentence first. "—fucking floor! I mean God is it too much to ask that you have a little respect and I tell you that's what's wrong with the youth of today is they don't have any damned respect and you can't even be bothered to keep your fucking blood off my floor I say—"

Okay. Eloquent may have been an overstatement.

As it didn't appear that she intended to pause, or for that matter breathe, for quite a while, I interrupted her. "I'm sorry," I said, holding Aiko out in front of me. "But my friend here needs help."

She broke off to glare at me, pulling herself up to her full, unimposing height. "Do I look like a doctor?" she demanded, attempting to look down her longish nose at me.

I glanced over the scrubs, lab coat, and stethoscope. "Well, yes," I said. Not the most typical doctor, perhaps—the scrubs had been cut off, with slightly disturbing precision, to make a pair of shorts, which didn't even come as low as the hem of the lab coat—but still definitely doctoral.

She sniffed. "Well there's that at least. I suppose you're expecting me to work pro bono?"

"Actually," I said, shifting Aiko around so that I could dig in my cloak for the gem, "no. I was told to offer this as payment." And yeah, my arm was starting to get tired by then, but there was no way I was admitting that.

The black woman glared at me, then leaned forward to examine the stone. "Well that's bloody good enough," she said, standing up and snatching the emerald off my palm. She immediately made it disappear into the pocket of her lab coat, where it didn't make any kind of bulge even though it really should have. "Well what are you standing there for you fucking idiot?" she demanded of me, turning around. "Follow me stupid and make it bloody snappy unless you want whatserface there to die you moron."

I followed her, not bothering to respond to the torrent of abuse, through a small door into what looked like a crypt. I mean, it seriously looked like a crypt; the stone walls were carved with intricate designs that made me think of hieroglyphics, and arched neatly into the vaulted ceiling overhead. This impression was only reinforced by the marble slab in the middle of the room. The world around us still had the peculiar *intensity* of the Otherside, but this domain seemed to be lacking the arbitrary quality that made Faerie truly frightening.

"Watcha waiting for hurry up and put 'er 'ere," the doctor demanded snappishly, stopping next to the slab and pulling on a pair of latex gloves. Where she got the gloves from, I was not prepared to speculate on. "Careful now watch what you're doing you fucking moron haven't you ever heard of proper fucking handling I mean really now!"

"Have you ever heard of using commas?" I wondered, gently setting Aiko on the slab. "I mean, I'm not an expert here, but most people seem to understand language better if you occasionally pause to distinguish separate clauses, right?"

She sniffed again, casually displacing me at Aiko's side. "I don't have the bloody time. Magic?"

"What?"

"You heard me!" she shrieked, causing Snowflake to wince. "I said, what bloody kind of magic am I bloody looking at here I mean God come on already hurry it up why don't we!"

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"Oh. She's a fullblooded kitsune. I'm mostly a werewolf, and we were transported here by a sylph." I remembered something. "Oh, and she said to tell you that the arrow was poisoned with deathstalker venom."

She paused. "Well now," she said, sounding almost sane, "that's interesting. Deathstalker, eh? Good bloody thing you came here. But what I *meant* was, what kind of magic is this arrow? Don't bother answering, Wolf," she said, examining the arrow.

I paused. "How do you know my name?"

"Well some kind of bloody goddess I'd be if I didn't now wouldn't !!" she exclaimed. "I mean, really who *doesn't* know your bloody name. What'd you poor bastards do to piss off the faeries?"

"You mean that's a fae arrow?" I asked, electing not to pursue the rest of what she'd said. I just *knew* that wouldn't get me anywhere useful.

"Definitely," she confirmed, producing unpleasant-looking metal tools from somewhere. "Midnight Court Sidhe, no doubt about it. Not that it matters mind you, I was just making a little bloody conversation, not that you'd know what *that* means eh?" She paused and turned to look at me. Her jet-black eyes were bright, burning with some emotion I didn't recognize, and when I looked into them, I could smell her power. It smelled of sand, hot wind off the desert like the stinking breath of some great predator, the scents of blood and poison and life and death and everything in between. And it smelled *strong*.

"You can't help from here," she said, her voice sounding for the first time almost normal. "And you don't want to see some of the things I'm going to have to do."

I swallowed. "Do you mind if I sleep?" I asked diffidently, nodding to the corner of the room.

She snorted, and it was probably my imagination that said that her breath didn't smell human. Right. I believed that. "No hairs off my back. Just don't blame me if you have nightmares, eh?" She turned back to the slab, humming something under her breath.

"Doctor?" I said softly. She didn't turn, but she did pause in her motion. "I understand that sometimes accidents happen. But if something should...happen to her, and I think that you didn't do everything in your power to save her...I'll be upset."

She snorted loudly. "You think I bloody care?"

"I think," I said slowly, "that if you've heard all that much about me, maybe you should." I turned and, staggering very slightly from sheer fatigue, walked to the corner to sleep. Snowflake followed, keeping her good eye turned toward the room.

As the maybe-goddess who stank of the desert had promised, I didn't sleep well.

The nightmares were bad. I had plenty of fodder for bad dreams, and all of them seemed determined to gang up on me tonight. Recollections of my brief stint in Jon's torture chamber, of the fire that had blinded Snowflake's right eye, even stuff as far back as standing in the morning sunlight looking at corpses and hearing Edward explain that I'd killed them, all of it came rushing in.

It didn't help that being awake was hardly better than the nightmares. I could hear Aiko's rapid, pained breathing, interspersed with occasional screaming and what sounded like convulsions. The doctor murmured soothingly when it seemed particularly bad, which was some minor comfort, but it was still pretty horrible lying there in the dark and imagining what was going on. If I hadn't needed the sleep so very badly, I doubt I would have been able to keep myself away. As it was, I got very little rest anyway, but that beat nothing.

Eventually, after what felt like years spent lying in that shadowy corner, I felt something prod my shoulder.

"You can stop pretending now," the doctor said, nudging me with her foot again. Rolling over, I saw for the first time that said foot was bare, and so callused I doubt that fact bothered her. Apparently I hadn't been at my most observant last night, no surprise.

"What happened?" I asked, pushing myself stiffly to my feet. There's nothing quite like sleeping in armor to make a guy feel old.

"She'll live," the woman explained, looking at Snowflake with an odd expression. "The poison had already inflicted damage when you got here, however, and I expect that there will be some lasting symptoms."

I swallowed dryly. "How bad?"

"Paresis and hypesthesia of the ipsilateral side," she said calmly. "Possibly also some muscle damage and mild contusions from the convulsions, and naturally the initial injury will also require a certain amount of time to heal."

"In English," I clarified.

"That was English," she said sharply. "Muscle weakness and impaired sensation on the left side," she explained. "The risk of death should be passed, assuming that infection is prevented and there are no complications. With reasonable care and therapy, she should be able to walk within the year. To some extent the damage will most likely be permanent, however, and I would strongly advise that you not get your hopes up for anything beyond survival and basic physical competency." The doctor said all that with about as much emotion as I use describing last week's meals.

"I apologize for my attitude last night," I said after a pause to process that. "I was...very stressed."

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"I assure you," she said dryly, "that it was not the worst I have encountered." This time she paused. "The kitsune should be awake within a few hours." Her voice contained the first real emotion I had heard in it, an odd sort of sympathy.

"It would probably be best if I were gone before then," I said in response to her unvoiced question. I wanted to stay, but it seemed entirely too likely that whatever faerie had attacked us would be coming back for seconds. I didn't want to be here when he did. It would be dangerous for Aiko, and unforgivably rude to the doctor, whoever she was.

Besides. This wasn't a good place to fight.

"I understand," said doctor replied, sounding like she actually did. "She's welcome to stay here until she no longer requires assistance."

I thought about it for a moment. Then, deciding that pragmatism was overrated and I'd probably be dead before it could come back and bite me anyway, I said, "Thank you."

The strange woman smiled back at me, showing teeth that were entirely too white, even, and sharp to be natural. "You are quite welcome, Wolf. Tell your grandfather hello for me."

Chapter Three

The scary doctor had, it turned out, a permanent gate in an attached foyer. That, right there, was impressive. Making a permanent gate between Earth and the Otherside is big, big magic. Big enough, in fact, that I'd only seen it once before, in a weird travel-nexus of sorts that the Watchers used.

So what I'm saying is that finding one in the closet definitely suggested that the doctor was a lot more powerful than she initially appeared. As a matter of fact, it lent a certain amount of credibility to that whole "goddess" comment.

More amusingly yet, said gate led to somewhere in whatever desert it was that made up most of Arizona. I know it has a name, but I can never quite seem to remember it.

A depressingly long time later, Snowflake and I were driving north from New Mexico. It took quite a while to get out of the desert, during which time I think both of us were lucky to avoid heatstroke—even right after dawn, a husky and an armored werewolf have no place in the desert. Finding someone willing to let us hitchhike was an adventure in itself, too, believe me.

Eventually we did manage it. He was an old, somewhat grizzled, and extremely nice man who nevertheless insisted that both of us ride in the back of the truck. I didn't particularly blame him. I had the armor and all my weapons covered by my cloak, but a scary-looking kid in a trench coat and a husky with an eyepatch are *not* exactly photogenic at the best of times, let alone in an Arizona desert.

Once we'd made it to Phoenix, the going was a lot easier. We rented a car (a process which made me very glad that I'd taken to carrying a sizable amount of cash whenever I left the house), and then drove. And drove. And drove. And drove.

I never really got into driving, as a concept. Oh, I recognize the value. I just don't *like* it. It involves sitting still for long periods, becoming increasingly bored and stiff, and you're flirting with death the entire time. It's like a fight, if you took out all the good parts and crossed it with watching TV.

Anyway, around perhaps twelve hours later, when we were just outside of Pueblo, something interesting finally happened. Namely, my phone rang.

"Hey, Winter," Doug said. "There's some old guy here who wants to see you. Says his name's Dwal-something. You know him?"

"Dvalin Kovac?" I asked.

"That's the one. He a friend of yours or something?"

"A friend?" I chuckled, perhaps a wee bit bitterly. "I used to think so. Tell him I'll be an hour or so."

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As it turned out, due to heavy traffic and road construction, it was closer to two hours later when I walked into the shop that currently belonged to Doug. Before that, it was mine. Before *that*, for who knows how long, it was Val's. It was getting dark, and I wanted nothing so much as a long hot shower, a hearty meal, and to sleep for about fifteen hours. Neither the shower nor the hearty meal was particularly likely, but I figured I could make do with a sponge bath and some raw steak.

I respected Val too much to do any of those things before I went to the shop, though. Besides, I knew the wait would already have strained his—extremely finite at the best of times—patience to the breaking point.

Val hadn't changed much, in the year and change since I'd seen him. But, then, neither had I.

Not on the outside, anyway.

He looked me up and down, brows lowered disapprovingly. "You sold my shop."

"Technically," I said, dropping into one of the chairs, "you gave it to me. And I didn't sell it for money, I gave it away."

His frown deepened. "You gave my shop away." His voice held a depth of disgust usually associated only with unsavory bodily functions. "My shop. You *gave it away*."

I sighed. "I thought," I said, in my best conciliatory tone, "that would be better than getting it blown up. Or burned down, which I suppose is more likely."

He stared at me. He didn't say anything. Val typically doesn't, unless he feels like he needs to for some reason.

"Someone torched my house," I explained. "And tried to assassinate me, um, six hundred and twenty-two times and counting."

"Who?" he asked grimly.

I shrugged. "Dunno. Anyways, it seemed pretty clear the best thing I could do for the shop was get myself as far away as possible."

He grunted. "Maybe. But still," his voice rose again, "you gave away my shop! And," his glower returned in force, "you hired a woman! A woman, working in my shop!"

"I heard that!" Kris exclaimed from the workshop proper.

"She needed the work, Val," I said. "Just like I did, however many years ago. You remember that, right?"

He grunted. "Still. Not proper. Where are you living?"

"I've been sleeping in my lab," I explained, keeping my face straight with an effort. Val talks a good game, but he cares.

"You don't have a shower there?" he asked.

"No, but I do pretty well with the sink, and I shower at Kyra's every few days," I said. "It's just been a long day."

Neither of us said anything for a few moments. "I'd thought of taking the business back up," he said abruptly. "If you're willing."

"That's not my decision to make anymore, Val," I said gently. "But I don't think Doug would object too much." I stood up. "Now, if you don't mind, I'd really like to go get that bath." I would, too; one of the downsides of being a werewolf, especially after several hours in the desert, was that you could smell *yourself* at a superhuman level, too.

"Fine," Val said, waving one hand dismissively. "I have to see what kind of disaster these children have turned my shop into."

Kyra called me at seven-oh-three in the morning. "There's something you need to see," she said grimly. "Somebody's coming to pick you up."

That, right there, was a telling indicator that things were serious. I could count on the fingers of one finger how many times she'd sent someone to collect me, and given that it had been Enrico that hardly counted.

I dressed hastily (there's only so long you can spend in armor, even relatively light and comfy armor like mine, before you need a break, and I hadn't been able to stand the thought of sleeping in it again) and swallowed a few bites of food before I heard a car pull up outside. I unlocked and opened the door, stepped out into a reasonably heavy rainstorm, and then stood and stared, because there are some things you just don't see twice.

My lab is not in a high-dollar neighborhood. In fact, it's in probably the closest thing Colorado Springs has to a genuine slum. Wealthy people don't tend to go there. You don't see nice cars there very often, either. On the rare occasions you do, they're usually being driven by Mexican gangsters.

So seeing a spotless lipstick-red sports car stopped in the middle of the road, being driven by a black dude wearing an expensive suit who was built like a professional heavyweight boxer, was an unusual event to say the least.

He honked, just in case there was some question there. I shook my head and locked up behind myself. Warded or not, I never leave the lab without locking both doors. There are too many things in there I don't want stolen. Then I walked over and got in the car, at which point the smell confirmed that

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the driver was indeed a werewolf. Snowflake had to sit on my lap, as there was no backseat, which made things rather cramped, but it was nothing we hadn't done before.

It was at that point that I learned why Kyra had sent someone, rather than just having me drive to meet her. She was in a *serious* rush. The strange werewolf burned rubber out of there like the hounds of hell were on our tail, pushing that sports car to the limit. I would like to emphasize, at this point, that it was indeed still raining.

"Who's dead?" I asked over the horns as he made an illegal left turn down a one-way alley.

"No one," he said grimly. "Yet."

He was not a chatty guy. He literally didn't say another word on the drive south, cutting through rush-hour traffic like they were standing still. I considered trying to make conversation—or, at the very least, learn what the heck had Kyra so freaked—but his demeanor prohibited it.

He didn't take a wrong turn in the maze of curving streets, dead ends, and inaccurate signs that led to the pack house, which was more than I could ever seem to accomplish. He didn't slow down, either, which struck me as more than slightly reckless. He didn't seem to move quickly on the way in, but somehow he was still holding the door open by the time I got there. Going in, I saw something I didn't remember having ever seen before.

Kyra was sitting in the lounge area watching the television. More specifically, she was watching some sort of news program.

"Thanks, Jack," she called, not looking away from the screen.

"No problem," the big guy rumbled, and then turned and left.

I walked forward and joined Kyra on the couch. Snowflake, of course, lay down on my feet and closed her eyes—she could look through mine just fine, after all.

The host of whatever show this was had two guests onstage. I knew who both of them were, which was sorta surprising in itself. One of them was a popular actor of some sort, who I only vaguely recognized, and a publically known werewolf. The other, the one currently speaking as I walked in, was a prestigious researcher at a well-known medical school—I didn't recognize his face, but they had the name at the bottom of the screen. I didn't know exactly what awards and such he'd won—that, too, wasn't something I paid all that attention to. In any case, there are only really three things you need to know about him.

He was a werewolf. He wasn't public about it. And, as I discovered right then, he was hands-down the most magnificent liar I had ever seen, barring Loki and Conn, and the only reason I was ruling those two out was that I'd never actually caught them at it.

"So you don't believe that werewolves exist?" the interviewer was asking as I came in.

"I don't," the scientist said, his voice trustworthy and charismatic and all those other words people use for what werewolves would simply call dominance.

"Well," the other man said, "I think I'm going to have to take exception to that claim. I can say from personal experience that werewolves definitely exist."

"You still claim to be one, then?" the scientist asked.

"I most certainly do."

"So you're allergic to silver, then?"

"That's one way to phrase it," the actor agreed.

"Right. Would you mind if I confirmed that real quick?"

"Not at all."

The scientist smiled the slow, confident smile of a predator who knows he's about to win the chase. He pulled a coin out of the pocket of his coat and handed it to the other man.

The actor was good at his job. His mouth tightened as he took the coin. Within a few seconds, there were tears rolling down his face, his jaw was clenched, his hands shook, veins stood out on his forehead. Less than ten seconds after he'd touched the silvery metal, his hands spasmed and the coin landed with a clatter on the floor.

The audience stared in dead silence. None of the werewolves' promotional material had included anything like this.

The other man clapped slowly. "A masterful performance," he said, bending down to pick up the coin. "Truly marvelous. In fact, I only have one objection to raise.

The actor raised one slightly unsteady eyebrow. "And what is that, Doctor?"

His smile grew broader, until even a human couldn't help but recognize it as an expression of victory. "This coin," he explained, rolling it around in his hand, "is ninety-nine point nine percent pure...platinum."

There was a moment where it was hard to tell who was more shocked—the actor (and damn he was good at faking shock, too), the show host, or the audience. And then, of course, it went to commercial, because that's how TV works.

"What the hell is this?" Kyra asked, turning to face me.

"They're playing both sides," I said thoughtfully. "It's Conn's work, it has to be. Nobody else could set something like this up." I glanced at her. "I take it this is what you wanted me to see?"

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She grimaced. "Yeah. It seemed like something you might want to know about, and I know you don't have a television."

Over the next hour, Doctor Whatsisname made an extremely convincing case for the recent werewolf phenomenon being an enormous hoax.

None of the werewolves—not one—had been willing to be examined in a clinical study, although several of them had been invited repeatedly and promised significant financial remuneration if they participated. Of the handful of people who had responded, all had proven to be quacks, unwilling or unable to demonstrate any superhuman abilities whatsoever. Most of them had fallen for the same platinum coin trick as the actor—who, I noticed, was not on the stage. He'd served his purpose in this game.

Regarding the lists of werewolves which Conn had arranged to have published, there were a number of questionable facts which had since come to light. For example, almost half of the names on that list belonged to people who either didn't exist, or were deceased, or who knew nothing about it and had since stated that they were not werewolves, hadn't signed any of the letters they were supposed to have, and in fact hadn't even realized their names were *on* those lists until friends called to ask them about it.

Of the other half, most were entertainers—actors, comedians, that sort of thing. Several of them had openly admitted that the whole thing was a hoax they came up with as a prank, and which had exploded far beyond what they'd intended. The rest—and I was gratified to see my name come up, if only as a passing reference—had largely made significant sums of money on the resulting publicity, and had then absconded with the funds. Granted, at least in my case, it wasn't nearly as dramatic as they made it sound.

Several of the so-called werewolves had business ties that were so far beyond shady as to make even the government blush. The companies which had sprung up selling silver bullets—at, of course, a significant profit—all had at least one "werewolf" on the company board. Most of them were munitions companies which had been started just before the big announcement, and were ready with the silver ammo suspiciously quickly afterward.

Of the videos of werewolf transformations which had been released to the press, seventeen out of twenty-one refused to be examined. Of the other four, three were found to have been obviously altered, and the last withdrew permission at the last moment. Even without study of the film, more than half of the other clips were found to have been clearly—and very badly—Photoshopped. The scientist on stage, who had long since eclipsed the actual show host, played several of these, and pointed out where they had clearly been tampered with. Several didn't show the change at all, just a man and then, standing in the same place, what appeared to be a dog wearing a lot of makeup.

The live footage, by far the most convincing evidence, had equal or even worse flaws. Much of it, for example, was found to have the same alterations as the other videos. Most of the reporters and cameramen were found to either belong to the same corporations as the so-called werewolves, or

suddenly had lots of money in offshore accounts, or both. Most of them had since quit working entirely, several moving to other countries. None responded to a request for comment.

It was incredible. It was astounding. I knew that werewolves were real, I knew that the man talking was also a werewolf, *I was practically a werewolf myself*. And yet, listening to him, I almost doubted. It was like convincing Newton that gravity was a hoax.

I had no doubt that it was true, either. The evidence would all check out, every "werewolf" *would* be found to have all kinds of suspicious connections. And, most damning of all, none of us—*none* of us—would, as we certainly could, prove our reality instantly by shifting on a busy street corner. None of us would, because everyone—even those, like Kyra and me, who hadn't known ahead of time—had to realize that this was a setup.

It made sense, too, that was the worst thing. Conn hadn't wanted werewolves to become public knowledge in the first place. He'd only even considered it because he felt that the fae were forcing his hand. Well, after this, it wouldn't matter what the fae or anyone else did. Werewolves would be the biggest hoax of the twenty-first century, and only the most desperate and deluded would ever believe in us again.

It was a funny thing. You'd think that, once publicized, it would be hard to get people to not believe in werewolves again—but I was betting Conn was right, just based on basic psychology. At this point, anyone who *had* "fallen for it" would be incredibly embarrassed and want to avoid anything having to do with the subject—they wouldn't even let you get through the first sentence before they were laughing in your face, overreacting so that no one would think they were falling for the same trick twice. Anyone who *hadn't* would be too smug about that fact to pay attention. The timing was right, too—give the public just long enough for things to sink in, just long enough to start wondering why there'd been nothing since the initial reveal, and then spring it.

There's no idea quite so certain to be ridiculed as a popular story *wanted* to believe in, and which for a while most everyone *did* believe in, which is then shown to be a hoax. Just ask the cold fusion people.

It was genius. It was perfect. It was quite simply the most incredible lie I'd ever seen firsthand. Looking at that masterpiece of deception, I felt what I imagined a pianist might feel watching Mozart in person might. It was humbling.

Eventually, Kyra turned it off and turned to face me. "This is insane," she said. "This will ruin my reputation. And a lot of others." Her voice didn't suggest that this fact particularly bothered her.

"It wouldn't have worked if it didn't," I said distractedly. "Everyone would know you were in on the game." I shook my head slowly. "Conn must have been planning on this the whole time. The evil genius."

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"Stupid," she corrected. "There are way too many variables in something this scale. It would have been way too likely for someone to accidentally provide definite proof." She frowned. "Especially if he didn't tell people what he was planning."

I grinned. "I'm sure he had another dozen plans for if that did happen. That's how Conn works." I'd played chess with the old werewolf a few times. I never, not one time, won a game, and the few times it looked like I might he proceeded to spring some fiendish trap and win instantly. I generally considered myself a passable player, although it had been a while since I played—but he could make Kasparov look a little out of shape. I don't say that for no reason. He approached real life the same way—it didn't matter what you did, he had a dozen plans ready to go for it.

The worst part was that you could never quite tell whether he really *did* predict what you did, or he just had a contingency plan for what he thought was an extreme long shot. I'd asked him a couple times, and he just smiled at me. It was the most frustrating thing ever.

"Life's gonna be exciting here for a while," Kyra said thoughtfully. She sounded, if anything, vaguely intrigued.

I chuckled. "Now you know how I feel." My life might not be the safest, or the most fun, but I had to admit it was seldom boring these days.

"Speaking of which," she said. "Progress?"

I grimaced. "Depends. One of the fae apparently decided to kill me because I'm investigating it. Does that count?"

"No," she said dryly. Simultaneously, Snowflake protested, *Hey, we all know he decided to kill us because I'm investigating. Everybody knows you can't investigate your way out of a can of cat food.*

"Speaking of which," I said, ignoring the dog. "Think you could get me a record of transactions at that pawn shop for the week before the killing?"

She shrugged. "I can try. You think it was a theft after all?" Kyra had, of course, copied the police files before I got them. I wasn't particularly surprised, nor did I mind. If I hadn't wanted her reading them I wouldn't have had them delivered to her address. And it saved time not to talk about them, anyway.

Besides. This way I could check on whether she would snoop on my mail, given the chance. She was my best friend, and I trusted her with my life—but paranoia isn't just a sometimes thing. I'm not necessarily comfortable with this tendency to test everyone around me, but it's kept me alive this far.

"I don't know that it *wasn't* a theft," I said in answer to Kyra's question. "And the Sidhe are pissed about *something*. I've never heard of murder bothering them all that much, so theft is looking more likely." I shrugged. "Don't have a better idea, mainly."

She grunted. "Works for me. I'll see what I can do." She frowned. "You want me to see what I can dig up on the other kid while I'm at it?"

"Can't hurt."

She nodded firmly. "I'll get right on it. What are you doing?"

I thought for a moment. "Well," I said eventually, "I think first I'll consult a demon formed from the destructive impulses found in the natural world. Then I'll probably be randomly attacked by a monster from ancient stories so obscure that not even mythology geeks remember them, from which I might learn some cryptic facts about my heritage or some sort of big picture which won't make sense for several years, if ever. Then maybe I'll do a little breaking-and-entering after, so Snowflake doesn't get bored."

She rewarded me with an unamused stare.

I shrugged. "What? You have to be realistic about these things."

"That is *not* being realistic. That is a comic book."

"You're just upset because you know I'm right," I said smugly. "Oh, one more thing. Do you think you could get your hands on the spikes they used on Humberto?"

"I've already got 'em," she said. "Didn't want to leave the things lying around. Why?"

"There was a signature at the scene," I said. "Some kind of magic I didn't recognize. I might be able to analyze it, figure something out."

"Fair enough. Give me a minute to grab them for you, and I'll let you know when I have the information."

I was cautious approaching the lab, concerned that someone might have left me a nasty surprise, but I didn't notice anything out of place. That wasn't all that surprising, really; the wards around that building make it pretty damned hard to really notice the place. Not even the Jehovah's Witnesses had managed it in my experience.

Inside, I cleared a space on the worktable and set the bundle I was carrying down. There was barely enough room for it; I'm not as bad as Alexander, but my lab is still perpetually cluttered, and that's only gotten worse since I started living there.

"Wake up," I said, pulling on a pair of heavy welding gloves.

"Whassup, Boss?" Legion asked brightly, walking over to stand right behind me.

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"I've got something for you to look at," I said, unwrapping the bundle delicately. There were half a dozen layers of canvas around the spikes, but it had still not been pleasant carrying them, and even with the gloves I wasn't thrilled about the idea of touching the things. That was some *heavily* charged silver. "Can you tell me what kind of energetic signature they're carrying?"

Legion didn't move or do anything to communicate, but I still got the clear impression that his attention was sharply focused on the spikes. That lasted for maybe half a second before he said, "Looks like mostly werewolf. Are you feeling well, Boss? 'Cause even you should have seen that."

*That's the victim*, Snowflake said acerbically. *As you should have known.*

"Not all of us have your twenty-twenty vision to work with, mutt."

I ignored the—mostly—good natured tirade of insults which progressed from there. I was pretty good at it, because most of their interactions devolved into that sort of schoolyard interaction. Snowflake's lupine alter ego has an ingrained hatred of demons in general and Legion in particular, and Legion was...well, Legion. Getting along with people wasn't a part of his nature. Kind of the opposite, actually.

Instead, I focused on the spikes, trying to pick out the aura I'd noticed at the scene. Unfortunately, Legion was right. Between the passage of time and competition from the silver, it was hard to sort out any details. The residue of blood muddled things further, burying everything under a layer of werewolf-scented magic.

I sighed. Some days are just not worth getting out of bed. Not even if your bed is a cot under the table. "That," I said, "is so typical. Legion?"

"Mangy, flea-ridden, louse-bitten, sorry excuse of a filthy cat-hacked hairball!" Legion concluded vehemently. "What?"

"Can you get any other signature off of this?"

He considered it for several seconds this time. "There's definitely something," he said at last. "I'd be inclined to guess fae of some sort, but I couldn't tell you the details. It probably wasn't all that strong to begin with."

"Incidental exposure, then?" I asked. "Just from being around someone?"

"Definitely," he confirmed. "It can't have been a deliberate spell. That would have left a much stronger signature."

I sighed and nodded. It had been a long shot, in any case. "Did you make any progress on those papers I gave you?"

"Nope," he said cheerfully. "If any of those guys was someone funky, I don't know them."

I glowered at him. "I thought you were supposed to be helpful."

"Yes," he replied calmly. "And it's also been two hundred years since I was in this world. That's more than long enough for a new crop of players to come up."

Huh. I wouldn't have guessed that. I wasn't sure exactly how old Legion was—every time I asked he just said that he was old enough, and then changed the subject (rudely, I might add). But he claimed to have served numerous mages as a familiar, and if none of them had been alive in the last two centuries, well, that made him pretty dang old.

"Okay," I said. "I get it. You ready to go snoop around a bit, Snowflake?"

Her jaw lolled open in a canid grin which emphasized the eyepatch. *Yarr, Cap'n.*

I rolled my own eyes and then grabbed a few more tools I might need before we left.

It wasn't as busy at the pawnshop as I'd feared. The building was very firmly closed, but there was no one there to keep us out. Not a surprise, I realized; they came, they saw, they surveyed, but after that the cops had no reason to stay. The incident had been neatly filed away under robbery, anomalous. It was attributed to a junkie with a knife of unusual size, never mind the parts that might not fit, and forgotten like last year's snow.

It seemed so very sad, somehow.

However, it also undeniably made things easier. It was in a better part of town than I usually thought of pawnshops as occupying, a classy neighborhood down south, and breaking in with a bunch of cops right there would have been a rather difficult proposition.

Without said police presence, it wasn't nearly as hard. Snowflake and I waited for a break in traffic, then I wove a quick web of shadow around us and we slipped around back. I don't care how nice the neighborhood is, or how little involvement it has with shady dealings, pawnshops will still have back doors. I'm sure there's one out there that doesn't, but I hadn't seen it yet and this wasn't the one, either.

After that, getting in was not a difficult prospect. Snowflake kept watch, and I tackled the door. Wrapped up in my cloak of shadow and tucked up tight against the door, I was hard enough to see that I wasn't worried that much about detection.

The door was, needless to say, locked. This was, needless to say, not a significant obstacle. My skillset is *unusual* to say the least, and lockpicking was one of the oldest parts of it. I'd learned it from Dolph when I was a teenager, but I kept in practice. Not so much because I was interested in stealing things—I don't have a huge moral problem with it or anything, but there are definitely easier ways to make a living—as because, well, you never know.

It took a couple minutes. Locks do, generally speaking, and don't believe any TV show that tells you otherwise. There are exceptions—some really cheap locks are quicker, and there are bypass

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methods that can get you through faster than some keys—but generally the only thing rushing gets you is broken tools.

I wasn't in a rush. I took my time, pushing the tumblers carefully into place. When the lock did pop open, I proceeded with the same caution. I nudged the door open, standing well aside from the opening, and waited. When nothing happened, I stepped inside and immediately slipped sideways to hide behind a big cardboard box labeled JUNK, and waited. When nothing continued to happen, I carefully closed the door behind myself (Snowflake was already crouching practically on my feet) and locked it. Then we waited some more.

Generally speaking, waiting is a much bigger part of sneaking than most people give it credit for. Agility and magic are excellent tools, but the essentials are still the same, and they require more than anything else calm, patience, and a good ability to make decisions under pressure.

I am not typically a calm and patient person. But I know how to be when necessary.

Snowflake and I spent probably another minute crouching behind the box, sorting out where we were. Visually, the room was about as unexceptional as they come, a small grey space packed with boxes holding the crap too worthless to display even in a pawnshop. The room felt tired and, in a way I couldn't quite seem to define, worn out, as though it had done everything it had to do and was now only still there out of habit.

There was no sound beyond two breathing patterns, one slightly higher and faster than the other, and a matching pair of heartbeats—the faster was Snowflake, and the other was mine. I could hear casual, late-morning traffic go by on the street outside. The building smelled old, in an indefinable way, and more obviously of cheap perfume and cleaning products. Nothing unexpected, nothing to worry about.

I glanced at Snowflake, who twitched one ear in the tiniest gesture of acknowledgment. She hadn't picked up anything that shouldn't be here either. I slipped out from my hiding place and, hugging the boxes, sidled slowly forward toward the door into the shop proper. I froze on one side of the opening, just barely peering around the corner. It looked like a total wreck, but no more so than I had anticipated. I saw nothing dangerous, heard nothing, felt nothing, smelled...wait. What was I smelling? It was familiar, unusually musky werewolf mixed with strong tones of forest.

At the same time I noticed this, a voice spoke behind and to one side of me, from behind another of the boxes. It was male, but otherwise...indeterminate. He sounded neither loud nor soft, warm or cold, pleasant or repugnant. I would describe it as robotic, but even computers can simulate expressiveness. What this individual said was, "Stop. Hands out."

I froze. That was the bad part about waiting so much—if someone *did* know you were there, it gave *them* plenty of time to sneak up on *you*. "Hello, Bryan," I said carefully. The smell was distinctive—most werewolves don't have any notable admixture in their scents, and I'd never run into one that

smelled that much like forest except Bryan Ferguson. The voice was even more so; that flat, dead, emotionless voice was *extremely* memorable.

There was a very brief pause. "Hello, Winter," he said, his voice not changing. "Lower your hood." There was another pause. "Stop trying to sneak up on me, hound."

I very, very slowly did as he asked, telling Snowflake to comply as well. I knew Bryan. We might even be friends, or at least the nearest thing Bryan was capable of. It was hard to say for sure with him. But either way, he still scared me absolutely shitless, and I had no intention of going against what he said.

"Do you still carry a knife?" he asked me.

"Yes."

"Cut yourself," he said. "Just enough to show blood."

Moving with the same nonthreatening slowness, I dipped one hand—the left, just to reinforce the impression that I wasn't planning violence—into my cloak and pulled out a simple folding knife. I flipped it open and nicked the back of my other hand, drawing just enough blood to trickle down the back of my wrist.

There wasn't any feeling of relaxation. There would have had to be tension first, and Bryan's voice didn't convey enough emotion even to establish that. Most people, if they stand behind you and imply death threats if you don't do what they say, are really scary and threatening and make your spine itch and your heart pound. Bryan didn't, and I have no idea why. It wasn't that I wasn't afraid, if that's what you're thinking, because I definitely was.

"It is good to see you again," he said. I couldn't tell if it was just a formality he mouthed for politeness's sake, or he actually meant it and his manner just couldn't get it across.

I turned to face him, closing the cut on my hand as I did. "Good to see you too," I replied. In my case, it was *definitely* just a formality, and I didn't bother trying to pretend otherwise. Bryan wouldn't be fooled. I had no doubt of that.

Bryan looked much the same as he usually did. I hadn't seen him for years, but werewolves don't age, and Bryan is more timeless than most. Everything about him contributes to that impression, really. His face could have been a mature twenty or a youthful forty, although even a human would probably say if pressed that he didn't really look like either of them. His coal-black hair was longish and unevenly cut—not in that stylish "I care so much about how I look that I can make it look like I don't care at all" way, more like he'd noticed it getting in the way and hacked it off himself with a knife. Which, in all fairness, was probably the case. I felt confident that his eyes, a shade of green closer to pine needles than the aspen leaves of his father and siblings, would still be deep and grim and haunted. I didn't meet them to make sure. It wasn't wise, with Bryan. He saw too deeply.

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Likewise, his clothing was strangely difficult to place. It wasn't modern—that was obvious—but just what time period or culture it might belong to was hard to say. Everything he wore was of a shade of grey midway between dove and charcoal, although no two pieces were quite the same color, which was somewhat disconcerting. The greys seemed to change when I wasn't looking, but never enough that I could be sure it wasn't in my head. In any case, all of the garments were so simple and plain as to make me think more of a monk's habit than anything else.

He wasn't carrying any weapons that I could tell. I didn't make the mistake of thinking that mattered. Bryan was the kind of guy who didn't carry a weapon, because he didn't *need* one.

"Why are you here, Winter?" he asked. His voice remained toneless, lacking even the rise at the end of the sentence that would have made it a question.

"Just looking around," I said nervously. He would know I was lying, but whether he would care was a harder question. He already knew the answer, after all. "What are you doing?"

"I am taking inventory. Are you also involved in the pursuit of the weapon?"

I paused. "You know what was stolen?"

"Yes."

I waited. When it became apparent that he wouldn't elaborate—no surprise with Bryan—I said, "What was it?"

"A weapon," he said redundantly. He stepped easily over the boxes. "Come." He walked into the shop area.

I did as he asked, swallowing nervously. *What's going on?* Snowflake asked me, but I shushed her. He would probably hear us. And, in any case, I was in no way ready to discuss the bogeyman that was Bryan Ferguson with her.

Bryan stepped over the counter, ignoring the opening less than two feet away. Snowflake followed him, while I went around. He walked slowly through the room, on a straight path without looking to either side. I *did* look around, and it was more impressive than I had initially thought.

I'd known the place had been ransacked, but that hadn't even come close to expressing the full extent of what had happened here. Shelves had been overturned or outright broken. Bins and counters of merchandise had likewise been dumped and bashed open. They'd cleaned the place up a bit, clearly, but not too much, and ruined merchandise was scattered liberally underfoot. CD cases crunched as we walked over them, and after a few steps I picked Snowflake up and carried her so that she wouldn't injure her feet.

Like most such establishments, there were a ton of windows, but most of them were papered over with various posters and fliers, and without the lights on it was a dim place. Combine that with the ransacked look of the place and the lingering smell of smoke, and it was more than slightly eerie.

Bryan, of course, led the way to the most dismal, poorly lit back corner available. The shelf here was still standing, although whatever had been on it had been knocked off to join the rest, and as a result it felt oddly insulated from the rest of the room. He stopped, abruptly enough that I almost walked into him, and turned to face the exterior wall. He pointed at a spot on the wall, not saying anything, and I leaned forward to look at it.

There was a puncture of some sort in the wall. It looked like somebody had stuck a knife into the drywall, maybe a half-inch deep, and then pulled it back out, except that the shape of the knife would have to be very, very odd. The hole resembled a sunburst, was deeper at the top than the bottom, and oddly dimpled inside. It hadn't been mentioned in the file, for which I couldn't blame anyone. Against the background of the devastation, something like this didn't exactly stand out.

Except Bryan wouldn't have brought me here for nothing. I leaned forward and examined the hole, making no progress. Then Snowflake, looking straight down, growled softly, and I followed her gaze.

At my feet—very nearly under my feet, in fact—were a pair of scorch marks, the cheap linoleum charred and blistered. It was, as the report had claimed, clearly in the shape of a person's feet. From where I was standing a trail led directly to the front door.

I reconstructed the scene in my mind. The thief had been standing right here. He'd found whatever it was he was looking for. And then...what? He'd taken it and left? Then why the scorch marks where he'd stepped?

Then it clicked. "It wasn't here," I said, looking again at the hole in the wall. "Somebody took it first. And when he saw that, it pissed him off." So much so, in fact, that he'd lost control of whatever magic it was that he wielded. So much so that his anger had boiled over into heat, and where he walked the ground burned.

I gulped.

"That is my presumption also," Bryan said. Fear, like everything else, failed to make an impression in his voice. "As the search is still ongoing it would appear to be correct."

"What is this search *for*?" I asked, exasperated.

He looked at me oddly, and this time I was too slow averting my eyes. I saw jade-green eyes and then I was trapped, fires buried deep within seeming to pull me in to join them, falling forward through the smells of the deep woods—

—and then Bryan blinked and allowed me to look away again. "How is it that you are among the hunters and yet do not know what is sought?"

"I'm not really hunting," I said, shaken. "Loki told me to investigate the deaths and recover any stolen property for him, but beyond that I'm clueless."

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His eyes didn't change and his voice didn't sharpen, but it was nonetheless very clear what he thought of that—more than a little like Legion, now that I think about it. "That is not a wise thing to do."

"I'm aware," I sighed. How did everybody get this idea that I *wanted* to help Loki? "But he's got me over a barrel and I don't see another way out of it."

"An understandable attitude," he said as though we were discussing last week's sports games. "But I was referring to assisting Loki in obtaining the item. It does not belong to him."

"What *is* it?" I asked, forgetting for once to be afraid of Bryan in my frustration.

He paused as though debating whether he wanted to answer. "The Gáe Bolg," he said eventually, turning to go back behind the counter.

"The spear?" I asked, following him.

"Yes."

"Are you sure? Because, you know, Cúchulainn was badass and all, but I'm pretty sure Loki could have crunched him like a biscuit. And given that, I don't get why you're so worried about him getting the guy's spear."

"I am concerned not by who wielded it, but rather by who made it."

I gulped again as I followed him out of the shop and set Snowflake down again. Cúchulainn's spear opened into thirty barbs that perforated the other guy's innards to such an extent that they had to cut the poor bastard open to get it back out, was always lethal, and couldn't be used by anyone except him. It was seriously so nasty that even Cúchulainn, who's fondness of violence was matched only by his lack of discrimination, considered it too horrible to use except in the last resort—a resort he wound up using on, amongst many others, his best friend and his only son. With the exception of various deities' personal weapons, I couldn't think of any weapon nastier or more dangerous in Irish legend.

I didn't think I ever wanted to find anything quite so powerful and vicious as that. I mean, heck, Tyrfing is bad enough to have around. I sure don't need *another* ancient and terrible weapon.

"But," I said, as something else occurred to me. "If something like that were found...there would be all kinds of people looking for it. I mean, Loki would be just the tip of an entire iceberg of nasty."

The Khan's son didn't smile, nor was his voice amused. Once again, this didn't do anything to stop him from getting the point across. "Correct," he said, and stepped into a deeper patch of shadows, and was elsewhere.

Chapter Four

Bryan was the first of the Ferguson family I met. I was fifteen years old at the time, and living with Edward Frodsham's pack in Wolf, Wyoming. I was strange and fey and full of magic, even then. I'd experienced the death at the end of the hunt a dozen times from both ends, and stranger things besides. I thought I was hard, and in some ways I suppose I was, but I was still a relative innocent. There was no blood on my hands or my teeth, and I hadn't yet learned to be afraid of the dark.

Thus it was that when, one pleasant summer afternoon, a strange werewolf came out of the forest, I wasn't yet wise enough to fear him.

I was the first one to see him—in fact, as I later discovered, I was the first one to see him in more than thirteen years. I was sitting alone at the edge of the woods—I often did, in those days, before I came to hate my magic and all the things it let me do—when he appeared. He looked much the same as he had today, almost fifteen years later, except that then his clothes had all been sooty black. I could smell his magic, both wolf and forest—that ability was one of the few that I was born with, and I've never known what it's like *not* to be as aware of magic as of more material parts of the world. I was curious and not easily frightened. Thus, as soon as I became aware of his presence—which wasn't as soon as it should have been, because I should have been able to see him coming through the forest through *somebody's* eyes, and I hadn't—I went to say hello.

At first I thought that he wasn't aware that I was there. Then he looked at me. Unusually, he didn't seem to have any reaction to the amber eyes and charcoal-grey hair. Then I met his eyes for the first time.

He hadn't let me go so easily, that time. I'm not sure how long I stood there staring into those forest-green eyes, unable to move or even really to think. It felt like hours, but it couldn't have been more than a few moments.

"What you are planning is a bad idea," he said flatly, not bothering with a hello. "It will end badly for many people." And then he walked past me towards town.

I don't know what he and Edward talked about. But I do know that Bryan never mentioned what he saw in my eyes, which is sorta ironic I think, given that he turned out to be exactly right. It might have been better for everyone involved, and most especially for the people I wound up killing, if he hadn't had such respect for my privacy.

Anyway, after that I started asking around. I mean, who *wouldn't*, after an encounter like that? What I learned was that I was not the only person who was afraid of Bryan Ferguson, not even among werewolves, and they don't fear much. In fact, it wasn't until I went to the Khan's pack that I was able to learn much of anything. Everyone in Edward's pack either didn't know much, or wasn't willing to talk.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Bryan didn't get less creepy over time. He vanished, every now and then, for hours or days or weeks or even months, throughout the time I spent with the pack. Nobody knew where he went or why, not even Conn, and even as a kid I found the thought of something Conn didn't know and couldn't find out as scary as everything else put together. There was never any warning or regularity to his disappearances, nor could anyone predict where or when he would be seen next. When he did come back, he wouldn't answer any questions about where he'd been. He *would* occasionally answer questions about what he'd done, but what he said was always disturbing, and seldom answered as many questions as it raised. Once, for example, I asked him what he'd eaten while he was gone. He replied, "Dragons," and when I asked what kind he said simply, "The friendly ones," and refused to elaborate further. What did it mean? I had no idea. I still don't. Nothing good, I know that much.

He laughed seldom, and when he did it sounded more appropriate to a funeral than anything. There was rarely any recognizable reason to laugh, either. Certainly Bryan never laughed at jokes; he gave the impression that he'd heard every joke you could imagine, and many that you couldn't, and he hadn't thought they were funny the first time. No, he laughed at questions, or ordinary statements, or occasionally things so horrid that they made even me gag. Often, or at least more often, he seemed to laugh at nothing at all. This impression was reinforced by the fact that he usually seemed to be paying attention mostly to things that no one else could see. He would stare over your shoulder into space when he talked, and break off suddenly to look at something else. He wouldn't talk about what he saw, if in fact he saw anything at all.

All of this only made me more desirous of learning about him. Most of what I learned came from his siblings, both of whom were storytellers from way back and fond of me. He was old, had been old when Dolph was born five hundred years ago, and he refused to talk about just how old he was, even to them. They'd never encountered a language he couldn't speak, including many that I hadn't even heard of and a couple I hadn't thought actually existed. He was rich— so rich that he once gave me three grand to buy candy. And like all good mysterious rich people, nobody knew where the money came from. And that was very nearly all they knew for certain.

I heard all kinds of stories about him, though, because werewolves love scary stories too, and like I said, Bryan Ferguson is a bogeyman. Out of all the werewolves I ever heard of, only two were the subject of more stories than Bryan. One was his father. The other was Jack Sheppard, and nobody even pretended *those* were factual.

The stories about Bryan, though, were exceptionally unnerving. They said that Queen Mab once offered to make him her consort—a position that would have made him one of the most powerful people in the supernatural world—and he laughed in her face and walked away. The most impressive part of that one was, of course, that he wasn't dead as a result. They said he had been Sigurd, and Beowulf, and Liechtenauer, and the only man to ever beat Musashi in a duel. They said that he had been one of Arthur's most favored and trusted knights, right up 'til he realized he liked Mordred's sales pitch more. Depending on the version he might have been Merlin, or Judas, or even Cain. (I didn't believe those. He was too apathetic about politics to be Merlin, and too Irish for the others.)

Everyone was careful to tell me that these were only stories, and that there was no way they could possibly be true. I knew that they were right.

Except, well, this was Bryan Ferguson we were talking about. And every time someone told me that the stories were just that, stories, I could hear the same thing underneath. They should be impossible—except this was Bryan we were talking about, and you never really knew with him. Much like Conn, he could do so many things, and *know* so many things, that shouldn't be possible that you had to wonder, at some point, whether one more was so unbelievable.

I explained all of this to Snowflake as we walked. I wasn't really sure where to go or what to do from here—Kyra was still digging up info, presumably, and until she got back to me there wasn't a whole lot I could do. Even once she did, I wasn't sure there was a lot I could do anyway. There were now officially way, way too many people in this mess for me to sort out. It didn't help that I still didn't know who most of them even *were*, let alone what to do about it. Add to that the fact that at least one of them could very easily have killed me already, and might still kill Aiko (and damn I felt guilty about not having done more *there*, but it wasn't like I could even find the place on my own for a visit), and this was not looking good.

And then, of course, there was the fact that I really *didn't* want Loki getting his hands on a terribly powerful and powerfully terrible weapon from another pantheon. He had helped me on occasion, but I didn't let that blind me to the fact that he was far from being one of the good guys. He already had way too much power for anyone's comfort. And it wasn't like he'd even reward me if I succeeded. That isn't the kind of god Loki is.

Of course, he *is* the kind of god who might follow through on his threat to flay me with a butter knife if I failed him. That kinda put a crimp in any plans to not stick my nose into this firestorm. Granted I'm going to die sometime, but on my list of top ways to kick it that one ranks somewhere slightly below "eaten by ants."

So what I'm getting at here is that we didn't have much of a specific destination in mind. But it was too nice of a day to spend indoors. And, in any case, the location of my lab was not the kind of secret that could stay secret from players on this level and my defenses would, likewise, not be sufficient to do more than mildly annoy them. So going home was out, as was going to any of my known hangouts or spending more than around five minutes in any given location. I was going to get caught eventually and it would probably be bad—there was nothing I could do at this point to prevent that, except possibly going even more heavily into debt to even more terrible beings—but there was no sense making it easy on them.

This was also why we stuck to heavily populated areas, rather than going anywhere that nefarious folks could just walk up and murderize us with impunity. This was the smart thing to do. That didn't make it the *fun* thing to do, at least not by our standards. Which is why, after several hours of wandering the downtown area, Snowflake and I were both surly and I almost wished that some baddie would show up and try to whack us. In my current mood I would rather enjoy slapping him down.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

This was the state of affairs when Kyra called to say that she'd dug something up and could we come meet her pronto, please. Rather than her house she specified an open-air café. I'd never been there, but I'd seen it and knew where it was. Not far from where we already were, which meant we could walk rather than have to go and fetch my car. Just as well, really; somebody probably had it bugged, trapped, and sabotaged to an extent that would make James Bond blush by now.

We did not, of course, walk straight there. If someone had bugged my phone, or if that hadn't actually been Kyra calling, or if, gods forbid, it was but she'd sold me out—an eventuality which, while I thought it unlikely, had to be taken into account—then doing so was likely to be very, very dangerous for me.

Instead, we took a winding route maybe three times the distance we had to cover, ducking through several alleys and doubling back twice. Neither of us detected anyone following which, while it didn't mean much when playing against the Sidhe and who knew what else, was the best we could do. We were still ten minutes early, since I hadn't told Kyra that we were so close to the place already. Rather than go in, we set up shop in the alley next door, hidden behind a Dumpster just out of sight of the main street.

Seven minutes later a poodle around a block away saw Kyra approaching and, as a consequence, so did I. Anything resembling honest predatory instincts had long since been bred out of him, but he was still a dog and what was left was adequate for my purposes.

Kyra was not, I noticed immediately, alone. I couldn't get any of the conversation—poodles aren't the smartest dogs going to begin with, and then my connection wasn't nearly as strong as I would have liked—but I got a decent visual, and that would do. The man she was with looked to be in his early forties, with darkish hair and skin that was surprisingly tan considering how early in the year it was. I couldn't see his face clearly, but his posture suggested very strongly that he wasn't one of Kyra's underlings. In fact, he appeared to consider himself her equal at the least, an attitude not even many humans present in the presence of an Alpha werewolf. Especially not one under stress, and I knew that Kyra was under stress right now. That mess surrounding Enrico's death was still fresh in her mind, and for another pack death to come right on top of it...well, she wasn't happy, let's leave it at that.

They *were* being tailed. I spotted two, a Hispanic guy who probably weighed two or three of me and wasn't by any stretch of the imagination fat, and a petite woman who reminded me of a small, furry carnivore—somewhere between a fox and a ferret, perhaps. I naturally assumed there were at least three more that I didn't see, maybe more.

I didn't know the strange man well enough to tell, but from her tense posture I was guessing Kyra was aware of their tails. She wasn't happy about it, but she wasn't freaking out either. Interesting. I wondered what this was about.

After they got there, I waited for another three or four minutes. The poodle was long gone, and good riddance, but there was a sleek magpie strutting about picking up scraps and I managed to

convince him to take a look around for me. Magpies being magpies, and therefore much, much more curious than the average cat, it wasn't particularly difficult.

Both of the people I'd marked out as tailing Kyra and her unknown friend had stopped in clear view of the café. The big, bruiser-looking fellow was standing across the street looking at his phone—*not* the most convincing disguise I'd ever seen, not remotely. The woman was doing significantly better, sitting on a bench by the corner and sipping from an expensive coffee of some sort—not being a coffee person, I couldn't have said what it might be. I also picked out a third man, tall and lean with a sallow, saturnine face, who was examining a store display across the street a bit too closely and for a bit too long to be quite right.

All three of them moved in ways that made me think they were probably carrying concealed weapons of some sort.

Well, at least I knew where I stood.

By this point, Kyra and Mr. Mystery had taken a table out on the patio. It was late for lunch and just a touch early for dinner, so they managed to get a corner table with no one too close nearby. It was also, I observed, out of direct sight of any of the watchers I'd noticed. Interesting.

By that point, I figured I'd learned as much as I was going to from passive observation. This situation wasn't exactly shouting *trustworthy*—in fact it was about pegging my Trap-o-Meter—but I reckoned I'd have to spring it anyway, and besides I liked Kyra too much to leave her hanging. Snowflake and I went down the alley to the next street, backtracked a ways, and then approached the café, making it appear that we had just arrived. I didn't think that anyone would be fooled—Kyra, at least, should know me well enough to realize that I would have been early—but there were certain proprieties to observe, y'know?

I casually vaulted the pseudo-wrought-iron fence around the café's patio area and dropped into the open seat. I sat with my back to the street, hoping it might make potential attackers think I wasn't paying attention and thus make them careless, while Snowflake arranged herself so that she could watch my back. The fact that this seating position also let *me* watch *Kyra's* back and that I was right next to the fence for a speedy getaway was, of course, a total coincidence. I would never think to arrange something like that. Really.

"Sorry we're late," I said brightly. "Traffic, you know." I didn't even try and pretend I was telling the truth.

Up close, the unfamiliar man looked slightly less everyday. I wasn't sure quite what gave me that impression—he was still of average build in every way, and while his understated dark suit was perhaps more expensive than average it didn't stand out noticeably from the office workers walking by—but I immediately decided not to discount that instinct. Perhaps it was something in his eyes, which were a normal enough shade of blue like jeans worn almost through. Perhaps it was simply the fact that there

was enough steel in his spine to stand up to an Alpha that told me that the man facing me was, in his own way, as much a predator as anyone at the table.

"I went ahead and ordered you an iced tea," Kyra said by way of greeting, apparently studying the menu.

"Thanks," I said, politely lifting the glass and even wetting my lips, though I didn't drink—they'd had plenty of time to poison it, after all. Granted that trick was well enough known that the counter, namely coating the glass in a contact poison, was also well known, but again, there were proprieties to observe.

Nothing was said until after we'd ordered food and it arrived. Literally nothing, which told me (among other things) that Kyra didn't much care for the man she had arrived with. At least, that was the only reason I could think of that she didn't want to talk in front of him. He ordered a very healthy and very boring salad and drank water, which immediately made me like him less. She had a roast beef sandwich and coffee. I ordered the gyros and didn't drink my tea.

"Shrike," Kyra said after the food was there and the waitress was gone. That, right there, told me even more about how things were going down. Aiko started calling me that as her version of a pet name. In spite—or, more likely, because—of my distaste for it, it stuck and I'd wound up using it several times when I wanted the person I was talking to to have something to call me without necessarily telling them my name. For Kyra to use it now suggested even more strongly that she did not trust this man in the least.

This was further reinforced, and largely explained, by what she said next. "This is Nicolas Pellegrini. He's the leader of the group I mentioned a while back that we were working with."

That kind of circumlocutional vagueness could only refer to the organized crime syndicate that the pack had been working deals with. Looking at Pellegrini I could see him being a crime lord. His suit and bearing projected the aura of understated wealth made popular by countless gangster movies, and I supposed that anybody who could keep violent criminals in line wouldn't be easily cowed, even by Alphas. It would explain the tails, too; I wasn't sure whether gang leaders really took a trusted enforcer or two everywhere they went, but heck, why not?

"Nicolas," she continued, "this is Shrike. He's currently representing certain interested parties in this matter." That, too, was an interesting phrasing, and one that gave me additional information about this interchange. By pointedly referring to me as representing parties other than the pack, Kyra was distancing herself from me. I wasn't sure why exactly she was playing it like this, but I was definitely getting the sense that she wanted as little to do with this conversation as possible.

Kyra finished making the sandwich disappear, and handed me a plain white envelope that would, with luck, contain the sales ledger of the pawnshop from shortly before things went pear-shaped. She then vaulted the fence and left without another word, waving cheerfully to the thugs as she

left. The woman stood up and started walking next to her, seemingly by coincidence, leaving just the gangster's people still watching us.

Pellegrini looked at me thoughtfully, sipping his water. "Shrike," he said eventually. "You know, I've never much cared for people who use needlessly dramatic sobriquets."

"You know," I said honestly, "neither have I. I got stuck with it more or less by accident." I shrugged. "I can't say I care for it especially, but I doubt I can lose it at this point."

He smiled thinly, and I knew that he'd said what he did to gauge my reaction—and also, I suddenly realized, to see whether I would know what a sobriquet was. It was, I thought, probably not the usual type of language for someone in the position I was pretending to. "Ms. Walker seemed to think that you could be of some use to me," he said. His voice was mild and trustworthy, putting me in mind of an English teacher.

"I'd have to know what you wanted first," I said, desperately hoping that my ignorance of how to act in this sort of situation wasn't as obvious as I suspected it was.

"Indeed," he agreed, steepling his fingers in front of his face in the classic evil-mastermind pose. "As you might expect, Mr. Wolf, my knowledge of operations in this city is more general than specific." Because his criminal empire, which spanned at least the state of Colorado and probably quite a bit more, was based out of Denver and considered the Springs a mere ancillary.

"In what way is that significant to me?" I asked, not making an effort to sound polite. I hadn't missed the fact that he used my real name, and I didn't think it was an accident, either. He wanted me to know that he knew who I was.

If my tone bothered him, he didn't show it. "Because," he said calmly, "I wasn't aware until recently that some of my associates were contracted to recover a certain item."

"Again, what relation does this have to me?"

Rather than answer me, he pulled a sheet of glossy photo paper out of his coat pocket, unfolded it, and passed it across the table to me. He went back to eating his salad (no dressing, if you were wondering) while I looked at it.

It was distressingly full-color. If it had been greyscale, or a worse photograph, or even just more cheaply printed, there would have been some way to avoid the full meaning of what it displayed, or at least to lessen the blow.

A man I'd never, to my knowledge, seen before stared out of the photograph. I'm not quite sure what he looked like; I couldn't seem to focus past the expression on his face, which was so profoundly agonized that it almost hurt to look at it, and it wasn't even the focus of the photo.

As you may have guessed, he was hanging from a crude wooden cross. The nutjob had used more conventional nails on this guy, which seemed like a rather pathetic silver lining. It was a lot

bloodier, too, probably because his intestines were hanging out of a broad slash across his abdomen. Oh, and his throat was slashed wide open. That might have had something to do with it.

I fought down the gag that was my first reaction, because it absolutely would not do to have this man see me flinch. But it was definitely not the easiest thing I've ever done.

I folded the photo neatly and handed it back to Pellegrini. "I take it that was one of the men who was hired to retrieve the item," I said as nonchalantly as I could, taking another bite. Macabre of me, perhaps, but then I'd eaten less pleasant meals under more grotesque circumstances. Besides, tzatziki is a terrible thing to waste. And I still couldn't afford to let this man see me blink.

"Indeed. He was found like that a block from one of my offices. The next morning his employer was similarly killed."

"Mr. Escobedo, I presume?"

He smiled like a crocodile too satiated to bother with the lamb in front of it. "Quite."

"I don't know what Kyra told you, Nick," I said, matching his smile with one of my own that was every bit as cold—although probably a bit more, you know, mammalian. "But I'm already under contract to return the object in question to someone else."

He waved my comment off like a particularly tenacious mosquito. "I don't want it. The buyer is already dead, and possessing this *object* clearly isn't particularly healthy." He wasn't smiling now. "But this makes me look bad. It makes me look *weak*. And weakness is bad for business."

"I'm curious," I said lightly. "Are you a walking stereotype on purpose, or does it come naturally?"

His eyes were frosty enough that it almost scared me. Or, at least, it might have if I hadn't traded hard looks with the Khan, the Khan's children, a demon, a demon-possessed werewolf, Loki, Loki's son Fenris...you get the idea. It was still scary—I am under no illusions regarding the ability of normal folks to kill you just as dead as anything from the spooky side—but gangsters aren't the only ones who are aware of the dangers inherent in showing weakness. That was the whole reason I mocked him. It was dangerous to make fun of a guy like this—but in the long run it was more dangerous to let him think he could walk right over me.

"I am going to make this simple," he said, still sounding like an English teacher though I could see anger of some sort in his eyes. "Remove this individual. Do so in such a way that no one tries something like this again. And I will pay you five thousand dollars."

"Fair enough," I agreed. "But I don't want payment in cash." I smiled brightly. "You'll owe me a favor." Had he been fae I would have had to be a lot more specific, but not even mobsters were anything like as tricky as the fae. And he wouldn't be bound to the words of his contract anyway. I didn't figure he'd cheat me, though, because there was one mafia cliché that I knew to be true from personal

experience, and that was the importance of reputation. If people didn't think Pellegrini would follow through on a deal, soon nobody would want to make deals with him at all, and that would be the end of him. That didn't mean that he wouldn't screw me over, but it did limit somewhat *how* he would go about it.

"Fair enough," he echoed. "Oh," he added as an afterthought as I got up to leave. "And Wolf? Don't call me Nick."

As I'd expected, the store records were pretty telling. Three days before the store was robbed, the owner had bought a semi-divine spear for the low, low price of fifty-five bucks and change. Unfortunately she hadn't kept a record of whom she bought it from, ruining that approach, but there was a sale on record, at a slight profit. The buyer was—surprise, surprise—Steve Potts, the same guy as was killed next by some of Pellegrini's mobsters.

I thought I was starting to get a decent idea of what was happening. Somebody had found the spear and, probably recognizing that it was in no way something that it was safe to possess—the gangster was right on that account, no doubt about it—had offloaded it ASAP. I wasn't entirely sure why they'd sold it rather than just drop it in a dumpster or something. In any case, some kid bought it, probably just because it looked cool. And then things blew up.

News got out about it being found, or stolen, or whatever—that was inevitable, news always gets out. Somebody, having tracked it down to the pawnshop, had taken preemptive measures to ensure that no one else would get information out of the proprietor or the store itself. Humberto, whose information must have been more complete, knew who bought it and wanted it for unknown reasons—but, quite sensibly, he didn't want to get any closer to it personally than was absolutely necessary. So he'd hired some criminals, who he'd probably met through the pack's more nefarious dealings, to do it for him.

A good plan, except that something went wrong. They'd panicked, maybe, and shot the kid without interrogating him. Then they bugged out fast when it became apparent that shooting someone in the street is actually a really bad way to keep things off the radar. Somebody else, with a fondness for nailing people in the least pleasant sense of the word imaginable, had caught up to what had happened. He could have been the same as the person that initially attacked the pawnshop, but I thought it unlikely—they didn't feel like the actions of the same person.

Anyway, at that point lunatic number two was on the trail of the criminals. He got the identity of their employer—three guesses how *that* happened and the first two don't count—and went after Humberto next. After that, well....

The magic residue I'd detected at the scene of the werewolf's death was very clear in my mind. I wasn't sure what to make of the human aspects. But the rest, the smell of shadows and silences, darkness and poison, well, given that I knew the Sidhe were in this up to their eyebrows that really made

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me think Midnight Court. Shortly after I saw Humberto's body, I'd been on the Otherside—on the Night side of Faerie, in fact, which I realized now had been an incredibly stupid thing to do. I was suspecting that the Midnight agent who'd been running around crucifying people had waited and watched to see who would come to check it out. When he saw me there, and then I started running around in the middle of his home turf, the prospect of eliminating one of the competing interests in this chase must have been too good to ignore.

*That explains the other too, Snowflake said, trotting along at my heels. Fire damage like that probably means it was a Daylight faerie.*

*True.* Where one Court was involved, it was a sure bet that the other wasn't far behind. It would have been too much to ask for Daylight not to send a representative. *What do you think we go to do now?*

*Check the thug's apartment, she said immediately.*

I frowned. *You don't think they'll have hit it already?*

*They'll assume the killers took it, she said. But they might not even have had time to go inside before the cops got there. Even if they did, they might have missed a clue.*

Reasonable enough. It wasn't like I had any better ideas, anyway.

Steve's apartment was even easier to get into than the pawnshop had been—easy enough, in fact, to make me nervy. They'd long since removed any hint of a police presence, and for that matter any indication that any criminal activity whatsoever had taken place. It wasn't hard to wait for one of the residents, who by his gait was probably coming home from an early trip to the bar, and follow him in. Given that he was moderately intoxicated already and we were wrapped in more shadows than just my cloak, I doubt he even noticed we were behind him.

We probably didn't need to bother. We could have talked our way past him—as I'd often noted, the average person has a lamentable tendency to trust his fellow man. Most of the time, a person will hold a door that ought to be kept locked, or answer a question without thinking. In his current state I highly doubt he would have stopped us. But it was clear that anyone I interacted with at this point might be caught in the crossfire between the Courts. I didn't want to bring that down on this guy's head just because he had the bad luck of living in this building.

The guy I was a few years ago wouldn't have bothered to think of that. I was so careless then that now it makes me somewhat ashamed.

We took the stairs, of course, because I don't like elevators. Steve's apartment was on the fourth floor. Neither of us detected any unusual odors on the way up there. I didn't even bother looking

for a magical scent; it had been over a week since the murder, and no magical signature would last that long.

A few tense moments in the hallway, hiding under my cloak and hoping nobody walked out at an inopportune moment and caught me at it, was enough to open the door. We closed it quietly behind ourselves and then turned to look at the room.

It was the embodiment of the bachelor apartment. I don't mean that in a good way, either. There were pizza boxes, empty beer bottles, and dirty laundry lying in random places around the room. Steve had been a smoker, adding one more unpleasant note to the miasma, which was unpleasant enough already to make me seriously consider turning around and leaving right there.

You can say a lot of bad things about werewolves, but generally we have pretty good hygiene, just because we can't stand the smell otherwise.

That made things harder than they might otherwise have been. Picking out a scent, even a remarkable scent, would be impossible in this apartment. It quite simply reeked too much for anything less than straight bleach to leave an impression. The clutter, too, would make finding anything noteworthy harder. I had no doubt that we could find it given enough time, but I also had no doubt that time was in short supply. If there was anywhere we couldn't afford to spend more than a few minutes, it was here.

We split it up the only way that made sense—that is to say, Snowflake looked low and I looked high. I felt pretty sorry for her; I don't know that I would have been willing to put my face that close to that floor, not for life or love or money.

While she was doing that, I looked around the rest of the room. Now that I knew what to look for, it wasn't hard to see. The wall of the living room had the same sort of star-shaped hole in it as the pawnshop.

I went to look at it, hoping it would just be one more sign of Steve's bad living habits. No such luck. It had the same distinctive appearance, right down to the dimpling inside of the mark. I knew what had left it, too, now; the Gáe Bolg had been left leaning against the wall here, and its preternatural sharpness was such that even that tiny pressure had been enough to punch through the sheetrock.

Of the spear itself there was no sign. Of course there wasn't. That would have been too easy.

*I smell someone*, Snowflake said as I was realizing that. *Someone familiar.*

Presumably she would have said more, but she was interrupted right then. "Good eye," said a male voice heavily flavored with Ireland or somewhere near it, where the open door would have prevented us from seeing him as we came in. "Took me a few minutes to see it."

I turned immediately to look at him. The man I saw was...unremarkable. He was short, maybe five-three, and leanly muscled. His hair, tied back with a leather thong, was a shade of brown a few

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shades darker than his eyes, and his complexion was just swarthy enough not to look pale. He grinned sardonically and inclined his head slightly as he met my eye. He was carrying a short, simple sword on one hip, and had a longbow and quiver slung across his back.

"What do you want?" I asked coldly, checking that my feet were clear.

He grinned cheerily. He seemed a lot more human, outside the woods of Faerie—because he was, indeed, human, as far as I could tell. He looked human, at any rate. "Told you," he said. "You're better than most these days. Shame to kill you wit' the bow."

"Why bother?" I asked. "You already have the spear."

He laughed. "No, I don't. It was long gone before I got here." His grin, although it didn't fade, hardened into something less pleasant. "Besides. This isn't about the spear. That's business, but this is personal, eh?"

"Personal?" I said incredulously. "I haven't done anything to you!"

"Not about you and me," he said roughly. "Come on, we ain't fighting in this sty."

"Why were you waiting here, then?"

He laughed again. "Where better to ambush a werewolf? Now stop stalling and come outside." He turned and left.

*Should I hit him from behind?* Snowflake asked immediately.

*No*, I said quietly. *I bet he's counting on it. He has to be more than he seems.* No true human could have pulled that trick with the arrows in Faerie. I followed him, instead, down the stairs and out the door.

The sun was just setting. "Do you mind waiting a minute?" I asked. "I'd like to watch the sunset, if that's all right with you."

He shrugged. "'Course not. Every man's entitled to a wish afore dying, ain't he?"

And that's how I wound up sitting on the curb next to a magically endowed husky and the Midnight Court assassin who was about to try and kill me, watching the sunset and sharing a packet of jerky from my pocket. He didn't seem to have any qualms about eating my food. It felt, in a strange way, more companionable than anything else.

Finally, when the streets were dark, he stirred again. "Come on now. It's time we were getting this over with, innit?"

I glanced around. "What, in the street?"

He laughed again. "Nah, I can't stand fighting with all this damned unnatural stone underfoot. There's a bit o' grass down the way, I reckon that'll serve."

"A park, you mean?"

"Aye, that's what it's called these days."

I shook my head in bewilderment. Some days.

I didn't, as you might be imagining, try and bolt or anything like it. This wasn't from any sort of honor—I've never had much of that particular commodity—but, rather, simple practicality. This loony had made it quite clear that he could ambush me more or less at will, and I didn't think I could expect to dodge arrows like that again. I harbored no illusions that I survived for any reason other than that I was still playing by the rules of the game. If I were to run, that would make me cowardly vermin, and that would make me fair game for extermination rather than this bizarre sort of honorable duel.

That was why I followed my would-be killer down the road to the park. It was, as he'd said, not far. Snowflake tried to talk me out of it, but she understood when I explained what I was thinking.

*Don't you dare die on me*, she said, as I knelt by her side at the edge of the grass. *I'm not going through the effort of training a new master.*

*Don't worry*, I said, resting my forehead on hers and closing my eyes. *Aiko won't let you starve, I expect.* I hugged her close for a moment, then stood and summoned Tyrfin to hand. I undid the catch and then dropped the scabbard lightly to the ground next to her. *If I lose...you'll tell her I love her, right? And how I died?*

Snowflake didn't give me any of those platitudes about not talking like that, or tell me that I wasn't going to die. I appreciated that. I'd hate for the last thing I heard to be clichéd bullshit. *Of course*, she said gently. *I love you too, Winter.*

I took a deep breath and then turned away from her.

Across the park—a meager bit of grass, really, hardly deserving of the name—the other man was doing something similar, although he didn't have a dog with him. He dropped his bow and drew his sword. "You ready?" he called out.

"Yes," I replied. In spite of everything, I still felt the anticipation of a good fight. It's stupid and suicidal and incredibly unethical, but there's a lot of truth to the sayings about violence being exciting.

I almost died in the first instants of the fight.

We closed in the middle of the field. I swept Tyrfin in a horizontal stroke at his neck, hoping to end this fight before he knew it was really even starting. He brought his own weapon, a short sword made of what looked like bronze in the light of the rising moon, to parry long before I got close. That

was predictable. I set my teeth and put more force behind the sword. Tyrfing hit his sword and bounced off.

Tyrfing bounced off. Tyrfing. Bounced off.

For a second I was too shocked to respond properly. Tyrfing could cut through practically anything, including magic. Logically I knew that there were weapons out there that were equally as potent and it wouldn't be able to treat them the same way. Logically I knew that not even Tyrfing could cut *everything*—but I'd gotten very accustomed to it pretty much doing exactly that. Thus, when it totally failed to do so this time, it was a very unpleasant shock, and one that almost became lethal.

He did *not* freeze in shock. Instead, he flicked my sword away as quickly and easily as batting a spider aside with a newspaper and riposted. His bronze sword flicked just as quickly toward my face.

I fell back a step and, barely, managed to get Tyrfing into position. He batted it away. Literally—the sword spun end over end into the night, a flicker of silver in the moonlight.

He wasn't even trying. He gave me a moment to recall Tyrfing to my grasp and step back again, getting out of immediate range. Then, once I was prepped and ready to fight, he attacked. His blade was nearly a blur as it came at me, a vicious overhand slash that dropped from my upper left to lower right. It was the kind of attack that would cut a person from the collarbone to the hip and drop him to the ground in two pieces—*theoretically*, at any rate. Unless the person in question is a werewolf or the sword in question is the match of Tyrfing, it usually doesn't pull that kind of feat off.

I think this guy might have, even if his sword had just been a sword. I caught the blow perfectly, raising Tyrfing to meet it at a slight angle, and it was the only thing that saved my life. I was braced against it, and had Tyrfing in a solid two-handed grip, and it *still* knocked me from my feet.

I turned the fall into a dive and scrambled back to my feet, thickening the air and tugging at his feet to slow him down long enough to get back into position. He'd only been using one hand, for crying out loud. As a werewolf, and an above-average one at that, I was stronger than any human but a hardcore bodybuilder. This guy, whatever he was?

He was stronger.

*A lot* stronger.

He was loitering just outside of range. "Good reaction," he said, not even breathing hard. "But your footwork needs improvement." He flicked another blow at my face. I blocked it and pulled away, stepping back again to keep far enough away that he couldn't decapitate me at will. "There, you see? You let your weight get on your heels when you retreat. Try again."

It was crazy. I was busy fighting for my life. He was utterly thrashing me without even trying. And he had the attention free to be giving me *fencing lessons*.

What followed was quite possibly the strangest fight of my life. I kept retreating in circles, parrying and frantically trying to think of a way to not die in the next few minutes, without much success. He kept following me around, not even pretending to work, and offering swordsmanship advice when I slipped up. Occasionally I riposted, and he easily defended himself. The whole time he never even sped up from his casual lope.

"Better," he said as I continued to retreat from him. At a thought, my cloak dropped away and pooled on the ground like a puddle of shadow. I couldn't afford any restriction on my movement now. "But you've seen too much fencing, you have. It's affected your stance. Standing with your feet at right angles only barely works wit' a rapier, and you are using a slashing weapon. You have to face the enemy to slash effectively, eh?"

"Now," he continued, "if I *do* want to turn my feet—" he did so, using the opportunity to launch another of his irritating feints at my knees—"I 'ave to change the way I attack. By turning sideways slightly, I become a smaller target. That is also excellent for lunging, and I can thrust in line with my body. But movement and defense are so limited that I generally say this stance is suitable only under the rules of fencing, and in actual combat there are no rules regarding right of way or target area." He shifted back to his previous stance, and his next slash again sent me flying.

"Now," he continued, "you use your sword with two hands. I think probably you see that, whatever you might have been shown, the traditional duelist's stance is inappropriate for you. You're using classic Japanese cuts, which is acceptable, and I think also a primitive form of the Liechtenauer style. I recommend you focus more on that; he had a very realistic view of combat. However," he said, tripping me and then waiting for me to stand back up, "you have to make certain accommodations. In particular, your sword is closer to a broadsword or a light bastard sword than a true *Zweihänder*. You're plenty strong enough, Wolf, you don't need to put your full power behind a strike to kill. Given that you don't need two hands on the hilt to manage the weapon or to get adequate striking power, I recommend that you use one except for situations where a second hand is helpful for leverage." He demonstrated the point by locking blades and then, with the assistance of his free hand on my left forearm, rolling *Tyrfing* over until my wrists crossed and I lost the sword.

And so on. The worst part, I think, was that it was actually very good advice. Under any other circumstance, I expect I would even have appreciated the impromptu lesson. He was very, *very* good with a sword—infinately superior to Aiko, who'd been the only person I had to practice with for quite a while. This isn't an indication that she's bad, not at all; I could beat her in a fight, but only by relying on raw power and speed, and even then I'd be thankful for my healing abilities by the end of it. When it came to skill, technique, and elegance, she had me beat any day she wanted.

No, the problem was that he was quite simply the best fighter I'd ever seen. He shifted stance and style every thirty seconds, it seemed, and made all of them look easy—even the ones that he decried as inefficient, impractical, or unsuitable for someone of my skills and armament. I couldn't beat him. If Snowflake, Kyra, and Aiko had all been pitching in on my side he would still have put us down like

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butterflies attacking a housecat. I wasn't sure if even Conn could have beaten him in a pure physical confrontation.

So I wasn't appreciating the tips. I mean, it was looking really, really unlikely that I would survive long enough to use them.

Long story short, I was desperate. I knew that soon he would tire of the game, and I knew—not feared, not suspected, *knew*—that when he did I was a dead man. It would take him maybe ten seconds to kill me, tops. If he for some reason wanted to do it slowly.

Which is why I did what I usually do, in the face of drastically superior firepower. I cheated.

Throughout the course of the fight cum tutoring session, I'd been trying to think of a way to beat him. Eventually one occurred to me. I would only get one shot at it, and I would have to get very, very lucky for it to work, but it was the only thing I could think of. So, the next time I got the chance, I checked my position and then started retreating at a slight angle. He didn't seem to notice the change.

I was breathing pretty hard by that time. Hand-to-hand combat is exhilarating, and make no mistake, but it's also incredibly hard physical exertion. Werewolf or not, I'd been pushing myself to the absolute limit just trying to survive his idea of instruction. If I didn't finish this very soon now, he'd kill me by accident.

It was interesting, trying to navigate to where I needed to go. I couldn't take the time to look behind myself—in addition to a dead giveaway of what I was doing, it was likely to be a dead giveaway of a more literal sort—and as a result I had to rely totally on my magical senses. It was distracting, earning me a sharp reprimand and my first wound of the encounter, a stinging but shallow and minor cut on the cheek. First blood to him—a bad sign, as though I needed another.

Two more steps. One more. And then his foot came down squarely in the middle of my discarded cloak.

I designed the cloak to be responsive to my will and magic, regardless of whether I was actually touching it or not. The second he touched the shadow that was its substance, it flowed up him like a swarm of ants. In a bare instant it had gone from an inert pool of slightly darker darkness than the surrounding absence of light to a mantle of shadow wrapped about him, thickest around the arms.

It wouldn't stop him. Shadows were insubstantial, and even my magic could only change that to a limited degree—enough, perhaps, to make my cloak as solid as duct tape or heavy twine. Not as strong as chains, and I had the feeling that was what it would take to restrain this guy. Rope wouldn't do it.

It wouldn't stop him—but it might, just barely, slow him down enough.

I didn't waste a moment of my limited time talking. I didn't go for the fancy maneuver, either; I lunged straight forward, thrusting at the center of his chest.

He did...something. I'm not quite sure what. One moment I was going for the kill and hoping desperately that he didn't get loose in time. The next, he was standing sideways to me. He ducked his shoulder into my movement. I flipped up and over the resulting fulcrum and landed hard on my back.

"Excellent idea," he said approvingly. "However, you might want to think twice the next time you try to use shadows against a Champion o' Night, eh?" He chuckled. "You are a bit thick, ain't ye?"

I'd recovered enough breath by then to start trying to stand up and not, you know, totally get murdered in the next few minutes. Unfortunately, around the same time I got my arms underneath myself, darkness flowed over my face, bringing with it the delicate aroma of magic and Midnight. It was dark and cool, and not intrinsically unpleasant except for the part where it was also impermeable. Embarrassingly, I could feel that it was also my own damn cloak. Even as I realized that, a hand with approximately the same degree of strength as a silverback gorilla picked me up by the neck, and Carraig started walking.

I struggled. Given that I was blinded and rapidly running short of oxygen, it should come as no surprise that I failed miserably. Within a few minutes the darkness outside my eyes was matched by darkness inside.

The last sound I heard was Snowflake's mournful howl, seeming to echo from a long way off.

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Chapter Five

I woke up. That, in itself, came as no small surprise.

I woke up in a lot of pain. That, once I got past the initial shock of not being dead, was rather less surprising.

It took me a minute to realize where I was. There was just too much stimulation, and none of it good. My head was throbbing—probably from the, you know, near-asphyxiation back there—but that was nothing compared to the burning, stabbing ache in my limbs. It was quite simply the worst pain I'd ever experienced—a significant statement, that, as I consider myself something of a connoisseur of injury—and it made it hard to even see straight, let alone think clearly.

When I did, the view took my breath away again, for another reason this time. I had no idea where I was or how I'd gotten there, aside from the obvious. But it was beautiful, wherever it was, in a strange way I hadn't quite run into before. I was high above the ground—how high I had no way to tell, but it was high enough that I seemed to be floating in the sky, and I couldn't reach out and touch the earth magically. The night had the unique feel of the early morning hours in a place that never really sleeps, but the moon was practically eclipsed by the harsher tones of artificial lighting, making it hard to gauge accurately.

About that time I realized where and how I was, and for a moment pain was superseded by sheer disgust. Bad enough to be crucified. Worse to be crucified with charged silver. Even worse to be on top of a skyscraper (okay, maybe not a skyscraper, but my standards weren't exactly high in that regard) at the time.

For it to happen in *Las freaking Vegas* seemed like overkill. I mean, that's just adding insult to injury, there. I'd never visited Vegas personally, not my cup of tea, but the tackiness was unmistakable.

I took stock of my options over the next several minutes. The good news was that I had all the time I needed to do so. The bad news is that this was because I did not, in fact, have any options. The spikes—and they were spikes, no mistaking it, the same sort as those used on Humberto—were driven through my wrists and ankles, where I could feel them displacing the bones (an incredibly painful and intensely disturbing sensation, if you were wondering). Worming myself free was out of the question; even if I could work up the nerve, which I doubted, the only way I could do it would involve lateral motion. Bisecting all of my limbs with charged silver seemed like little more than an exotic way to commit suicide.

The most chilling part of that thought was, of course, that before long I might be wanting to take that route. Just to get things over with a little faster.

That left me with few other alternatives. There was no one around, making any attempt to talk my way out of things an exercise in insanity. Magic was a good idea, except that I frankly doubted I could

muster the precision and power to extract the spikes, particularly when even the smallest movement would cause them to grate against my bones and leave me screaming (I'd already been doing a fair bit of *that* tonight, judging by how my throat felt). Generally speaking, doing magic under conditions that bad for your concentration is, again, pretty much just a cruel and unusual way to die. In any case, the presence of so much silver in my body rendered it a moot point. Werewolves are allergic to silver in an energetic sense rather than any autoimmune crap, and it would render me incapable of mustering anything more than a faint breeze.

I hung there and stared out at the neon lights, most of them little more than a blur of light against the night. I considered, briefly, screaming in an effort to attract help. I dismissed it as the idle fancy it was. The building I was on was far enough away from the Strip, and high enough, that I highly doubted anyone would hear. And even if they did, I knew humanity well enough to know that ninety-nine percent of people would dismiss it as the wind, and the last guy would probably frown slightly, tell himself that it was probably nothing and he didn't want to get involved anyway, walk away quickly without looking back, feel guilty for an hour or two, and then forget all about it. It seemed like a waste of effort, all things considered.

It's funny, how a thing like that makes you reflect on life. Cliché, I know, but then they do say all clichés have a grain of truth. You know that scene where the hero, on his deathbed, says that he has no regrets about life? Well, that wasn't me. I wished I hadn't wasted so much of my life in a haze of self-loathing. Heck, I would have settled for having a little longer after I figured that one out.

Ah well. It was fun while it lasted.

About the same time I was finishing up that train of thought and wondering whether I was supposed to get religion yet, or I was in for a few hours of whimpering first, I heard another voice—one which wasn't in my head, I mean, I had plenty of *those* already. "Hello, Winter," said a nearly-human voice from somewhere behind me.

"Hello, Fenris," I said back as lightly as I could—not very, I might add. "I don't suppose you'd set me free again?"

"I would if I could," he said, walking around to where I could see him. He hadn't changed—mottled grey hair, golden eyes that reflected the ambient light, emaciated to a state somewhere between "runway model" and "concentration camp."

The funny thing was, he really sounded like he meant it. "You're a god," I said, more than slightly upset. "You want me to believe that you can't pull out a few nails?"

"I would like for you to believe me, yes," he said quietly, sitting on the rooftop directly in front of me. "But ultimately, it doesn't really matter. I can't pull those nails out. Whether you believe that or not has no bearing on the truth."

I...well, I'd like to say I slumped but, obviously, circumstances made that difficult or outright impossible at the moment. "Why not?" I asked listlessly. I believed him, too, dammit. Fenris...well, both

the legends and my own impressions of him suggested that, while he might well kill you, he wouldn't pretend to be your friend first.

"No freedom comes without matching constraint," he said, sounding about as depressed as I felt. "Remember that. Anyone saying otherwise is selling something." He pulled the classic small steel flask out of his hip pocket and took a small swallow. He offered it to me.

"You know," I said, "I don't usually drink, but somehow at the moment it sounds pretty good." I paused. "You do realize I can't get up and walk over there, right?"

He nodded solemnly. "Of course. Forgive me." I couldn't hold the flask, either, which was more than slightly awkward, but I forgot all about it the second I tasted whatever it was that was in Fenris's flask.

I don't drink. But if booze all tasted like that, I don't know that I would ever *stop*. It smelled of honey and tasted of fire. To drink it was...blackberries and laughter over the course of a long afternoon in the last summer of your childhood, sleeping on the rocks under the moon with your lover by your side, the exultation at the start of battle and the grief at the finish, kissing your daughter goodbye on the way to a war you'll never come back from. It was ash and honey, sunshine and sorrow, the smell of lilies in the world's most beautiful mausoleum, starlight reflected in the dark places underground, blood in your mouth and a smile in your eyes beneath the moon.

There are no words.

Fenris took another sparing drink and then carefully, almost reverently, capped it and stowed it back in his pocket. "Damn," I said. I couldn't think of anything more articulate, and besides, it seemed appropriate.

He nodded agreement, going back to his seat. "Say what you will about the dwarves, they brew some fine mead."

We were silent for a long moment. "Sort of a depressing third meeting," I said after a while. The suffocation hadn't started yet, but I could definitely feel my weight hanging off the spars. "Given that I'm about to die and all."

He smiled sadly. "Perhaps. But you won't die tonight." He stared off into the night. "Your canine friend is leading a rescue of sorts. They should only be another hour."

It took a second for what he'd said to sink in. When it did, I managed a wheezy laugh. Wow. I wouldn't have guessed that Snowflake's ability to find me, whatever obstacles might find their way between us, would ever come in that handy. Heck, I wouldn't have guessed she could pull it off from that far away.

"Wait a second," I said as something else occurred to me. "*Another* hour? How long have I been here?"

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He frowned. "Around five hours, I think? I'm not so good with clocks. It's about even between midnight and dawn now, in any case."

"Five hours?" I asked, shocked. "How did I lose that much time?"

He smiled...well, not sheepishly, but as close as the Fenris Wolf could ever hope to come. "I've been keeping you asleep. I would have done so longer, to spare you the pain, but it was approaching the point where it wouldn't have been safe." He shrugged. "It isn't exactly my specialty."

A pleasant way to say that you were more accustomed to causing death and destruction than preventing it, I thought. "What happened to not being able to help me?" I asked, genuinely curious. Fenris was possibly the only ancient and powerful being I had encountered from whom I thought I could actually get a straight answer to a question.

"I can help you," he corrected. "I am only not permitted to oppose him who is responsible. To help you sleep is a thing between us, but to remove you from the cross would be to act against his intent in placing you there, and that I may not do."

"You know who put me here, then?"

He nodded slowly, his eyes far away. "Yes. He is called Carraig—no one, I think, knows his father's name anymore, perhaps not even him. He is the mortal champion of the one called Scáthach, and has been for many years now."

"Wait a minute. You mean Scáthach"—my pronunciation was, needless to say, nowhere near as smooth as his—"the goddess?"

"She has been called as such," he said quietly. "And in the old days she was worshipped, under another name. Yes, I think the title applies. One of the least, perhaps, but a goddess all the same."

"But...but that's crazy. Why would a goddess need a mortal champion? She could crush any human that's ever lived."

Fenris grinned boyishly, the expression gone so fast I was never quite sure whether I had seen it at all or it was the product of an overtaxed mind. "Not any, I think, but most, that's true." He shook his head. "You're thinking like a werewolf, Winter, and no surprise, but that won't help you here. The fae don't think like men, less so like wolves."

"What do you mean?" I asked, growing annoyed. Why is it that *everyone* I talk to is constantly wanting prompted?

He frowned, and I got the sense that he was grasping for the words he wanted. "An Alpha faces threats himself," he said slowly, "because to do otherwise would lose the respect of his pack. Because werewolves, as you know, are wolfish at heart, and not to fight his own battles is the action of a weak or cowardly wolf. No pack follows a weakling or a coward."

"But," he continued, "the Sidhe don't see things that way. They never do things directly, or use one plan when three would serve. For one of the Sidhe to duel herself would be an admission that she doesn't have sufficient influence to make another do it instead. Doubly so for such as Scáthach; queens do not sully their hands with the blood of lesser mortals."

My head was...well, it didn't start to hurt, because it was already pounding when I woke up, but it sure as heck wasn't *stopping* to hurt. "I thought Mab was queen of the Midnight Court."

"The one called Mab is," he agreed. "Queen, and ascendant." He laced his fingers before his face and seemed to examine them. "Nothing is ever simple with the fae, Winter. Mab is the Mother of Night, and this is her time. But Scáthach is yet the Maiden of Shadows, and there is another who is Crone."

I stared. "You've gotta be kidding me," I muttered. "Maiden, mother and crone? *Seriously?*"

"You can use Lady, Queen, and Beldam if you prefer," he said. "But I suggest you not, because I have a hard time keeping a straight face when I try to call her a beldam in person. Each is sovereign in her own dominion." He shook his head slowly. "In truth, I don't know why they keep humans to serve as champions. I suspect that one of them found a promising man, and then all the rest decided they needed one as well."

"Wait. You mean they *all* have a guy like that?" I found that prospect more than slightly terrifying.

"Well," he clarified, "not the Crones. They are...beyond such frivolities, I think. But the Maiden and Mother of Day and Night keep human champions, aye. Carraig is likely the eldest living, but Aodh is near as old."

"I am so confused right now," I groaned. "He said it wasn't about the spear. But if he serves Scáthach, I don't get what else it could be. I mean, it's *her* spear, for crying out loud."

"He is searching for the Gáe Bolg," Fenris confirmed. "But this, he did for hate of Conn. I don't know why Carraig hates him so much, but he does."

"So let me get this straight," I said slowly. "Carraig is Scáthach's hatchet man, so when her spear turned up she sent him to go fetch it for her. But while he was in town, he thought he'd take the time to off me because he thought it would hurt Conn's feelings for me to die?" Fenris nodded. "Then why the heck am I still breathing?" I asked, perplexed.

Fenris laughed, a sound like wolves howling and Nordic blizzards. "Isn't it obvious, Winter?" he asked mockingly. "He wants to fight you again. It is all he knows, anymore."

"You sound like you feel sorry for him."

"I do," he agreed. "The world has moved on, since his time, and he doesn't know how to move with it. Bloodshed is all that is left to him, these days." He looked at me seriously. "You are angry, at what he has done to you, and this is natural. I would worry, if you were not angry." He shook his head.

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"Hate isn't the same. Anger motivates, but hate can do nothing but poison. Nothing good can come from hating him, especially if that gets in the way of understanding."

"I see what you mean," I said reluctantly. Oddly enough, now that the pain was more or less a constant in the back of my mind and therefore dismissible, I was more upset by how much my back itched. Even if I could have moved to get at it, I was still wearing most of my armor, and that would make it more than a little hard to get to in any case. "I don't suppose you know where the Gáe Bolg is now, do you?" I asked. I didn't feel particularly hopeful—if there's one thing I've learned it's that it is never, ever *that* easy—but I had to ask.

"No. Sorry. Not my thing." He shrugged. "I've never had much need for spears, in truth."

No surprise, considering his nature. I mean, I might be wrong, but I somehow doubt the Wolf of Asgard even noticed most any weapons.

A moment later he cocked his head sideways. "I had best be going, I think," he said. "It looks like your friends will be here sooner than I anticipated, and it would probably be simpler for them to find you alone."

I envisioned Kyra's likely reaction to finding me in this circumstance with Fenris standing right there and...well, I didn't shudder, for obvious reasons, but I would have liked to. "Yes," I agreed fervently. "Thanks for the company."

He grinned toothily. "Any time. I'll see you soon," he said, and casually jumped off the side of the building. Still spooky, but nowhere near as much so as Loki's "Now you see me, now you don't" routine.

The pain became significantly worse, when Fenris was gone. Like, it went from noticeable-and-annoying-but-not-severely-so to the incapacitating, overwhelming agony I'd woken up with. What, exactly, he'd been doing was impossible for me to determine, but clearly "helping me sleep" was an understatement.

This is why I kinda lost track of time at that point. If you've ever been injured, or even seriously ill for that matter, you can probably relate. At some point the perception of time contracts down to an instant that lasts forever—*not* my recommended way to achieve Zen, by the way. It presumably took less than fifteen minutes for Snowflake to get there, but it felt like a couple months at the least.

When I heard the distinctive sound of a door slamming open behind me, it was all I could do to lift my head. This was followed by the sound of footsteps—I counted at least three patterns—which were quickly eclipsed by the sound of a very, very impatient husky.

*You're here! You're here you're here I found you you're here!* Snowflake didn't actually say that—it was a lot less coherent, as she lost her grip on words and resorted to basic emotions and images—but that's the closest I can come to expressing the gist of what she sent.

"Hey, girl," I said. I was in that peculiar state where I could hear the thready waver of my own voice, but couldn't do a thing about it. "How ya doin'?"

"Better than you," Kyra said. "For fuck's sake, Winter, what happened?" She was dressed in the very, very casual way that, in a werewolf who prefers the lupine shape for combat, indicates more caution and readiness for a fight than a suit of plate.

I looked at her and grinned as best I could. Given that she winced, I was guessing it wasn't very good. "Oh, I don't know, I'm hanging in there. The dog didn't tell you?"

"You're the Doc Doolittle," said a masculine voice I vaguely recognized from somewhere behind me where I couldn't see. "Lassie here didn't feel like talking to us mere mortals."

"Stop jabbering and get over here," Kyra snapped in the tone of an Alpha who does not currently have the patience for games. "How badly off are you?"

"Me?" I thought for a few minutes. "Well, my feet are asleep, and my head hurts too." I glanced down at myself. "And I'm sorta bloody. This was my nice shirt, too." Something else occurred to me. "I might be a little bit drunk. Not quite sure, you know how that can be, right?"

"Fucking hell," said a female voice I didn't recognize. "He's delirious."

I grinned. "I think you might be right." I peered over Kyra's shoulder. "Hi, Ryan. Hi, werewolf I don't know."

"Come on," Kyra said briskly. "Ryan, help me hold him. Daniell, you have something you can use for gloves?"

"No problem, Boss," said the female, walking around to stand in front of me while Ryan went back out of sight. She was, indeed, already pulling on a pair of heavy leather gloves, the sort you think of a welder using. Werewolves treat silver the way normal people might aqua regia—you know, if they knew what that meant. Snowflake was, whiningly, displaced. I could feel concern, fear, and sympathetic pain from her.

I peered down from my perch. "Wait a second," I said. I realized, in whatever small part of my mind was still thinking clearly, that I was starting to slur my words, whether from that single swallow of dwarven mead or simple pain I wasn't sure. "I know you. You were one of th' ones tailing Kyra. The one with the, the wossit, the coffee. Yeah."

She paused. "You saw me?"

"Course I did," I said, somewhat grandiosely.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Talk later," Kyra said brusquely. "Work now."

Daniell nodded. "Yes, Boss. This will hurt," she said, addressing this last to me.

This was, as it turned out, an understatement. I will skip over the next few minutes, because nobody—least of all me—wants to think about them in detail. Suffice to say that there was a great deal of pain and a reasonable amount of bleeding on my part, and awkwardness enough for everyone. I screamed, enough that after a few minutes they also improvised a gag. I didn't feel particularly ashamed of that fact. It did, indeed, take both Kyra and Ryan to hold me still while Daniell pried the silver spikes from my flesh, and in spite of their best efforts, I landed a pretty solid kick to her face at one point. She didn't complain, just stood up and got right back to work. I'd have to apologize for that later.

Snowflake couldn't stand to watch, and had to go back inside the stairwell about the same time as they finished with my legs. I didn't blame her; I would have really preferred not to be present either—and not just because, you know, if I weren't there we wouldn't be having these problems. Especially when Daniell had to improvise a footstool to get enough leverage on my wrists. Talk about awkward moments.

By the time I was fully extricated and lying on the ground, I was drifting in and out of consciousness. I didn't complain too much, mostly because unconsciousness beat screaming agony. It meant that I wasn't having much input on the decision-making progress, but considering my current condition that was probably a good thing.

My memories of the following hours are scattered, disjointed things, snapshots arranged without rhyme or reason. I remember hearing Kyra and Ryan arguing, while Snowflake licked my face and whimpered and Daniell bandaged my various wounds. I remember that the argument ended with Kyra saying, very softly but in her Alpha voice, "I don't care," and Ryan throwing up his hands in disgust—and defeat, because you don't argue with an Alpha using that tone.

I remember that Daniell was the one to carry me down the stairs. It hurt—being carried over an uneven surface when severely injured typically does—and I remember that I wanted to scream, but couldn't seem to do more than moan and whimper. She made gentle shushing noises, reminding me of that night after Aiko got shot—*not* an association likely to make me feel better.

It occurred to me, somewhere in there, that this was quite possibly the worst off I'd been since I first changed into a werewolf and went batshit insane as a result. The time I got shot a few weeks earlier might have been worse as far as injury goes, but I'd been too shocky to feel much in the way of pain that time around.

It's probably a statement about your quality of life when you find yourself saying things like that.

That was the last clear thing for a while. All I got were sensory snapshots—Snowflake licking my hand delicately, whimpering in pain as I was helped out of my armor, nausea and vomiting as the silver

started working its way out of my system, opening my eyes to see Tyrfin less than six inches from my face, blocking everything else from view.

It was a fever dream without the fever, and in my brief moments of lucidity all I could think of was how much I wanted it to end.

The next time I woke up for real, I was at home. More specifically, I was lying on the workbench in my lab.

It bore a disturbing resemblance to the slab where I'd left Aiko.

I tried to sit up, and was immediately pushed back down by Kyra. "Easy, Winter," she said. "You're, like, seriously fucked up. Take it easy."

I muttered something deprecating, but didn't fight her. "How long was I out?"

"Not that long, actually," she said with the forced cheer of someone trying to hide just how bad things are. "We got back to Colorado about an hour ago." She stood up, and returned a moment later with a glass of cold water. "Here."

My hands were too bandaged to work right. Kyra had to hold the glass to my mouth. "How'd you get through the wards?" I asked her.

"I take it," Kyra said dryly, "that you don't remember waking up long enough to lower them."

I thought back on it. "Not in the slightest," I said eventually. I lifted my head enough to see Snowflake sleeping on my knees. "Hey, good to see you again. Glad you made it out of there."

She must have been truly exhausted, because she didn't respond except by shifting slightly in her sleep and making a contented sound.

"Speaking of which," Kyra said. "What the hell happened? You were too far out of it to talk earlier."

I frowned. "Well, I've got some idea what's going on. The good news is, it was good enough to let me catch up to the guy that likes crosses. The bad news is, it was good enough that I caught up to the guy that likes crosses."

"Who was it?" she asked.

"Some whacko working for the Midnight Court. He's looking for the same thing as everybody else—it's some sort of überspear, by the way—and decided to start thinning the competition."

She grunted, making it clear that she didn't particularly care about spears über or otherwise. "He ambushed you?"

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"No. Well, yes in the sense that he set a trap and I walked straight into it. But no in the sense that he challenged me to a fair fight on neutral ground at that point." I shook my head. "He's good, Kyra. He might be better than anyone I've ever seen. I don't think I can take him," I admitted. I hesitated a moment. "I'm afraid."

She knew how few people I would ever have admitted that to, and she knew what it meant that I would say it now. "Well, we're pretty screwed," she said cheerfully. "Oh, I called Mac. Her shift just ended, so she should be here within a few minutes." Mac, in addition to an excellent night-shift nurse, was a witch who, although inexperienced, had a real talent for healing. She was the closest thing there was in this town to a doctor I could trust.

"Thanks. Thank you, Kyra." I paused. "I'm sorry I keep doing this."

"Doing what?" she asked, baffled.

"Dragging the pack into my messes. It isn't fair to you."

"You know," she said meditatively, "when you're feeling better, I think I'll smack you one upside the head for that. You're my *friend*, Winter, and the pack's too, whether they know it or not. You don't need to apologize for asking us for help. That's what friends *do*." She smiled suddenly, eyes bright and mischievous. "Besides, I distinctly recall getting you into a few messes too. I'd say we're even now."

The outer door banged open, causing Kyra and me to jump slightly and Snowflake to raise her head, and was followed a moment later by the inner. "I hate coming here," Mac said loudly by way of hello. "I always feel like I'm about to get shanked. What's the crisis?"

Kyra pointed mutely at me. Mac just as silently displaced Snowflake and started peeling away bandages, while I tried to ignore the little flashes of pain as she did. Kyra must have put me on some massive painkillers or something to block it out so far; werewolves aren't *immune* to drugs, no more than poisons, but in both cases it takes a huge dose to have any effect.

"Ooo," Mac said when she managed to expose my wrist. "Nasty."

I turned my head to look, and immediately regretted it. There was a hole clear through my arm, big enough to put maybe three pencils through. The flesh surrounding it was raggedly abraded, and the skin from my fingertip halfway to the elbow was mottled black and blue, probably from the spike being pried out. Very, very nasty.

I mean, come on. When you can look straight through yourself, it's pretty nausea inducing even for me.

Mac poked and prodded at me in what I presumed was a diagnostic way, while I winced, gritted my teeth, and tried not to jerk away from her. I knew she was only trying to help—Mac might not (okay, definitely doesn't) like me very much, but I really don't think she's *capable* of malpractice—but *ow*. I mean, really, wow.

After she'd spent a few minutes at that, she stopped and closed her eyes. I felt her magic touching my skin, like the gentlest brush of a feather, and smelled it like growing grass on the air.

"Well?" Kyra asked impatiently.

Mac opened her eyes and let go of my wrist. "You're screwed," she said bluntly. "Ahem, that is, there's good news and bad news. The good news is, you're a werewolf, so you might be able to walk again someday. The bad news is, that day won't be anytime soon."

I winced. "It doesn't feel *that* bad."

She stared at me levelly. "In that wrist alone, one tendon is severed, half of the blood vessels are damaged, three of your carpals are broken, and I think the radius is fractured too. If you were a human, we'd probably have to amputate all of your extremities." She shook her head. "Be grateful for what you have."

"Oh," I said. "Is there you anything you can do?"

She grabbed my wrist again and looked at it, but without much hope. "Probably not," she said. "The bleeding's already stopped, and I did what I could about the inflammation, but at this point anything else I add will probably just make things worse. The worst thing that could happen would be for you to heal with your bones where they are right now." She looked at me curiously. "How did this happen, anyway?"

"Crucifixion," I said glumly. "It isn't as much fun as it sounds like."

She blinked. "Wow. That...is a new one. Nice job."

Before I could think of anything in the way of witty repartee, the door opened again. I hadn't heard the outer door, this time, probably because I was busy not screaming and/or puking. "What are you doing?" Fenris asked. He didn't sound very friendly.

Mac looked at the door coldly. "I am *trying* to see to an injured person, and would appreciate it if you would wait."

He snorted loudly, the sound less human than he usually sounded. "Mortal hack." He walked closer and looked briefly at my exposed wrist. "Move," he said absently, making shooing motions.

Kyra bristled. "Are you telling me what to do?" she asked. Her tone made it clear that her tolerance and patience, already stretched thin over the last month, were not currently extending to that action.

I contorted around and met her eye before she could say something which, considering who she was talking to, would probably be disastrous. I didn't say anything. I didn't need to, given that she was a werewolf and therefore perfectly capable of seeing a message that clear in my posture even when I was lying down.

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She hesitated, and then said, "Fine," in a tone closer to snarl than language. She glared at Fenris, making her opinion of him coming in and trying to boss her around quite clear, but she moved, and practically dragged Mac with her.

Fenris just laughed, the sound of wolves howling more deeply buried than it had been last night. "Anytime you want, pup. Anytime. You're out of your league." He grinned at her, showing plenty of tooth and meeting her eye, his attitude making it clear that he was aware of the implications of such a gesture for werewolves. If he were anyone else, I would have said that challenge would have been the last straw for an overstrained Alpha and he was about to start bleeding.

Given that he *wasn't* anyone else, not so much. Kyra was savvy enough to see some shadow of his power in those eerie golden eyes, and smart enough to not want any of that action. She didn't quite back down—not even for gods do Alphas back down on their home turf, which probably goes a long way toward explaining why werewolves haven't come to dominate the world—but she didn't attack him, either.

Having put Kyra in her place, Fenris dismissed her totally and turned his attention to me. "Stuck you pretty good," he commented, examining my wrist. He was a lot less, ah, *subtle* about it than Mac had been—not cruel or rough, just firm. Considering my condition, that was more than enough.

"This will hurt," he said calmly, closing his hands around the wound.

The puncture—now *there's* an understatement—started to itch and burn, and for a moment I thought it wouldn't be too bad. Should have known better, really. The heat faded after a few seconds, and then kept fading. After another thirty seconds, it felt like I'd been stabbed again, with an icicle this time, and I had to clench my teeth, first to stop them from chattering and then to keep from making any undignified sounds.

Then the sensation peaked. I'm not sure how to describe it. For a second, that same bitter bone-deep cold lanced through my whole left arm, like my blood had been replaced with liquid nitrogen. It wasn't numbing, the way such intense cold should have been, even for me. It was just agony, fierce and piercing and at the same time almost sweet, beautiful in its purity. My fist clenched, involuntarily, so tightly that my own nails drew blood, and my cheeks were wet with tears. And for an instant, just one instant, I felt claws circling my wrist, and I saw the darker face of the Fenris Wolf, not a pleasant if odd-looking young man but a terrible, hulking grey beast bigger than a car, his lambent yellow-gold eyes so deep you could fall into them forever and filled with a hunger that could consume whole worlds and never be sated, never even notice—

—and then the moment passed. Fenris was just a guy again, albeit one who declared in every aspect of his appearance and bearing that he was *far* from normal. I felt only a slight residual chill, and my hand stung only where my nails had broken the skin, and that slightly.

Wait a second. *My wrist didn't hurt.*

I looked at it in amazement, but it was true. Where there had just been a gaping hole in my body, now there was nothing but a faint white dimple. It was still scarred, true—but that scar looked like it'd had a few months of werewolf-level healing to smooth it out.

Oh yeah, and my skin was fish-belly white, cold and waxy when I touched it to my cheek, and dusted with frost.

"That...*how*?" Mac asked, too stunned for eloquence. "How did you do that?"

Fenris grinned toothily. "Wouldn't work for you." He moved on to my ankle, pulling the bandages apart like tissue paper.

Long story short, the visible injuries I'd sustained were repaired in short order. It didn't seem difficult for Fenris—rinse and repeat, and he never showed the slightest evidence of fatigue—and I, like Mac, had to wonder just how the heck he was doing it. Healing was serious, *serious* magic, and healing like *that* shouldn't have been *possible*.

I kept my eyes firmly closed. I still felt wolf's claws and not fingers, but I was just glad not to see it—especially because I was pretty sure what I was seeing was a hallucination, my hindbrain trying to interpret a power intrinsically beyond human experience, rather than bearing any real resemblance to the truth behind the mask. Fenrisúlfr was a god—a true god, a primal force that nothing in the civilized world could prepare you for. I felt only the smallest touch of that power, and it was still enough to make me want to hide under the blankets and hope that enough of my body would be found to identify it.

And the best part? *This was the god that liked me.*

What would happen if I ever ran up against one that didn't? I mean, it was looking ever more likely that Scáthach would stick her nose in personally, and while the legends didn't paint her as having the raw, terrifying power of the Fenris Wolf, she was still a deity. What could I do if something like that decided to take action directly against me? Or, worse still, if I didn't return the Gáe Bolg to Loki. Fenris is potent, but both my own experiences and the legends say that he doesn't hold a candle to his father when it comes to terrifying the monsters that horror films don't dare to touch.

Which, I reminded myself, would probably not be a problem, given that it looked like Carraig was going to be killing me before Loki got another shot at it.

That is called "looking on the bright side."

Chapter Six

"I didn't expect to see you again this soon," I said to Fenris, stripping off my thoroughly befouled clothing. Strangely, Carraig hadn't bothered to take my armor, weapons, foci, or cloak. Presumably he felt that, regardless of what I might be carrying, I didn't represent a threat to him. I just wished I thought that was overconfidence on his part. I'd managed to talk Kyra and Mac into waiting outside, hopefully averting any diplomatic catastrophes that would otherwise have occurred.

"I told you that you would," he said, confused.

"Well, sure, but you said the same thing the last time I saw you, and that was, what, almost a year ago?"

"Yes," he said patiently. "And this is the first chance I've had to come by since. I don't get out much." He got up and rummaged through my cupboards—dammit, wards are supposed to *keep people out*. Why is it that everybody gets to go through my stuff at will? "You are living like a pauper, Winter. This is unacceptable. I'll have to do something about this."

"Wait a second," I said. "Are you trying to tell me you haven't had a day off in nine months?"

"Well," he admitted, finally coming up with a cleanish glass, "technically, I spent a weekend in Barbados in November. But Coyote would have killed me if I missed our game, so that hardly counts."

"Coyote," I said blankly. "You mean, like, Coyote. Like, *the* Coyote?"

"Do you know any other coyotes that play cards?" he asked me, sounding genuinely curious.

"Not unless you count biting or sleeping on them," I admitted.

"Me either," he said, disappointed. "Anyway, we get together with Anubis and Reynard every few months for a few games of bridge." He filled the glass with water, drank deeply, grimaced slightly at the taste, and sat down at the table. Given that Kyra had cleared it to dump my unconscious self there, it was the cleanest it had been since I inherited the place.

"I'm sorry," I said after a moment. "I don't think I'm capable of dealing with this." Fenris was bad enough, but at least I'd had a while to get used to the idea. Coyote was a whole new realm of crazy, and what little I knew of Reynard Fox wasn't much better. And as for Anubis, well, my knowledge of the Egyptian stuff was sketchy at best—once I realized that there wasn't a single decent fit for my father that I could find in the whole belief system, I sorta stopped paying attention—but even I'd heard of Anubis, and he wasn't exactly the kind of guy you wanted around. Nothing against psychopomps, they do an important job and all that, but the longer it is until I meet one the happier I'll be.

"You'd better learn fast, I think," Fenris said seriously. "Coyote said he wants to meet you, and I think Reynard might as well."

I winced.

"What will you do now?" he asked after a few moments.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I don't suppose you can do anything to help?"

His eyes flickered with anger. "No," he growled, sounding like nothing human. "That healing is the most I can do, and even that is flirting with the bounds." There was real emotion there, but I couldn't quite say what it might have been. Not anger—that's *way* too simple to describe what I heard in his voice. Or, at least, not just anger; I heard that, but there was also fatalism, worn-out desperation, exhaustion, resignation, acceptance, the pain of old wounds long scabbed over—all of that and more, and even then I can only convey the smallest piece.

I was starting to catch on to what distinguished gods from men. Fenris wasn't just stronger than me, or *bigger*. He was *deeper*, in every sense of the word. It was like the difference between a photograph of a flower and the real thing. A real lily is just so much *more* that someone accustomed to the static image couldn't hope to describe the whole of the living plant.

I nodded resignedly. "I guess my first priority is information, then," I said glumly. "If I don't figure out what's going on I'm going to get eaten alive." I frowned. "I guess the worst part is that I still have no idea why most of these people are even here." That was the real kicker, too. I could see Carraig—if somebody made off with Scáthach's personal favorite weapon, sending her chief minion to recover it was an entirely reasonable action. Likewise, whoever was in the game on behalf of the Daylight Court wasn't too surprising. If Midnight wanted something, Daylight tried to stop them on autopilot, if anything I'd earned about the Sidhe Courts was accurate.

But what the hell was *Bryan* doing here? He wasn't Sidhe, and I couldn't see him wanting anything as high-profile as the Gáe Bolg. It wasn't like he needed a weapon anyway. And, even more so, what was with Humberto? He'd clearly recognized that he was playing with fire—at least, that was the only reason I could think of to hire thugs to do his dirty work—so, again, he recognized that actually *having* the object of the chase would be incredibly bad for his health. Why hadn't he dropped out of the running once he caught on to that fact?

What I really needed to understand, I reflected, was the Gáe Bolg itself. What was it, exactly? There had to be something about it, some quality that made all these people want it badly enough to risk crucifixion. Until I knew what that quality was I would never understand why all these people wanted it, or for that matter who most of them were working for. If I didn't find that out, and fast, it was only a matter of time before someone more educated than me found it. I wouldn't be so upset about that, except that it seemed likely that it would involve killing me in the process.

Fortunately, when I needed information about ancient, horrible, powerful weapons, I knew just the guy to talk to.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Kyra was waiting outside my door when I walked out, which was not entirely unexpected. She wasn't alone, which also wasn't *entirely* unexpected, although I had presumed that once it became clear I wasn't at immediate risk of death Mac would have bugged out like a cat fancier at a birding convention. It wasn't Mac she was waiting with, which *was* entirely unexpected.

"Hey, Ryan," I said. "What are you doing here?"

He nodded stiffly. "Hello, sir," he said, with military-level precision. The impression was probably reinforced by the trench knife and SMG he was carrying. Just a little, you know.

I looked from him to Kyra and back again. I sighed. "You can't be serious."

"Oh, but I can," Kyra said, deadpan but with laughter in her eyes.

"I do *not* need a bodyguard."

"Not to pick nits," she said dryly, "but apparently you sort of do. I don't want you getting kidnapped again." Her tone implied that I'd more than used up my allotment of kidnappings—which, admittedly, was a totally fair statement. I thought so too.

"Look, Kyra, I appreciate the thought and all, but...*no*. You didn't see this guy in action. None of your wolves would stand a chance against him. No offense," I added belatedly.

"None taken, sir," he said soberly.

"Maybe," Kyra allowed. "But he could have given you a chance to leg it."

I started to protest that I didn't want anyone, not even a total stranger, dying to cover my retreat. Then I saw the look in Kyra's eye and elected to shut up. Sometimes it was hard to remember that I wasn't just talking to Kyra, but to the Alpha. At times like this, on the other hand, it was hard to think of anything else. Arguing wasn't going to get me anywhere with her in this mood. It might even make her decide to knock me out and lock me up until I saw reason, and that wouldn't end well for anyone.

"Fine," I said, glowering at the two werewolves. "You," I said, pointing at Ryan. "Get a coat or something. I don't want somebody seeing those toys."

"Sir, yes, sir!" he barked, making me wince slightly. Snowflake, who was lying on the sidewalk patiently waiting for us to work things out, laughed at me. He reached into the open window of Kyra's sedan, which was parked illegally right outside my front door, and pulled out a trench coat. *My* trench coat, as a matter of fact, which I'd "loaned" to Kyra and not seen since. What that was supposed to mean, I had no idea.

"Do you *really* think this is necessary?" I asked plaintively.

"Yes," Kyra said firmly. "I can send you with a fur-form, if you'd rather."

I pictured myself walking down the street with one-eyed Snowflake and a werewolf in fur and shuddered. That was just asking to get arrested for being too freakish for comfort. "No. Please."

She smiled in satisfaction. "I thought so. Call if you need anything," she said over her shoulder as she left. As though I would believe for a moment that Ryan wasn't under orders to call her if I so much as sneezed. What kind of sucker did she think I was?

"Did she tell you what I'm doing?" I asked Ryan as he finished buttoning up the coat, slinging a backpack full of my own toys over my shoulders.

"No, sir. Respectfully, sir, it isn't my business."

Typical. The one time I *wanted* somebody to take an interest in what was going on. "Have you ever dealt with the Sidhe?"

"With who?" he asked, forgetting in his confusion to sound like he had a stick up his ass.

"The Sidhe? Faeries," I clarified at his expression of confusion.

"You mean those are real?" Oh great. This was so not what I needed.

"Tell me you've at least read fairy tales."

He stiffened. "Yes, sir!" There was a brief pause. "Although it's been a few years."

I closed my eyes and reminded myself that, as this was not in any way Ryan's fault, throttling him would be a bit of an overreaction. "Your knife's steel, right?" I asked. He nodded. "Well, if we run into something nasty and I don't tell you otherwise, just try and hit it with that, then." Steel wasn't quite as good at damaging the fae as pure iron, or better yet magically charged iron, but it was decent.

Snowflake laughed some more. *It isn't funny*, I told her sourly.

*No, it's hilarious. "You mean those are real?"* Her mental voice dissolved into laughter.

*Easy for you to say. You don't have to deal with it.* "Come on," I said to Ryan, settling my shotgun underneath my own cloak. After our last encounter, I wasn't relying on Tyrfing to be enough.

"Where are we going?"

I smiled grimly. "To talk to an acquaintance of mine."

Kris was working the desk at the shop, and looking distinctly unhappy to be there. "Hey, Winter." Then she took a second look, and winced. "Holy shit, Winter, what happened to you? And what's with the thug?"

"It's good to see you too, Kris," I said. "Is Val here? I really need to talk to him."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Yeah, he's in the shop ripping Doug a new one." That was—well, not a blessing or godsend, or at least I really hoped not, all things considered—but at the very least extremely fortunate. He hadn't been answering his phone, and I had no idea where else to find him.

"Thanks."

"No problem." Kris hesitated. "Look, do you need a hand or something?"

I was tempted to tell her I did. As a shapeshifter, she might not have the same terrifying power of a wizard, the dangerous insidiousness of witchcraft, or the sudden violence that was the hallmark of combat sorcery. But she was smart, tough, and vicious in a fight, and her assistance would be invaluable in any kind of violent situation.

But there were already too many people in position to die if I made a mistake. So I said, "Not yet," and walked on into the shop proper, trailing a werewolf and a...whatever the hell you could call Snowflake.

"You," Val said, not turning to look at me. "Explain, please, how this man got the idea that turning a bowl out of pine was a good idea." Doug, standing next to Val and all but looming over the guy, winced.

"I'm sure he knows what he's doing," I said, which wasn't technically a lie—I was entirely sure that Val had made certain Doug knew exactly how stupid he'd been. "But I really need to talk to you."

"It can wait," he said, still not turning his glower away from Doug, "until this is fixed."

"The Gáe Bolg is in town," I said flatly. As I'd anticipated, Val froze dead still where he stood, though I could tell that both Doug and Ryan either weren't in on the hunt or were very, very good actors. "Now that I have your attention," I said sweetly, "I really need to talk to you."

Val finally turned to face me. His expression was not pleasant. "Not my problem," he said coldly.

"You owe me," I said, with just as much ice in my voice, "for lying about the sword."

"I do not lie," he said, his tone dangerously mild.

"You misled, withheld information, and abused a trust. Whether you spoke an untruth or not." I regarded him evenly. "I think you owe me a few answers."

He was silent for a long moment. "Fine," he said eventually. "Ask. Three questions only."

"Question one: what quality of Scáthach's spear makes it desirable enough to interest gods?"

"It is not the spear, it is the power. She invested it with no small portion of her magic. Who holds the spear, holds the power. More importantly, it is a symbol of her power. Taking it from her would be a significant victory on a symbolic level."

I nodded slowly. That tracked; a spear was nothing to something like Loki, but stealing power from another deity? Yeah, I could see him being interested in that. "Question two: what supernatural abilities does Scáthach's champion possess?"

"Like the spear, he is invested with her power. It makes him strong, fast, quick to heal, immune to the ravages of time. Like the Sidhe themselves, he bears Faerie with him wherever he goes, and can walk the darkened ways even in this world, and so no cage can long hold him. Shadows bend to his will, and none see him when he does not wish to be seen, while his own eyes penetrate any mask. Those of Midnight answer when he speaks, save only the Queens themselves."

Holy crap. Add in his superhuman skill with weapons, and he was starting to sound pretty much unbeatable. How do you fight somebody stronger and faster than a werewolf, who's had who knows how long to practice fighting, who can teleport—I figured that's what "walking the darkened ways" meant, and it would explain how he'd been able to send arrows from every direction at once back in Faerie—become invisible, escape any situation, and see through any illusion or disguise? Heck, that pretty much covers every base at once.

"Question three: what are his weaknesses?"

"Iron will harm him and disrupt his abilities, although it is not poison as it is to the faeries. Other things harmful to those of Midnight—oak and rowan, rock salt, that sort of thing—he will find painful but not truly dangerous. He is not quite as capable in the hours between dawn and dusk as in the night." Val shrugged. "In truth, the champions have few weaknesses. That's the whole point, really."

Great. Just great. Why is that out of all the inhuman monsters that walk the earth, only werewolves—*only* werewolves—have a built-in weakness that's easily exploited and crippling under normal circumstances? I mean, heck, all you have to do to survive most werewolf attacks is wear a whole bunch of dangly silver jewelry and they'll go after easier prey instead.

Life is just so unfair.

"Thanks, Val."

He started to respond, paused, and turned away from me. "I am sorry," he said finally. "That you feel that way about the sword. Such was not my intention."

I wanted to be angry at him. But honestly, what was they point? It was in the past now. No amount of ranting and raving would ever change the fact that I was Tyrfing's wielder now, or make him admit that duping me into agreeing to that was wrong.

He wasn't human. Trying to judge him by human standards was not only futile in the long run, it was also incredibly unfair.

So all I said was, "It's okay, Val. I understand." And then I turned and left, my dog and my bodyguard following along silently.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"What was that about, sir?"

"The short version?" I said. "Some numbskull stole something they really shouldn't have that belongs to this old Celtic goddess. Now everybody and his brother wants it. Apparently it surfaced in a pawnshop in town, and that's why all this shit's happening."

"Understood, sir."

*He really doesn't like you, does he?*

*I'm not entirely sure. Now that you mention it, though....* "Ryan," I said out loud, "what's your beef?"

"Excuse me, sir?"

I rolled my eyes. "Seriously, man. I am entirely able to recognize when somebody's got something against me. So, what, did I kill your uncle or something? Come on, work with me here."

He blinked, then grinned. "No, sir. Nothing against you."

I nodded thoughtfully, adding a few things up in my head. "Right. So what's your problem with Kyra, then?"

He stiffened, then forced himself to relax. Too late; he'd already shown me that I was on the money with that guess. He clearly hadn't spent all that much time around other werewolves, if he was giving himself away *that* easily. "Do you think this is the best time for that conversation, sir?"

"Nope," I said cheerfully. "But I'm not going into a fight with somebody I don't know. So, you know, the longer you spend stalling, the longer we're going to be standing here."

"Right," he said, resigned. "Yes, sir, I do have problems with Kyra."

"You don't like her policies or something?"

"No, sir. She's too nice."

"Okay," I said after a moment. "You lost me there."

"She's too nice, sir. That works in the proximate, but for the long term she doesn't inspire enough fear. And she's female."

I raised one eyebrow. "That bothers you? Listening to a woman?"

"Not me, sir. But a lot of the others don't respect her, and her attitude reinforces that. In the long run the Alpha has to be an authority figure, and werewolves require a certain amount of harsh

discipline for that to work. By ignoring that need for normative control, she's destabilizing the social system, which will ultimately lead to the collapse of the pack system and, inevitably, violent change."

*He's right*, Snowflake said, sounding surprised. *I hadn't thought about it like that, but he's right.*

"That's a remarkably detailed analysis," I said mildly.

He grinned again. "I've had a lot of time to think about this, sir. And I did sociology in college." He shook his head. "I've tried to tell her, but she doesn't want to listen. And then she tells me to shut up, and, well." He shrugged. I knew what he meant; lax disciplinarian or not, Kyra was his Alpha, and I could tell that Ryan wasn't all that dominant of a werewolf. If she told him to shut up, he would, like it or not.

"How long have you been in this pack?" I asked.

He shrugged again. "Around a year. I was in Arizona, but I can't stand the desert. Came up here when I heard there was an opening."

"Well, let's just say Kyra's got reason, then." I so didn't want to go into the sordid details of what had gone on in the Pikes Peak Pack (whose idea was that name, anyway?) before he'd been around.

"Doesn't matter. She needs to toughen up." He glanced at me. "I don't expect you to understand, sir."

Which, it occurred to me, was quite possibly the most patronizing thing you can say to somebody. I mean, that's practically straight-up telling somebody they're so stupid they shouldn't even bother trying to understand the situation. "Look, Ryan, how long has it been since you were Changed?"

"Seven years next month, sir."

"Seven years," I said, nodding. "Not bad. Plenty of werewolves don't last that long."

"I've been lucky," he said. "And I don't normally do this many stupid things, sir."

I snorted. "Yeah, you want to stay around here you'd best get used to it. Now, I've been around werewolves for, um, I guess around twenty-seven years now, maybe a little more. There's an outside chance I know what you're talking about."

He stared. "Twenty-seven years? You don't even look twenty-seven years old."

"Yeah, neither do you, buddy. Werewolves aren't the only things that can live forever, or nearly. Okay, let's move on. I think that's about as much as we're going to get out of this discussion."

"Thank you, sir. Where next?"

"Good question," I said, thinking. "I don't suppose you know who Humberto was working for when he hired those thugs?"

"Don't know anything about hiring people. But Kyra said he was doing something for the Khan."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Huh. Wonder why he wants this thing." I shook my head. It didn't matter, at least not in the immediate term. Worry about surviving the next few days—which, at the moment, meant getting this spear and getting it as far away as possible—and then figure out what the political consequences would be.

Speaking of which. Where the heck was it? Somebody had taken it from Steve's apartment after he got shot. Carraig had said it was gone before he got there, and I was inclined to believe him—my gut said that he wasn't the kind of guy who'd lie about something like that, not even to the opposition. I doubted that it had been the Daylight rep, either; if that happened, the Midnight Court would have known. It could have been Bryan, I supposed, but I didn't know enough about what he was even *doing* here to guess.

And that is when I realized what I'd overlooked. *Who did you smell in that apartment?* I asked Snowflake.

*What?*

*In the thug's apartment. You said you smelled someone familiar. Who was it?*

*Oh. Oh shit, I can't believe I spaced that. It was whatserface, the police person.*

*The one Kyra works with? Frishberg, her name was?*

*That's the one.*

There was a brief moment of shock. Then I felt myself start to grin again. "Hey, Ryan. You know where I could find Sergeant Frishberg at this time of day?"

He shrugged. "Sure."

As it turned out, it wasn't hard. Ryan might not approve of Kyra's management approach, but he was apparently one of her more trusted subordinates, so Frishberg didn't find it too surprising for the werewolf to call and ask her to meet him.

I figured it'd be better if it wasn't me that called her. She already knew that I was investigating this mess; the instant she saw me the game would be up. Better, I reckoned, to catch her by surprise.

To help reinforce that impression, he set the meet up in a location that was the polar opposite of where I had. I mean, maybe this is just me, but I think of a shopping mall as representing the antithetical ethos of a park.

The funny thing is that, while they aren't very similar on the surface, it was the exact same reasoning responsible. Both were crowded places where you could still have a private conversation with a reasonable expectation of it *staying* private.

They were also places where you could easily arrange to have dozens, if not hundreds, of people playing backup without it being obvious.

For some reason, this fact didn't comfort me very much.

We met her at a small table in the food court, where the pathetic artificial waterfall would prevent any casual onlookers from overhearing our conversation. I made sure that it was in a brightly lit area with the nearest notable shadow a few dozen yards away, too. Just in case.

I was wearing my cloak as just that, rather than molding it into a coat like I usually did when I wanted to look like an only moderately creepy dude. More specifically, it was currently a black cloak with the hood pulled up and wrapped around my face. I thinned it out enough over my eyes that it was no more impediment than a pair of shades, while still keeping my features well concealed.

Magic is hard work—but sometimes, it's just so darn cool.

Ryan was wearing a more traditional trench coat, and not making a huge effort to conceal the fact that he was armed. Between that and my Renaissance-style equivalent, we looked sufficiently spooky that nobody seemed inclined to come too close. Snowflake was concealed in the plants along the water—they weren't very impressive, but I didn't think Frishberg would notice her. How a white-and-black dog can hide in an artificial jungle I will never know, but she made it look easy.

The sergeant walked in around fifteen minutes late to the meeting, at which point we'd been there for almost half an hour. Ryan was eating fast food burgers—half a dozen of them, complete with sides and drink—with all evidence of enjoyment. It was good for camo, but I couldn't bring myself to join him. I mean, I regularly eat my meat raw, and I *still* can't call that shit food with a straight face.

Sergeant Frishberg evidently agreed with me, because when she sat in the chair across from us she looked at him in disgust. "I can't believe you eat that stuff."

Ryan shrugged, stuffed the last half-burger into his mouth in one bite, and swallowed it all but whole before he replied. "It beats MREs. Glad to see you taking things so seriously."

"Bite me," she said—*not* the best thing to say to a werewolf, really. They can *usually* tell if you're being sarcastic, but even the ones that know what you mean might not turn down an invite like that. "I actually do have things to do other than meet you, what with the way I'm in charge of a unit dealing with things that are now officially debunked as a hoax. Interestingly, I've been informed that I'm not supposed to say otherwise, even though I've personally seen you guys doing your thing. I don't suppose you know anything about that?"

He opened his mouth to say something witty, which would probably have given away info he wasn't even technically supposed to have. Even playing the other team, I had to admire how smoothly she'd worked that into the banter—the police didn't know what they had, if they'd put somebody that good in charge of the bottom-of-the-barrel freak squad.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

That respect did not, of course, prevent me from cutting him off. "We are not here to make small talk," I said flatly.

She looked at me directly for the first time, though I didn't believe for a moment that she hadn't been aware of me from the moment she walked in. "What are you here for then, mystery man?"

"Where is the spear?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

I couldn't give her a hard stare through the shadow—well, I suppose I could, but it tends to lose something in translation when they can't actually see your face. "You were present in Potts's apartment. As his death was a straightforward homicide, I see no reason for you to be involved in the investigation. Thus, again, where is the spear?"

She hesitated—only a fraction of a second, but that's a fraction too long when dealing with werewolves. I don't know that our senses are actually more acute for that sort of thing, but we sure as heck pay more attention to them. "I should warn you," I said, before she could attempt to bullshit me again, "that I have had a very unpleasant few days. I am very nearly out of patience, and the idea of killing something sounds incredibly cathartic right now. So, in the interests of fairness, I should warn you that if you lie to me, I will eat your nose. Just letting you know."

"I appreciate your candor," she said sarcastically. "Look, I don't know what you're talking about. I was there, sure, but it was on the third day of the investigation, okay? I can see if there's a record of what was taken, but otherwise your guess is as good as mine."

"Do," I said curtly.

"Fine," she said, sounding equally happy. "Excuse me." She stood up and walked away, pulling out her cell phone as she went. *Tail her*, I told Snowflake.

*Say please.*

I rolled my eyes. *Please kindly tail the corrupt police officer in an effort to keep both of us from being slowly tortured to death by wicked faeries.*

*All right. But only 'cause I like you.*

Through Snowflake, I could keep a decent eye and ear on what Frishberg was doing. She walked out of sight of our table around the corner, staying pretty close to the planter where Snowflake could keep close to her. She called someone. Contrary to my expectations, their conversation was really boring. Snowflake's hearing was good, but not quite good enough to hear the other party's responses over the pseudowaterfall, so it basically consisted of listening to Frishberg requesting information. In fact, the only really remarkable part of the entire conversation was the very last thing said, which was: "Thanks, Mike."

Interesting. Very, very interesting. I wasn't exactly an expert on the inner workings of the Colorado Springs police force, but I couldn't help but think that I *did* know one Mike on the freak squad. Namely, Mike Adams, a beginner shaman and vigilante. I got along with him pretty well—he disapproved of me on principle, but recognized that he didn't exactly have a lot of room to throw stones. If it *was* Mike she was talking to, I might be able to confirm what Frishberg said with him.

*Thanks*, I said to Snowflake, and returned to my own body.

Ryan was gone. Simply gone, no sign of where he'd gone or why, and every sign he'd been there was gone as well—the trash, everything. If I hadn't been sitting next to him a minute ago, I wouldn't have known a thing. There was no sign of a struggle, and Ryan was the kind of guy who could struggle pretty hard. None of the people in the mall seemed to have noticed anything upsetting.

*Get ready for trouble*, I told Snowflake, sending her an image of what I'd seen. That was the downside of looking through her eyes, or anyone else's for that matter; managing two sets of senses was nigh impossible, so I generally couldn't pay attention to any of my own senses at the same time.

Sergeant Frishberg picked that moment to return from making her calls. "Where's Ryan?" she asked me.

Wouldn't I like to know. "Not your problem," I said instead.

She shrugged. "Whatever. I think I found your spear. One of the attending officers thought it resembled a recent murder weapon, so he took it in as evidence."

"Where is it now?"

"That's the funny thing. Nobody seems to know. It vanished the next day." She stood up. "If it's all the same to you, I've got things to be doing. I'll send your boss the bill."

I felt a sudden stirring of power, the smell of shadows and nightshade hitting me like a sledgehammer, and snapped my head sideways to look for the source. I found it, a slightly-too-dark shadow in the corner of the roof, maybe forty yards away. "Oh, shit," I said, standing up and kicking the chair away. It attracted attention, but the way this was going I reckoned I could count myself phenomenally lucky if I lived long enough for that to bother me.

*What?* Snowflake asked instantly. "What's the problem?" Frishberg said almost simultaneously.

"You might want to run," I said, stepping out from behind the table and pulling magic to myself. As before, I spun tendrils of air into a sort of sensory system extending forty-five feet in all directions. It was a lot harder here, where there was so much motion to track. People in every direction were turning to look at me, and I felt the awareness of my nonsensical actions rippling out, disrupting the patterns of movement through the food court.

A moment later, I felt what I'd been waiting for. The air currents spun aside from a single object, moving very fast on a direct track at me. Just as before, there was no time to think, or plan, or consider,

only to react. I shoved power through the leather bracelet I was wearing under the cloak, thickening air and forcing it into a headwind to slow the arrow, and dodged sideways.

I never consciously decided to stick my hand out. I mean, it was an insanely stupid thing to do. I wasn't fast enough to pull that kinda stunt. Particularly given that I *knew* this guy used a massive enough dose of poison to make even a werewolf dead in short order, the intelligent thing to do would be to get as far away as possible from this arrow, and then keep running.

But, nevertheless, I did reach out. And, impossibly, my hand closed around the shaft of the arrow just behind the head. I glanced at it and, in the better lighting of the mall, could see that while the shaft and fletching were jet black, the arrowhead itself was bronze, gleaming with silver at the cutting edges. It was liberally smeared with a dark oily substance, too, confirming my expectation that he would be using poison this time too. I wasn't sure if it was scorpion venom again, but I thought I could be entirely happy never finding out.

Almost as creepy, my hand was frosted over, and I could feel a coating of ice on my palm. Interestingly, it had frozen to the arrowshaft, both ensuring that I wouldn't drop it by accident and preventing me from getting splinters.

"The hell!" Frishberg exclaimed, looking at my catch.

"I thought I told you to run," I replied, forcing air between my hand and the ice and popping it off. The arrow clattered to the ground, and I dug in my cloak for my pistol as I waited for the next arrow. I heard someone scream, as they finally realized what had just happened. As though it had been a signal, people all around started screaming and running in panic. Interestingly, Frishberg wasn't one of them. She backtracked the arrow's path—and immediately ducked behind the planter where it would serve as cover and took off at a perpendicular angle to it.

Something told me the sergeant had been in a few scrapes. Given that, most of the time, a police officer's life is rather more boring than certain movies would have you believe, this was an interesting fact.

Behind me, Snowflake burst out of the bushes, growling deep in her throat. She didn't speak, but I could feel bloodlust, hunger, the thirst for revenge.

The shadow I was watching faded, right then, into something more mundane. I started straight for the door, straining all available senses to figure out where the next shot would be coming from. Snowflake moved at my side, glaring from side to side and growling.

I looked at the crowd between us and the doors. "Shit." Another arrow snapped at me from behind. I shoved magic to slow it and relied on the armor to stop what was left—I couldn't dodge, not when it would keep going into that crowd. I got lucky and it didn't penetrate the backpack, but I couldn't count on that—especially not if he managed a headshot. I needed to get out of here.

Snowflake ducked sideways. *This way*, she said.

Apparently she knew the mall pretty well—a lot better than me, at any rate. No surprise, given how much I hate shopping malls; I knew Kyra had taken her shopping a few times, and that was more than I could say. She led me through a side corridor that was almost empty, meaning that we could move at a dead run. A few people did get in the way. When they did, I abused my superstrength and tossed them out of the way, and Snowflake abused her canine agility to get through the gaps. I couldn't get through a crowd that way, but I could handle a couple people in an otherwise empty hall. We were by them before they could really work up much in the way of shouting.

I might have felt better about it if my feelers hadn't detected another arrow coming at us from the other end of the hallway, once again aimed straight at my face. Rather than trying to pull another arrow-grabbing stunt, I juke sideways, Snowflake taking the hint from me and diving out of the way as well. The bronze arrowhead hit the tile hard enough to penetrate an inch or so, and stuck up at an acute angle, quivering slightly.

Snowflake bit my sleeve and pulled me to my feet, hauling me in the direction of a nearby clothing store.

I glanced over. "We have to get out of the building!" I shouted—entirely unnecessary given that there wasn't, like, any gunfire or anything, I know, but the situation really did seem to demand shouting. Funny how that works.

*I know, come on!* she said urgently

I shrugged and went with it. Once inside, I could see what she had in mind; the store was too small to have the long sight lines Carraig seemed to favor, and there were enough obstacles that we could probably hide from any shot he did take. We still had to get out—I had no doubt that, if we stayed long, he wouldn't hesitate to take us out in hand-to-hand.

But, indeed, he made no appearance as we raced through the claustrophobic aisles. It was possibly the first time I'd been in a clothing store in a shopping mall, and if the husky hadn't been there I would likely have gotten totally turned around. As it was, we made a beeline toward the escalators.

She started down. I smelled magic, and saw a patch of shadow at the bottom of the escalator, and pulled her sideways to the ascending escalator. A moment later, another arrow flew up from below and stuck in the ceiling.

The next few minutes were very hectic. We raced up the escalator, ducked away from another arrow from below, and took off through the upper level of the store. Back out on the concourse, I immediately had to dive under another shot.

*There's not an exit on this level,* Snowflake noted calmly as I rolled back to my feet.

I glanced around and saw a bank of windows overlooking the parking lot. "Yes there is," I said, and took off for them.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Snowflake, seeing what I had in mind, laughed exuberantly. She was panting pretty hard—I was too, actually, which wasn't too surprising, considering—but I couldn't feel any fear from her. Snowflake just isn't the sort to take danger seriously, an attribute I suspect she picked up from Aiko.

Thirty feet from the windows, I summoned Tyrfin. It appeared on the ground in front of me, and I scooped it up as I ran. Then, not taking the time to unsheathe it, I chucked it at the glass. It hit hard, and sent a network of cracks through the windowpane.

I kept running, gathering more power as I went. It took three gusts of wind, but I managed to shatter the window the rest of the way. The shards, and Tyrfin with them, were swept out by the wind. We were less than ten feet from the hole.

Snowflake laughed again, and launched herself through the air. I snagged her around the ribs with one arm and jumped out the window.

Three stories doesn't seem like too far, until you're falling from it. At that point, believe me, it ain't too shabby. The wind whipped around us, ruffling Snowflake's fur, pulling at my cloak.

I grabbed that wind and twisted it, again using my bracelet as a focus. There was a bit more weight involved than I was used to slowing with this method—I'd carried Snowflake before, on a pretty regular basis, because she enjoyed it, but not on such short notice. Between that and the relatively short fall, I wasn't able to do as much to slow the fall as I would have liked to. We didn't hit hard enough to break bones, but the impact was definitely enough that my knees would be complaining in a few minutes.

Assuming I lived that long, of course.

At the moment, that assumption wasn't looking too likely. I dropped the dog and heaved myself back to my feet, swaying slightly—between the running and all the wind I'd been throwing around, I was very close to my limits now. Snowflake was on her feet in moments, still laughing exuberantly, her eye bright and sparkling blue.

That would have been okay, except for one thing. Snowflake was *not* the only one who was amused. I could clearly hear Carraig's laugh as well, directionless and indefinite as it had been in Faerie.

I was staggering slightly as we took off through the parking lot. Snowflake started to say something about Ryan's car being parked nearby, but I shook my head. *I don't have the keys, and there's no time to hotwire it*, I said grimly. Besides, it was probably already sabotaged. No, we had to get out of this on foot.

For a few moments, it really looked like we were going to pull it off. We'd made it out to the street, after all, eliminating the crowds that had been quite likely the most dangerous part of the shopping mall. We got out of the parking lot, jogged unsteadily down the street, and turned off down an alleyway without being shot at again. It seemed like we were home free, and I was already starting to exhale.

Right up until we turned out of the alley onto another street. We were just off the intersection with the main road, going between two shopping centers. To our left was a pair of chain restaurants, one a Mexican place and one Chinese takeout. To the right was a hardware store. In one of their ongoing efforts to simultaneously gentrify the neighborhood and demonstrate their total removal from any understanding of what that means, the city had planted a few trees in the median of the street we were on currently. They were thin, anemic things held up largely by the posts arranged around them, and it was in the shade of the largest of these that Carraig was waiting.

He'd dumped the bow and quiver on the ground at his feet, and was standing with one hand on his short bronze sword. "Not bad, Wolf," he called when I got close enough that he didn't have to shout to be heard. "Nice job with the window, I really didn't expect that." He took two long steps and jumped to where we stood on the sunny side of the street, easily clearing a few passing cars.

"Hello, Carraig," I said, stepping clear of Snowflake so that I would have room to maneuver. "Changed your mind about my being worth a fight?"

"Not at all," he demurred. "But this time it is about business. Do you have it?"

"Wouldn't tell you if I did."

"I know," he said, grinning. "And I also know you're getting close. I'll see you in hell, Wolf." So saying, he pulled the sword and brought it whistling at my face.

Excepting possibly Conn, I had never in my life seen a person move that fast. There was no time to summon Tyrfing to parry, no time to dodge. His sword was moving too fast for me to even blink before it reached me.

And, because I didn't have time to blink, I saw another weapon appear and deflect the blade inches from my face, flicking it up and away with ease. "G'day, Carraig," rumbled another, improbably deep voice, one I didn't recognize.

Belatedly, I reacted, falling away from the Midnight champion and scrambling backward until I hit Snowflake's flank. There, I finally got a good look at my savior.

He was about as far from Carraig as it was possible to get. He was huge, better than seven feet and built like a bear, with dark hair and an enormous beard. I didn't doubt that he could lift me over his head one-handed if he wanted to, and that was just based on musculature, not whatever supernatural advantages he brought to the table. In his hand was an equally massive sword. It might have been just my vantage that made it look seven feet long, but I doubted it. It looked to be made of solid steel, and must have weighed nearly twenty pounds, but the newcomer flicked it around like a rolled-up newspaper. He used two hands, sure, but I thought that was more because of the sheer length of the weapon than any limitation of strength.

And he smelled, quite strongly, of magic, of fire and growing things and long hours in the afternoon sun. Hello, Daylight champion.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Carraig fell back from the newcomer, an expression of incredible frustration on his face. "Hello, Pier," he said. "It's been a while." I noticed that he had drawn a long dagger from somewhere, a simple steel weapon he hadn't bothered to use against me, which smelled of magics steeped in blood. Gulp.

Rather than reply, Pier launched a straightforward cut that would undoubtedly have chopped the smaller man longitudinally in half, had it connected. Carraig sidestepped diagonally backward, however, easily avoiding it, and thus started one of the more impressive fights I have ever been witness to.

When two humans fight, it's a pretty straightforward event, just because of the limited options available. I don't mean that to be disparaging; it's just a statement of fact. There's only so many ways a fight involving two unarmed humans can go. Any decent martial artist will tell you essentially the same thing: the vast majority of the time any such fight will be brief, simple, and ugly, and will involve essentially no beauty or grace whatsoever. If you're skilled enough to win, or you just plain get lucky (a more common event than most martial artists want to admit, especially given that one or both of the participants is usually so drunk they can't see straight), you'll almost certainly never work out quite *how*.

But all that changes when you start adding in options. A fight between two werewolves tends to last longer than one between humans, because it takes more to put a werewolf down—they have more options, when it comes to staying alive, and needless to say there are more avenues of aggression available as well. Add in equipment and the options expand further.

To continue that line of thinking, you might already be seeing that I have way more options available to me than even the average werewolf, by virtue of being a sort of mage. In any given fight, I have around half a dozen tricks I can pull with magic to turn the tables in my favor, plus Tyrfin, a number of more exotic weapons, and the tactics that any lycanthrope can use. Trying to predict what someone will do when they have that many choices isn't easy, which can give you a considerable advantage over a one-trick pony.

What I'm trying to say here is that the more options you add in, the harder and more complicated things get. Most of the reason that the prospect of fighting the Inquisition doesn't scare me is that they don't have the experience to handle that. As mages—even half-trained mages—they have a ton of options in any given fight, particularly when working as a group. But that doesn't, can't, miraculously give them the ability to figure out what options their allies are choosing at any given moment and decide which of their own choices might best support that, while simultaneously keeping abreast of enemy actions, presenting a moving target, keeping alert for tricks, traps, and dirty tactics, and generally navigating the chaos that is any fight larger in scale than thumb-wrestling.

It doesn't matter what you *could* do if you can't actually *do* it in real-time, while under stress. Even though they had, as a group, *way* more options available to them than I could hope to match, I stood a reasonably good chance of surviving, and even winning. I had a lot more experience at managing all that input and making snap decisions. Additionally, I tended to have fewer allies and to know them much more intimately, reducing the likelihood of friendly-fire or just plain getting in each other's way.

Carraig and Pier fighting made me look about as competent as a kitten.

The champion of shadows ducked into one straight away and vanished. A moment later, he reappeared thirty feet away, already charging. I started to shout a warning, only to see the giant pull a similar trick, vanishing into a beam of sunlight. He appeared directly above and behind Carraig, and the force of his swing with the momentum of his fall behind it was nothing short of terrifying. Carraig ducked around with incredible speed to a position directly behind the larger man, easily dodging the aerial attack, and went for his back, only for the Daylight warrior to parry behind his back before vanishing, blinking back in to stand facing the other man.

After that, things got complicated.

Pier had only one blade to the other man's two, and it was a huge and ungainly one at that, but it was a fairly even fight nonetheless. If I'd thought that Carraig was insanely strong, it was obvious that Pier was as much stronger than him as Carraig was stronger than me, and faster too. It was the middle of the day, after all, and he had a sizable advantage for that reason alone. The Midnight champion, though, was more agile, more inclined to sudden and unpredictable maneuvers and magical tricks, and possibly the better swordsman by a slight margin, and I honestly couldn't tell who had the advantage.

I couldn't follow the fight, and I didn't even try. Instead, I found my attention drawn to something else. Where Carraig crossed a shadow—any shadow—it pulled away to follow him. Within the first ten seconds of the fight, he was casting a shadow the size of a building, one that didn't seem to have much to do with the light. It wasn't a natural shadow, either; it was full of roiling motion, shapes defined by a lighter shade of black appearing and disappearing within its depths. I saw hounds, birds, trees, horses, warriors, things that had no name and things that were nearly too strange to see at all. None of them lasted long enough to get a definite fix on them before being subsumed back into the mass.

Likewise, where Pier was, the air around him seemed indescribably *changed*. He moved in a bubble of light, casting no shadow at all, and the sun burned brighter where he stood. When he'd moved on from a spot, it seemed somehow dismal, as though something had faded from it that couldn't ever be quite returned. Where the two auras met sparks flew in colors that didn't make sense, and the air rippled, as though it were a fabric under almost too much strain to bear.

"How is that possible?" I wondered aloud. I looked at the spot where a tree's shadow had been stolen, and yep, the asphalt was entirely too bright to be natural. Not as bright as the pavement right next to it in the sun, granted, but still too bright. "I can't see through the tree," I mused, "so obviously it's still obstructing light. Why isn't the shadow right?" It made no sense at all according to any law of optics I ever read.

*Not to discourage your scholarship, Snowflake said bitinglly, but do you think we could start running like hell now?*

*Oh right, I replied, tearing my attention away from the fight. Sorry. I got distracted.*

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

*Moron*, she said—and, honestly, I couldn't argue. I mean, that was a pretty ditzy move. *Where do we run now?*

I had no idea whatsoever. I mean, Carraig had just confirmed my suspicion that my ability to hide, run, or fight was essentially nil—it was frankly miraculous that I was still breathing—and I quite simply didn't *have* a safe haven that might protect me against him. And, while I was grateful for the other champion's intervention, there was no real guarantee he didn't mean to kill me too. Or worse. People joke about fates worse than death, but in my world it was a very real danger.

Just ask Prometheus.

But obviously staying there was a distinctly low-percentage move. So I picked a direction at random and started running. I would have tried to avoid the fight, but they were moving around so much, and so randomly, that it was pretty much impossible to figure out what the best route for that was.

*Where are we going?* Snowflake asked, sticking close to my heels. It wasn't hard, because at the moment my version of "running" was closer to what I should have considered "shambling with great vigor." If we didn't come up with somewhere to hide soon, I wouldn't be able to get there. The magic and exertion, coming on top of my recent and severe injuries, had just about drained me dry.

*Anywhere that isn't here*, I replied, wincing slightly as I heard the distinctive sound of metal impacting metal at high speeds and breaking glass, suggesting that the duel had caused a serious car wreck. A moment later it was followed by a large *boom* and the distinctive flickering light of a fire. It would have to be a major fire to be visible from that far away when I was looking the other way, too. I would probably have felt worse about that, if I hadn't been so busy running for my life.

*Works for me. Don't slow down.*

*Wasn't planning on it*, I replied, ducking down an alley and—hopefully—out of sight of the giants duking it out behind us. We had to get out of the neighborhood, before things escalated from car bomb-level chaos to, I don't know, earthquake or something.

*I wonder who's winning*, Snowflake mused.

*Beats me. Looked pretty even from where I was standing. Pier's stronger, but Carraig's slipperier.*

*Well, duh. Day and Night, remember?*

Oh. Right. She was probably onto something there.

I'm not sure why that's what gave me the idea—I mean, no rational connection whatsoever, right?—but somehow it did. *Watch my back*, I said to Snowflake, dropping down to hide behind a dumpster while I dug for my phone.

*You really think this is the best time?* she asked caustically, arranging herself so she could see back down the alley. We both winced slightly at a sound which might have been mistaken for thunder, except for the total absence of anything resembling a thunderstorm. A moment later I heard sirens, and winced again. This was so not good.

*No*, I replied, half-frantic by now. *This is a terrible time. But I can only think of two places in this goddamn town that might be enough to keep us from getting horribly killed, and Alexander would skin me alive for bringing this into his house, possibly literally.* I found the number for a cab service and dialed on the run. My fingers only shook a little bit.

We met the cab on the next street over. By that time three police cruisers, two ambulances, and a fire truck had passed us going the other way, the roads were all but blocked with stalled traffic closer to the epicenter of this mess, and I could see at least two buildings majorly on fire.

Somehow, I thought this one would be setting new records when it came to my collateral damage tally. Well, by property damage anyway; I doubted it would reach new heights in terms of casualties.

Somehow, somehow, the taxi made it through that. Never mind the postal service, right then I decided that if anybody deserved a motto about how nothing would stop them as they went about their task it was cab drivers. I mean, how else do you explain somebody coping with that kind of disaster area for nothing more than a job, one that didn't even pay squat?

I practically collapsed into the cab, Snowflake crawling over me. She was whining, softly enough that it took me a minute to realize that it wasn't an audible sound, and I could feel that she was concerned for my health. Not that I blamed her, given that I wasn't feeling too terribly confident myself.

"No pets," the driver said in the flat, disinterested tone of somebody who's seen it all before and wasn't impressed the first time.

I dug around in my cloak and came up with my wallet. I was starting to run short of cash, but I managed to come up with a twenty to hand to the cabby.

He might have seen it all before—but there are some things you don't mind seeing twice, right? He took the bill with the smooth motions of someone who's done the bribery gig more than once, and said, "Right-o, sir, where can I take you?"

I told him, and he pulled out into traffic. "There's forty bucks in it for you if you get me there in fifteen minutes or less," I said. I had another forty-two dollars in my wallet, and maybe thirty more scattered through other pockets. After that, well, things would be getting pretty tight. I'd just about wiped out the Watchers' blood money, and after that I'd be scraping the barrel for whatever was too hard to get to for me to have already used it.

What? Even in the normal world, it doesn't take a genius to think "gee, maybe I should have money in more than one pocket." That's just plain common sense.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

He shrugged eloquently and made a sorta mostly legal left turn which nevertheless garnered plenty of horns.

Once again. I hate to be a walking cliché, but the hell of it is, sometimes it *works*.

Chapter Seven

Thirteen minutes later, I staggered in the front door of Pryce's and found a seat at the long walnut bar. *Will this really help anything?* Snowflake asked me curiously, dropping to the floor at my feet.

*Probably not*, I admitted. *But, well, I don't know about you but I really need a chance to catch my breath.* It was a slow time of day, and I was one of less than a dozen people in the whole place, mostly the hardcore regulars who never seemed to *leave*. I slumped over and rested my head, my arm hanging off the edge of the bar.

Snowflake licked my hand and looked at me, concern easily visible in her eye. *Are you okay?*

*No*, I said thoughtfully. *But I don't have time to not be, so let's not dwell on things, eh?*

Pryce meandered over to where I was sitting. The big, barrel-chested bartender was, I think just to complete the image, busily wiping glasses with a white cloth so spotless he must have never used it on something actually in need of cleaning. "Sick?" he asked, his voice possibly even deeper than Pier's.

I don't know that he cared. I don't know that he was capable of caring. But he wouldn't have been the perfect bartender if he hadn't asked.

"Sick and tired in more ways than I can begin to describe," I groaned. "Can you get me a pitcher of iced tea and however much food I can buy for thirty dollars?"

"No problem," he said, moving around behind the bar. He didn't have any other employees on right now, there being nowhere near enough business to justify it, but he always had a cook there.

Although actually, now that I come to think of it, I've never seen the kitchen, or found out for sure who the cook might be. Just one more strange, mildly unsettling point of interest at Pryce's. There are more than a few of them, once you look past the surface.

On the other hand, it's good food, company who, generally speaking, really do know what you're going through, and absolutely nobody takes the "neutral ground" policy lightly. The customers there might not be titans like the champions of the Sidhe Courts, but they aren't anything to scoff at either—and Pryce on his home ground is a force to be reckoned with. You break the rules (none of which, of course, are actually written) at your own extreme peril, at Pryce's. Of course, even that might not be enough to keep out Court business, but I didn't have a lot of options available.

I took my pitcher of tea and slunk off to my second-favorite table in the corner. My *favorite* table, the one with a chessboard inlaid in the top in walnut and beech, was already taken by a small-time operator called Luna Kuzmak. I was, after all, far from the only one with a fondness for dimly-lit corner tables where you could clearly see the entrance.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I felt a bit better when I saw that. Good to *finally* have something go my way. Luna was small fish—and she was smart enough to know it, which was more than some could say—but when it came to keeping an ear on the pulse of the local preternatural, supernatural, and othernatural community she was hard to top. There was an excellent chance that I could get some info out of her, and she owed me enough of a favor I might not even have to pay for it.

After, of course, I got to eat something. I mean, what kind of werewolf would I *be*, otherwise? We *always* eat first. It's, like, in the job description or something.

*What about Ryan?* Snowflake asked me, sounding somewhat depressed. Couldn't blame her.

I'd been trying to avoid thinking about that particular subject. *I have no idea*, I admitted. *I feel like we ought to do something for him, but I have no idea how. He's probably dead by now anyway, I suppose.*

*Maybe so*, Snowflake said moodily. *I just...I wish for once it wouldn't go like that. You know?*

*Yeah*, I sighed. *Yeah. I do.*

One excellent and very large meal later, I judged it was time to get over the pity party and get back to work. In this case, that meant going over to sit next to Luna. Snowflake came with me, because there wasn't really any point trying to pretend she wasn't there. It was too well known, around here at least, that we tended to stick close together.

Luna is not a good person. I mean, she's not like a rampaging murderer or something, but she's definitely not playing for the good guys. She's not evil, exactly, so much as disinterested. The way she phrased it was that if bad people are punished by God's law, and good people are punished by Murphy's law, the only smart place to be is in the middle. She's a fence who knowingly supplies some pretty terrible people with some pretty terrible things, and never asks any question but "how much?"

I don't hold it against her. I mean, I'm not in a great position to judge myself, you know?

Somehow, though, I never ceased to be surprised at the dissonance between what I knew of her and the persona she managed to project. I'm no stranger to a wholesome mask—that's, like, one of the top ten favorite tricks of supernatural nasties everywhere, after all—but somehow hers got me. I think maybe it was just that she looked so incredibly *average*. Brown hair, brown eyes, just tan enough not to look pale, fit without looking thin, pretty without being beautiful...Michelangelo couldn't have done it better. Her attitude backed it up, too.

"Hullo Winter, Snowflake," Luna said as I sat down. "What can I do you for today?" Luna liked us; I'd provided her with a number of items that, presumably, made her clients happy, and Snowflake has charisma. That's what she tells me, anyway; I wouldn't recognize charisma if it bit me.

"Hello, Luna," I said. "Got a minute?"

"For you? Always. Watcha need?"

"Well," I drawled, "I hear there's a certain item going around, and I thought somebody might have contacted you looking to sell it."

"Might be. I do a lot of business in certain items. Which one was this?"

"A spear," I said, carefully not mentioning that the speariness was the tip of a very nasty iceberg. "Big-time magic, maybe a Sidhe signature."

She thought for a moment. "I don't know about a spear," she said after a moment. "But yeah, I heard something about a major Sidhe artifact. This was, I don't know, three weeks ago or so."

"What'd you do with it?" I asked, struggling to contain my excitement. Who'd have thunk I'd get so lucky?

She snorted. "Do? I didn't *do* anything with it. I know my limits, Winter, and the service doesn't include dealing with fae bullshit. I'm not desperate enough to buy that kind of trouble." She eyed me, and didn't ask whether I was.

"Come on," I said. "When have you known me to *not* be desperate?" Snowflake laughed, at least. "Who was selling?"

Her smile became more acquisitive. "The service isn't complimentary, either."

I smiled. "I seem to recall that you haven't yet paid me back for that creep I ran off for you." *Creep* was probably all kinds of understatement for someone willing to make a deal with a very-nearly-literal devil to more effectively stalk someone, but I'm pretty sure it's also an applicable descriptor, so whatever.

"You're calling your marker in over this?" she asked me sharply.

"You know, it would appear that I am."

She muttered something very impolite under her breath, demonstrating an inventiveness and enthusiasm in profanity I normally only encountered in Aiko or Snowflake. She wasn't their match, of course—her litany included no inexplicable acts being performed upon random vertebrates, for example—but she gave it a solid try.

"What?" I asked curiously.

"Reminding myself why I don't do fae bullshit," she said. She fixed her gaze on me grimly. "I give you this, you leave me out of it. Nobody finds out about it, and you don't come to me for help when it goes to shit."

"What makes you think it will?"

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

*Gee, maybe it's because she's met you? I don't care what titles Loki feels like using today, you are the undisputed Master of Disaster in Colorado. I'm pretty sure I saw at least one cop cross himself when he saw you coming, you know.*

Luna said something similar, albeit somewhat less eloquently worded. And at much greater length.

"All right, all right already," I said, rubbing at my forehead with one hand. "Geez, Luna, I think we get the point. Deal."

"Deal. It was that airhead you work with sometimes, the one that thinks she's a Wiccan. Erica, I think the name was." Luna knew Erica's name, of course, whatever she said. This was just her way of showing that she didn't regard the other woman highly. At all. By which I mean that she once offered me twenty bucks if I could get Erica to cry on stage during karaoke night. (Not at Pryce's. He doesn't do karaoke, and I don't know of anyone who has the balls to ask him to after what he did last time.) That says a lot about Erica, really.

What says even more is that, for a few minutes there, I was really tempted. And not for the twenty bucks, either. There are not very many people I could say that about.

Luna stood up and started for the door. "Where are you going?" I asked, more out of casual curiosity than anything. Luna practically lives at Pryce's, and she definitely works out of the bar. Makes sense, really, given that practically everybody in the supernatural community goes there at least occasionally and Pryce quite literally does not care about the law. Where better to do dark-grey market business catering to the discerning supernatural customer?

"Out of the blast radius," she tossed back over her shoulder. "Try not to die right away."

*How cheery. Hey, I bet she doesn't want the rest of that fish.*

I'd been considering calling Mike already, and Erica's involvement turned it from a "good idea under general principles" sort of consideration to "obvious way to proceed." He wanted to meet me somewhere more convenient, but as I was still unwilling to leave the relative safety offered by Pryce's walls, I held out. As a result it took him nearly an hour to finish up his current business (shocking, I know, that a cop should have business other than doing me quasi-legal favors) and make it there. I spent this time napping, on account of I'd gotten pretty used to the nocturnal thing since I quit my job, and also because I knew that it would help accelerate the healing process.

I woke up when Snowflake nipped my ankle lightly, feeling much better than I had been and also like I could still use about a billion hours more sleep. I picked my head up off the table, wincing slightly at the stiffness this action revealed in my neck, and looked over toward the door. Mike was pretty clearly walking into the room. I could tell, on account of how I couldn't actually see out said open door.

Mike's not as big as Pier of the Daylight Court—but he does his best.

Likewise, his voice when he sat down across from me wasn't as freakishly deep as Pier's, but he still sounded like a bass drum. "Winter. Glad to see you're keeping busy."

"Bite me," I muttered, rubbing my eyes. "It's been a long day."

"I know," he said, sounding surprisingly sympathetic. "Mac told me about it."

I tensed. "Told you what?"

"About your injuries," he said patiently.

I relaxed again. I wasn't entirely sure what I'd been afraid he would say—Mac didn't exactly know my dark secrets and such, largely because she wants to hear them even less than I want to talk about them—but this was relatively safe. "To be honest," I said, "I'd nearly forgotten that. Listen, I need a favor."

He looked at me soberly. "I can't promise anything."

"Understood. But trust me, it's better that you help me. For everyone, this time." I looked blearily at my cup, found that there was still a bit of tea (the ice was long since melted, of course), and drained it. "Has Erica done anything stupid lately?"

"Does Erica ever *stop*?" he asked dryly.

"Point," I said, nodding. "But this is a dumbass move even by her standards. I think she got her hands on a serious relic—a spear, one made by the fae. And I need to know where she got the damn thing."

Mike was silent for a long moment. "I told her it was stupid," he said eventually. "But she didn't want to listen to me."

"Wait a second. *You* thought it was stupid? Wow, this is worse than I thought."

"Ha ha," he said sourly. "Truly, your wit is unmatched in the known universe. Did you want to hear this or not?"

"By all means, please continue."

"Thank you. Where was I?"

"I believe you were about to explain how Erica managed to do something stupid enough to stand out of her background stupid, which I believe is on a level approximating a chimpanzee after two quarts of vodka." I can get a little silly when I'm tired, okay?

*I don't know if I'm comfortable with that joke. I mean, there are some very personable chimpanzees out there, and frankly I find the implication that a chimp would be that stupid after just two quarts to be highly insensitive.* Snowflake also gets a little silly when I'm tired.

"Oh right. So you remember that clusterfuck a few weeks ago? Well, she decided anyone who could set up a massive underground complex like that must have some seriously valuable toys to stock it with."

I stared, aghast. I mean, I don't get many opportunities to be really *aghast*—it doesn't mesh with my hardass seen-it-all-before image, you know how it is—but this was definitely one of them. "You're joking. Please tell me you're joking."

"I wish. I did tell you this is stupid, remember?" He shook his head. "Anyway. I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't hear a word. She went back in through the evac tunnel—you remember, the one we came out of?"

I remembered. "I really wish I could say I didn't believe you."

Mike nodded gloomily. "I really wish I could say I was joking. Anyway, she came up with twenty pounds of magic shit and started trying to sell it."

*You know, I commented to Snowflake, this may be the happiest I've ever been to not be human.*

*Why?*

*'Cause this way I don't have to be ashamed to be in the same species as someone who would do something that mind-numbingly moronic.*

*Seconded, she said. I mean, if you're going to get yourself horribly killed, you might as well at least get a cool video out of it to put on the Internet.*

"It went all right at first," Mike was continuing, oblivious to our little side-conversation—he was, after all, a *very* inexperienced shaman. "Until we got to the spear."

"Wait, we got to the spear?"

He shifted uncomfortably. "She's dumber than a post, but she's still a friend. I couldn't let her get herself killed," he said sheepishly.

I was sorely tempted to say that she might well still have done so. "What happened then?" I asked instead.

"Nobody wanted it. Even Kuzmak wouldn't take the thing, and I've never seen her turn down easy money before. Eventually, somebody took pity on her and told her that the *reason* nobody wanted it was because it was major bad news to own." He shrugged. "Even she was smart enough to dump it after that."

"Yeah," I said grimly. "Dump it on some poor shopowner, you mean." I hadn't thought it was possible for Erica to lower my opinion of her any further. I was somehow both disappointed and disgusted to discover that I was wrong.

"She told me she buried it," Mike said. His voice is deep enough that it always sounds slightly threatening—and damn if *that* doesn't say weird things about my subconscious—but this particular statement was less friendly than most.

I snorted. "Yeah, in the sense that she picked a random pawn shop and sold it cut-rate." I shook my head. "The owner was killed not long after. Sloppy, really, given that she'd already sold it."

"I see," he said flatly. I got the distinct impression that Erica would be receiving a quality lecture, if she lived long enough to hear it.

"Anyway," I said. "I hear a similar spear was taken out of an apartment as evidence after a shooting soon after."

He looked at me oddly. "Where'd you hear that?"

"Little bird told me," I said airily.

"The worst part is," he said sourly, "I'm never sure with you whether that's a literal statement." He shook his head, as though clearing it. "Yeah, that's right. I saw it there, recognized it straight away—you'd have to work to miss the thing, believe me. I might not know exactly what it is—" *might not*, I noticed, not *don't*, which might be interesting—"but I know that thing's bad news. 'Evidence' was the fastest excuse I had to get it off the street."

"Makes sense," I agreed with a grin. I like Mike—very practical guy, for a cop. "Where'd you disappear it to? I thought you guys kept pretty close track of that sort of thing."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it vanished from evidence. Where'd you put it?"

"Winter," he said slowly, "I haven't heard anything about this."

The smile faded from my face. "Oh. Well, if it wasn't you...."

He had the *oh shit* expression on, and I was pretty sure mine wasn't too far different. For that matter, even *Snowflake* couldn't think of a rude joke, something that was practically unheard of.

I'm not sure if überpowerful beings warp the nature of probability by their mere presence, or they listen at the door waiting for the perfect moment, or luck is still upset by that one crack I made about its mother, but I've noticed that all kinds of spooky things seem to have absolutely uncanny timing. It was for this reason that I was not particularly surprised when the door picked that *exact* moment, when the realization was just starting to sink in for both Mike and myself, to slam open.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Everyone in the room (excepting those of us currently too shocked to think clearly) immediately turned to the door. As I was still watching the crowd blankly, I got an excellent view of the reaction. It was gratifying. More than half of the patrons blanched visibly. Two people crossed themselves, one of them muttering the Lord's Prayer under his breath.

That wasn't nearly as entertaining as the more *exotic* reactions. The old regular at the bar who drank harder than Jacques and never showed any of it grabbed the neck of his bottle like he was planning to use it as a weapon, and made the sign of the horns with his other hand. He was joined in this endeavor by the strange cloaked figure in the corner that was ten feet tall and nearly half as wide, although I didn't recognize his choice of warding gesture, and his hand was gloved. One woman presented a crucifix and started reciting an exorcism, while another fell to her knees and genuflected towards the door. By this point even the few people who hadn't reacted at first were catching on, and more than a few of them made motions like they were thinking about bolting for the exit—except the only door out was also the only door *in*.

As you may have noticed, that accounts for pretty much every damn person in the bar. A few more customers had come in while I slept, as it was getting closer to lunchtime, but still. Wow.

That, in itself, would have been enough to make me very, very nervous. Pryce's clientele is drawn from the spooky side of things, and you don't last long over here if you rattle easy. I had never, in all the years I'd been eating there, seen a reaction this extreme from *one* of his customers, let alone all of them at once.

But what was infinitely creepier, what really made me ready to throw down with a dragon or an elder monster of the infinite dark or something, was Pryce's reaction.

He turned to look at the door. He planted his feet like he was planning to lift a car—not one of those wimpy ones, either, more like a Caddy or a limo or something. And he looked....

Scared.

Pryce. Looked scared. In his own bar. *Scared*. Pryce, who faced down Watchers without batting an eye and bounced drunk and angry werewolves most every weekend with as much difficulty as most bouncers have with a six-year-old. Looked *scared*.

That's the point where I stopped considering fighting, and started trying to figure out which wall I could most easily escape through.

Fenris walked into view. And he wasn't wearing his happy face today.

I normally thought of Fenris as being, as far as physical appearance goes, an exaggeration of my own less ordinary features. Well, right now he looked like a similar exaggeration, but one applied to his *regular* appearance. He stood nearly seven foot tall, and looked less human than some werewolves do in fur. His hair was a matted, mottled grey mane that hung halfway down his back, and his eyes were literally glowing golden, which was easily visible because they were so sunken. His cheekbones looked

sharp enough to cut an awkward silence, and he was baring long, sharp teeth in a snarl I was willing to bet he wasn't even aware of. You could clearly see that they were a wolf's teeth in a man's mouth, and it gave you the distinct impression that he would distinctly enjoy biting someone at the moment.

Perhaps most distressing of all, though, was his attire. There was a wide silver ribbon without seam or knot around his neck like a strangely plain choker, and the ugly steel piercing in his lower lip looked incredibly painful. More disturbingly yet, they actually went with his outfit. Now, that wouldn't be so bad, except that every time I'd seen him he'd been wearing pretty standard clothes—jeans, T-shirts, that sort of thing. Seeing him wearing leather and furs—in April, no less—came as something of a shock.

Strangely, though, it looked entirely natural—less like he'd put on a mask, more like he took one off.

Needless to say, the scary god who looked like he really, *really* wanted to kill something made a beeline for me. Several of the other patrons gave me sympathetic looks, although most were too busy bolting for the now-clear door.

Within ten seconds of Fenris being in the bar proper, it was practically empty, only the truly hardcore staying behind—Rachel had even left in the middle of a billiards game, and I didn't think there was *anything* that could do that. I stayed, of course, and Snowflake, and Mike stuck his ground too. The old man at the bar went back to his boozing, and the thing in the corner with the cloak went back to...whatever it was doing, and of course Pryce wouldn't—couldn't—leave. Other than that, there was no one willing to stay with Fenris there.

I'm pretty sure I'm the only one that saw the pain in his eyes, when that happened. It was only there for a moment, gone too fast for me to ever be willing to swear I saw it at all, but I knew it would be haunting me for a while.

"What have you done?" he asked me, pulling one of the newly abandoned chairs over. "What have you *done*, Winter?"

"Hello, Fenris," I said dryly. "This is Michael Adams, a detective with the local police force who specializes in events of supernatural leanings. Mike, this is Fenrisúlfr, the Wolf of Asgard, Loki's son, and general all-around nice guy."

"Charmed," Mike said, sounding like he'd been hit in the head with a board. Actually, I take that back; I'm pretty sure hitting Mike in the head with a board would just make him angry.

Fenris ignored both of us. "I don't know what you did," he said. "But it wasn't smart."

My stomach dropped. I'd thought Carraig was bad enough before. I wasn't sure I even *wanted* to know what he could have done to make *Fenris* think I was a moron to piss him off.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Unfortunately, what I want seldom has anything to do with what I need. So I went ahead and asked, "What's he done now?"

"He's called the Wild Hunt against you," the god said simply.

My stomach continued to drop. It was now somewhere in the vicinity of my kneecaps. "You mean that, like, a wild hunt, right? Not The Wild Hunt with all capital letters, right? Right?"

"No."

"Well shit. Why doesn't he just call in a fucking nuclear missile and get it over with?"

The Wild Hunt is not bad news. That is entirely inadequate to grasp the sheer terror involved with the concept. In fact, I'm not sure there *are* words that can express how bad the Wild Hunt was. This might be because it predates the entire *concept* of words.

The Wild Hunt is one of the biggest scare stories in the supernatural world. Almost every culture, from every corner of the earth, has some kind of story about it. I learned several when I was a kid, from the werewolfy corner of the earth. They tend to have a different tone than most other stories about them, one which tends to be a little more awestruck than frightened. Werewolves have a lot in common with the Hunt, on a basic level, and that changes how they tend to think about it.

But in spite of that, there's still a very real fear there. The Wild Hunt is a very old magic, very primal, and *very* powerful. When the Hunt rides nobody's safe, and nobody can hide. It's more a force of nature than anything. You can't beat it, or persuade it. You could as easily defeat a winter storm as fight the Wild Hunt.

I explained that to Mike in hushed, funereal tones. Fenris waited patiently. I had little doubt that he'd heard this story before, and likely all the rest.

He might even know which of them was true.

"I don't get it," Mike said finally. "What's the big deal?"

I stared at him. Then I looked at Fenris. "Explain it to him?" I asked.

"Words aren't my gift," he said, with just a hint of growl. "I've told you that."

I snorted. "Yeah, I ain't exactly a poet myself. I'm sure you know the stories better than I do, too. And which of them are true."

He made a growly, grumbly noise I took for acquiescence. "The Wild Hunt is more than just a hunting troop," he said after a moment. "It's the spirit, the idea of the hunt. Like Winter said, that's old magic, and strong. They never tire, they never stop, they never lose the trail. It's been five hundred years since someone escaped them after they got his scent."

"Oh. So that's bad, then."

"Yeah," I agreed glumly. The Hunt existed on an entirely different level than I did. I couldn't beat the Wild Hunt. I might have been able to hide, or just be less entertaining than the other available game—except that they had my scent specifically. "How long do I have?"

"They are primarily a force of the night, so I would expect until dusk at the least." Fenris shook his head in frustration. "That's the thing that bothers me."

Just one? Damn, he was lucky. "What?"

"I wouldn't have thought that one of the Maidens' champions could call the Wild Hunt. Not many can."

"I don't get it," I said, confused. "You just said they're a force of Night, and his boss is a big fish in the Courts."

"Yes, yes," he said impatiently. "But the Hunt doesn't answer to the Courts, or formal hierarchy. They're more primitive than that—closer to a werewolf pack, you might say. You can't be *given* the Wild Hunt, you have to earn their respect. There aren't many that can, and most of those who have are on the Twilight Court at the least."

"Oh," I said. I think that's when it started to click—both what was happening, and what I could do about it—although it didn't really settle into place until later. "Well, I think we've beaten that to death. Might as well get some things done before I kick it."

"Wait a second," Mike said, the first he'd spoken in a while. "You're just giving up? Just like that?"

"Of course not," I said indignantly. "I'm hardly going to lie down for them, if that's what you mean. But you have to be realistic about some things. I couldn't beat Carraig solo, and he wasn't trying. With the Wild Hunt added in, it's just a question of whether they're having too much fun to want it to end so soon, if you see what I mean. Barring divine intervention, I don't think I'm making it out of this one." I looked at Fenris.

He growled under his breath. "I could," he confirmed, and the humanity was gone from his voice entirely. It sounded, as it had the first time he'd spoken to me, like an amalgam of the grimmer sounds in nature—wolves, storms, that sort of thing. It was actually even creepier, knowing that I sometimes sounded like that myself. To my ears, at least; I've never asked anyone else what they heard. I think I'm scared of the answer. "But I'm not permitted."

I shrugged and looked at Mike. "I have a few hours yet. I might be able to get the damn spear out of here by then."

"It won't matter," Fenris said softly. "Not now. He is committed, and the Wild Hunt will not be swayed by less than his death." He stood up. "If you should die tonight, Winter, know that I will tell of it."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I have seldom known a stronger man, and I swear to you your name will not die so long as there is a wolf alive to sing it."

"Thanks," I said, sincerely touched. "I hope you'll understand if I'm not eager to hear it."

He nodded soberly and left without another word.

"Don't bring the likes of him here again," Pryce told me seriously.

I was currently rather doubting it would be a concern. But I didn't want to make a big deal out of it, so I just shrugged and said, "Sorry, Pryce. If I'd have known, I'd have...well...I'd have done *something*."

He nodded, not looking significantly mollified, and went back to what he'd been doing. Pryce is a hard guy to flap.

"Okay," I said, turning back to Mike. "You didn't take the spear. Who else had access to it?"

He stared at me. "Shouldn't you be, I don't know, taking this a little more seriously?"

"Cry, beat my chest, and tear out my hair, you mean?" I asked sharply. "No. Thank you, but if I've got less than twelve hours to live I find myself disinclined to waste any time complaining. Now, maybe you didn't notice this, but we're actually on a schedule here, so could you please get with the program?"

*Zing, Snowflake said. That was pretty good.*

*Thanks. You're not going to nag me too? Snowflake was usually pretty protective.*

She sent the mental equivalent of a shrug. *You'll die. Or you won't. Either way's better than spending the rest of your life in this bar.*

Wow, did she have my number. "Well?" I said to Mike.

He shook his head briskly, resembling Snowflake coming in out of the rain. "I don't really know. Any evidence we take in is stored in a rented storage unit—they want to keep anything to do with the freaks as far away as possible from real police work. Sergeant Frishberg's the only one with a key."

"Interesting," I mused. "The good sergeant didn't call you earlier, did she."

"No. Why?"

I smiled. "Oh, no reason in particular. I don't suppose you know where this storage unit is?" He did. He told me. I wrote the address down carefully. "Thanks for the help, Mike."

"Winter...I—"

I waved one hand idly, cutting him off as soon as I heard the maudlin tone of voice. "Save it, please. Like I said, my time's currently at a premium. Now, unless you can think of anything else...."

He started to say something, thought better of it, and simply shook his head. He got up and left without saying goodbye.

I tried calling Frishberg, and was entirely unsurprised not to get an answer. The way I figured it, there were three main possibilities. At this point, I was pretty sure that the person I'd met earlier hadn't actually been Sergeant Frishberg. That kind of impersonation is well within the capability of the fae, and it would explain why Mike hadn't actually heard from her. At this point, my major questions were who that had actually been, and why they'd given me information that was at least partially correct, although I didn't think either of them was a particularly promising avenue to pursue.

In any case, it didn't shock me that she wasn't answering her phone. I tried twice more, just for the principle of the thing, and didn't leave a message. What would I say, anyway?

Then I spent a few minutes thinking about my next step, while Snowflake took advantage of the haste with which most of the patrons had left to sample the plates they left behind. Surprisingly enough, Pryce didn't object to this.

I'd already made the decision to trust Fenris, and I didn't see either reason or benefit in going against that decision now. Furthermore, it was impossible to believe that he was wrong about something like the Wild Hunt. I mean, heck, I'd be shocked if he hadn't run at their head a time or two himself. It was very much his kind of magic.

That left me with two conclusions. The first was that, come sunset, I had to be out of town. Part of this was because my magic would be stronger outside of an urban area—I might be resigned to death, but I was sure as hell going to make it as hard for him as possible—and most of it was because, in most of the stories, the Wild Hunt isn't exactly careful when it comes to the ancillary casualties, if you get my drift. I reckoned it would be better to take that far away from any major population centers, if at all possible. I mean, I'm not a saint or anything, but that's just common sense.

The second thing I could conclude was that I didn't need to worry about further harassment—at least not from Carraig—until then. He wouldn't go to this much effort and then kill me anticlimactically before the Hunt was even mustered. So I could probably leave Pryce's without having to worry about taking an arrow to the face.

Unfortunately, that still left me with the question of where to go. Frishberg was starting to look *real* interesting, but I couldn't easily find her—and trust me, the knowledge that I'd so recently had the opportunity to squeeze her for information and blown it did *nothing* to improve my mood. I supposed I could ask Kyra; after all, she'd introduced me to the sergeant, and after Snowflake and (in some ways) Aiko I trusted her most of anyone alive. Or dead, actually, now that I think about it.

I didn't really think she would be able to help, though. Players on the level of the Sidhe Courts could certainly keep a secret from a relatively young werewolf, even an Alpha. Plus, she hadn't exactly made it sound like she and the sergeant were terribly close, making it unlikely she could do much more in the way of locating her than I already had.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I could probably find a way to get in contact with Carraig, if I wanted to badly enough. But I really didn't see how that would help. Pier was a slightly better bet, but only slightly. I didn't know who he was, what he was doing, or what his stake in this game was with any certainty. I could call Loki asking for help, but I frankly thought I'd be better off soaking myself in goose fat and a tangerine marinade before waiting for the Wild Hunt. At least all *they* would do was kill me, whereas it was entirely possible that Loki had already done something much worse.

So. Running was out—there was nowhere, in this world or the Otherside, that the Wild Hunt couldn't chase me down. Appealing for help was out—anyone strong enough to do anything about my situation would charge more than I was willing to pay.

There have to be boundaries, after all. There has to be a point at which you draw the line.

I supposed that just left finishing the job solo.

Chapter Eight

Step one was to go get my car, which was still parked near the open space where I'd left it. I hadn't needed it since going to the Otherside, but I had a feeling I'd be wanting it soon, and this might be my last opportunity to fetch it.

On the way, I called Kyra and, purely for the sake of form, asked if she knew where Frishberg was. She didn't; the sergeant wasn't answering her calls either, it seemed, and had unexpectedly taken a few days' vacation, starting shortly after I'd first spoken with her. Interestingly, nobody in the police department she could talk to seemed to know quite why, nor where she might have gone.

Fascinating. I was starting to think that maybe, rather than power-hungry, Frishberg might have just been smart enough to realize how dangerous the situation was getting and vamoose.

"Thanks anyway," I said. A moment later, "Tonight's the full moon."

"Yep. You coming hunting?"

My lips twitched in what I suppose you could call a smile. "In a manner of speaking, I suppose I am. Do me a favor?"

"Sure, what is it?" It said a lot that she agreed *before* asking.

"Stay away from Gold Camp Road." That was the region I was planning to run to, tonight.

She must have heard something in my voice—no surprise, with as well as she knew me. "Winter. You remember what I said about how friends are there to help, right?"

"Yes," I said. "But some things nobody can help with. Please, Kyra, just stay away. I'll explain everything later." Or someone would, at least, but I didn't say that part.

"All right. Good luck."

"Thank you. Goodbye, Kyra."

"Goodbye, Winter."

I wasn't quite sure whether to smile or cry, and was somewhat surprised to find myself doing both as I dropped the phone back into my pocket. For once Snowflake didn't say anything.

There was someone waiting for me at my car. He was leaning against the driver's-side door, to all appearances just enjoying the sunshine while waiting to meet someone for a walk. His clothing looked a lot more expensive than anything I'd even dream of wearing hiking, but then plenty of people came to this park that I wouldn't consider hikers anyway. Aside from that and an impressively strong

smell of magic, he was pretty unremarkable. His features looked vaguely Hispanic, but could just as easily have been Native American, or just really tanned. Based on the scent of his magic I was pretty sure he was human.

"What do you want?" I said, scowling. I hate it when people are waiting for me when I get somewhere. I hate it even more when they're mages. That situation hasn't ended well for me in the past.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said mildly. The Spanish accent confirmed my initial guess, although it didn't sound Mexican. "Seemed like a good time to come meet you for myself."

"Right," I drawled. "And you would be?"

He grinned, showing very white and even teeth. "They call me Caller."

I nodded. "What do you want, Caller?"

"I thought we just went over that."

"Yeah, sure, but I don't believe you, meaning no offense. I'm sure you have something more than saying hi on your mind."

"I see what you mean, but actually, I don't," he said, not sounding particularly offended. "The thing is, you're something of an enigma. What do you want?"

I blinked. "In what sense?"

"The literal," he assured me. "You see, Wolf, I know things. That's rather my job, no? But I don't know you, and that bothers me. What do you want?" He smiled again. "That's the question I am asking. Watcher speaks well of you, and so does Maker, though he would deny it if you asked. But I, personally, don't know what motivates you. Considering that you are, I think, the most likely to succeed in this chase, that concerns me."

I frowned. "I don't think my motivations are that complicated. I'm just trying to survive."

"And yet," he said mildly, "you do not run for shelter, even though the Hunt is already mustering." He chuckled at my expression of shock. "As I said, I know things. I am the Caller, after all."

Not just Caller, I realized. *The* Caller. That meant something. I put it together with his appearance and smell, and thought I was starting to get a solid idea of who he was.

What he said was true, though. Now that I thought about it, there *might* be places I could go that even the Wild Hunt wouldn't follow. Not many, and once I was there I might never get to leave, but if I ran now I might be able to survive. Maybe not happily, but still alive.

And yet, even now that I *had* thought of that, I didn't feel tempted to do so, and I wasn't sure why. Was it simply that I couldn't stand the idea of cowardice? That didn't feel quite right. I didn't have a

problem with running in the face of vastly superior firepower. Was it that I didn't want to pay the price of that shelter? That couldn't be it. I mean, most of them, sure, but Conn wouldn't ask anything of me in exchange for his shelter, beyond what any Alpha would, and I couldn't imagine *anyone* poaching his turf.

The only thing I could think of was that I wasn't willing to let the Gáe Bolg stay here and keep poisoning my city, endangering my friends. It seemed crazy, but it was the only motivation I could think of.

Well, damn. And here I'd always promised myself I wouldn't turn into a hero.

"You see?" Caller said knowingly. "Your motivations are not so simple as you think. And so the question remains. Why are you chasing the spear? What do you hope to gain from this action?"

"I'm not sure," I admitted.

He nodded slowly. "Well, at least you're honest about it. Now, in all fairness, I must admit that you weren't entirely wrong to doubt me. I do have an interest in this affair, a very strong interest in ensuring that the balance between the Courts remains relatively stable. In the interests of advancing that agenda, would you object if I gave you a few pieces of advice?"

I shrugged. "You can tell me. I won't guarantee that I'll listen."

"Right," he said. "First, if you do find the spear, I would strongly recommend that you avoid using it. You're years away from being able to do so without being fundamentally altered by the power of that weapon. Second, think very carefully about what you do with it. Keeping the weapon is likely to get you killed, but giving it to the wrong person could be at least as hazardous to your health. The choices you make in the next few hours have the potential to decide your path for the rest of your life. You probably shouldn't make them lightly."

"What makes you so sure that I'm going to find the thing?"

Caller grinned. It was an infectious, mischievous sort of grin. "Oh, let's just say that I have a hunch. You know what the best way to place a smart bet is, Winter?"

"Sure," I said. "Rig the game."

"That's right," he said. "You remember that. *Vaya con Dios*." Caller took three steps away, opened a portal to the Otherside with no more than a flick of his fingers and a whisper of vegetation-scented magic, and disappeared.

I thoughtfully unlocked the door, opened it, got in, and started the car. When it was clear that none of these actions was going to lead to my swift and explosive death, Snowflake jumped in beside me, rolled down the window with her teeth, and promptly stuck her head out. *I think you're doing the right thing*, she told me.

*Really?* I asked.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

*Yeah, she said firmly. I'm proud of you, Winter.*

*Well, I said lightly, it's no enchilada, but I suppose it'll have to do.*

Twenty minutes later, I was pulling into a small storage center. It was in a decent neighborhood not far from downtown, which struck me as almost stranger than a high-class pawnshop. Maybe it's prejudiced of me, but somehow there are certain businesses which just don't seem to belong in a nice neighborhood. It wouldn't have taken me that long, except that I took three separate wrong turns.

I'm not that used to driving, okay?

Anyway, once I'd found the place it took me a few more minutes to find the right unit. All told, I probably spent more time being lost than it took me to break into it.

You'd think it would be hard to break into a storage unit in a decent neighborhood in broad daylight. You would be wrong. See, if you see a sketchy looking guy you don't recognize in a storage unit in the middle of the night, it doesn't take a genius to think "hey, maybe there's something shady going on here" and call the cops.

But, because everybody *knows* it's impossible to sneak in somewhere in the middle of the day in broad daylight, it's actually quite easy. Nobody looks twice in broad daylight, not so long as there's even the flimsiest excuse. That's why, for example, you can quite successfully burgle a house using nothing more than a fake moving van as a disguise, with all the neighbors watching the whole time, and get away with it.

So I didn't even bother being furtive, like I had when breaking into the pawnshop earlier. I walked straight up to the door of the storage unit, Snowflake trotting along beside me—what burglar brings a dog, after all? Then, just to sell the act, I pulled out a keyring and started fiddling with the lock, muttering imprecations under my breath. After all, everyone's had that moment when they can't remember which key they're supposed to be using and the lock doesn't want to work right anyway.

I did not, of course, actually have the key to this lock. That didn't really matter.

In my experience, the vast majority of ordinary people have very little idea how a lock works. It's sort of like a telephone; it works, and that's all you really need it to do, so who cares? If it stops working, you can't fix it anyway, so you don't even have that motivation to learn about it.

However, to understand what I was doing to the lock, you have to understand a few things about how locks function.

The most common way to protect a door is with a tumbler lock. They aren't terribly secure, but they're cheap and easy to find—and, as you may have expected from how little respect the freak squad got, that was what they'd used here, rather than any sort of fancy kit. Inside such a lock, you have a number of pins, which have two portions. The idea is that, because these pins are sitting across the

shear line, the lock can't turn with them in their starting configuration. When you put the key in, it lifts each tumbler to the point where the shear line matches up with the gap between the two pins, and you can turn it.

To pick the lock you have to carefully nudge each of those tumblers to the right height, while applying constant mild rotation to the lock. It's difficult, delicate, and—most importantly—*time-consuming* work. If I stood there and picked the lock my paper-thin disguise of someone who was allowed to open this door would definitely not hold up. As I had to assume somebody was watching me, this was unacceptable.

This is why I cheated. Magic is, after all, a wonderful thing. You see, a lock isn't airtight—there would be no point to that, given that you have to leave a keyway anyway—which left me with something to work with. By stirring that air into gentle movement, and feeling how it moved, I could figure out where each tumbler's shear line was. Then, moving with careful precision, I could slide a little bit of air into that line to split the two parts, and lift the upper pin well above the lock's shear line, at which point there would be nothing preventing it from turning. At that point, while hiding the lock from view with my hands so that it looked like I was using a key, I could apply more pressure with said air and turn the cylinder.

So, you know, that's what I did. It took me less than thirty seconds—plenty fast enough that people wouldn't get too suspicious.

You may be asking yourself, at this point, why—if I could do the whole thing so quickly with magic—I'd actually picked the lock on the pawnshop door. If so, ten out of ten for memory, attention to detail, and argumentativeness, but I'm afraid you score a zero on critical thinking.

See, one of the hardest things to accept once you learn you have magic—what a lot of mages, such as Erica, never quite get through their heads—is that magic isn't a miraculous solution to famine, disease, and that embarrassing tattoo from when you were eighteen and got hammered with people who turned out not to actually be your friends after all. It's a tool, and nothing more. Most of the time, it isn't even a very *useful* tool.

The trick I'd just pulled was hard. It involved simultaneously focusing on moving half a dozen pieces of metal *exactly* as far as I wanted to, while also managing enough force to turn the cylinder (harder than it sounds, trust me), *and* managing the physical movement of looking through my keys. It's damn near impossible to concentrate, with the intensity required by magic, on that many distinct thoughts at once. You have to practically break your mind into pieces to keep the different magics straight. On top of that, it requires expending power, and that energy would be detectable to anyone with a reasonable skill at such things.

What I'm getting at is that, when possible, just picking a lock was vastly preferable. It just happened that it wasn't possible this time. That's the whole reason for practicing more than one skill, after all—nothing works *every* time.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I pulled the door open and ducked inside, leaving Snowflake outside to stand guard, and shut the door behind myself. Then I found a light switch—my night vision is better than human, but that doesn't let me see color or detail in the dark—and looked around.

The freak squad's evidence store wasn't nearly as cluttered as I would have guessed, or nearly as freaky, for that matter. There were a lot of cardboard boxes, neatly labeled with permanent marker. There were a few other things—bags, jars, that sort of thing. I didn't spend much time looking at them, because my attention was immediately grabbed by what was at the other side of the room.

The Gáe Bolg didn't look nearly as exotic as I'd somehow expected. The shaft, which had to be better than six feet long, was made out of what looked like steel but, considering its fae origins, almost certainly wasn't. The spearhead itself looked a little more unusual, apparently consisting of around fifteen very thin foot-long blades oriented in different planes, producing the distinctive starburst-pattern tip.

That was cool. But still. It looked so plain, even stark. Compared to Tyrfing, with its mirror-bright blade marked with runes in pure and perfect black, gold hilt complete with sculpted pommel, and death-motif scabbard, it seemed almost ridiculously simple. There was no decoration at all.

I walked over and, very carefully, dragged my fingers over the surface of the shaft. Here, at least, I wasn't disappointed—touching it was an almost physical shock, magic nipping at my fingers like static electricity. I hadn't smelled a thing before, but once I touched it the olfactory assault of magic and night and the hunger of the hunt was almost unbelievably powerful.

I pulled my hand away like I'd been burned and looked at the spear with newfound respect. How, but how, had Erica thought she could treat this thing lightly? I'd known she didn't have my acuity of sense when it came to magic, and hadn't blamed her for it—few people, few mages even, did—but this was something else. This spear was the supernatural equivalent of an armed nuclear weapon. You'd have to be blind, deaf, and mentally retarded not to feel that kind of magic. It was the kind of power that would make dogs howl and children cry at twenty paces.

What kind of *moron* tried to sell something like this? For that matter, how stupid did you have to be to steal it in the first place?

I shook my head wonderingly and, steeling myself, reached out and grabbed the Gáe Bolg. It wasn't much fun. The closest comparison I can think of is holding a running jackhammer. My hands shook slightly as, holding the spear close to my body where it would be harder to see, I left. I didn't bother locking the door behind myself. At this point, it really didn't matter much.

*Holy shit*, Snowflake said, her one eye very wide. *It was really there?* I could tell from her tone that she could feel its presence, and it frightened her every bit as much as it did me.

*Yeah. Hurry up, we have to get this thing out of sight pronto.*

A few moments later, when it was in the back of the Jeep and covered with my cloak and a blanket, I finally breathed a little easier. *I really wasn't expecting to find it*, I said to Snowflake. *Maybe I should have thought more about what to do once I had it.*

*Yeah*, Snowflake said, staring at the indistinct shape of the spear with the same expression she might have when looking at a viper. *I don't like it.*

*Me either*, I said sympathetically. I *really* hadn't planned for this—I'd been assuming that the Gáe Bolg would already be gone. I'd just hoped that I could get confirmation that it *had*, in fact, been there, and maybe if I got very lucky some kind of hint about where it had gone. Actually getting my hands on the thing was something else entirely.

A quick glance at the clock confirmed that it was around one o'clock in the afternoon. I estimated that I had between five and six hours before I had to get out of town.

It was sort of a strange feeling. Right here, right now, I was the one with the power. Oh, not directly—I sure as hell couldn't *use* the Gáe Bolg, not when just *looking* at it gave me the heebie-jeebies, and trying to do so was a bad idea on an epic scale. Even without Caller's warning I could have guessed that. But, however temporarily, I had the power to determine who would get it. It was exhilarating for all of a second and a half before it settled down to plain old terrifying.

What Caller had said seemed to echo in my head. What *did* I want? Did I want to help Loki, after he'd worked so hard towards screwing up my life? Not really, I found. I didn't owe him anything except possibly a knife in the face, and I didn't particularly care for the idea of handing him any more power.

Now that I thought about it, though, I realized something else. I *didn't* know what everyone's motivations were. Because, for all that I'd learned over the past days, I still didn't have even the foggiest idea what Bryan wanted. It seemed pretty hard to decide whether he should have the spear, without knowing that.

I nodded thoughtfully. There was the next step, then. I think I knew that it was really just a way to burn time, but it wasn't like there was anything else productive I could think to do.

It proved surprisingly easy to contact Bryan. I mean, I'd have thought just *finding* someone so bizarre and creepy would be an epic quest all by itself, but it actually took me less than fifteen minutes. I called Conn, and, after a bit of dancing around the topic of *why* I wanted to talk to Bryan when normally I wanted nothing to do with him, got a phone number.

Conn knew, of course, what was going on. I knew that. There isn't much Conn *doesn't* know. But he was willing to let me pretend. How nice of him.

Anyway, after that I called said phone number. Bryan answered, sounding even more spooky over the phone. When I said that I needed to talk to him, he agreed without difficulty and named a pizza place a few blocks away.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I wound up leaving the spear in my car, covered up and hidden as well as I could manage quickly. Snowflake stayed outside to play guard dog, hiding under one of the other cars. I didn't really think it would matter—much as I loved her, I knew perfectly well that Snowflake wasn't up to stopping these people—but she insisted, and it wasn't like they'd let her into the restaurant anyway. So I shrugged and went inside to wait for Bryan.

He'd got there first.

I have no idea how. None. I mean, it was less than *three blocks* from where I already was, and I got lucky enough to find parking right out front of the used bookstore next door. And yet, somehow, when I walked in the door Bryan was waiting.

That wasn't too unexpected. I mean, crazy and unbelievable, sure, but that wasn't surprising coming from Bryan.

What *was* surprising was that he wasn't alone.

Now, don't get me wrong. I, being a paranoid bastard, had more than slightly suspected that Bryan would bring friends, or at the very least thugs. I was ready to see a few dozen werewolves waiting for me. I was ready for Bryan to have brought monsters from the stranger reaches of the Otherside that had no names. I was even ready to walk in and see him with Carraig on one side and Pier on the other, all three grinning like madmen and brandishing pointy things. While I obviously couldn't *cope* with any of these scenarios, I was at least mentally prepared for them, and wouldn't have been shocked to see them happen.

I was significantly less prepared to see a thirteen year old girl.

To be fair, she *was* somewhat spooky. She had pale skin—like, enough to make you think "albino"—but her hair was very dark, producing a rather ghostly appearance, one that was exacerbated by her slight frame and huge dark eyes. Furthermore, she smelled of magic—not as strongly as Bryan or myself, but more so than a normal human—in tones I couldn't quite place. It resembled Bryan's slightly as far as the forest went, but there was no predator's musk, so she couldn't be a werewolf. It was lighter, too, making me think of early morning birdsong rather than terrifying secrets in the dark shadows under the trees. Not human, werewolf, or vampire; fae, perhaps, or one of the lesser-known critters.

Possibly even stranger was what she was carrying. It looked like a stuffed cougar made by someone who'd never seen any felid larger than a housecat. The fabric looked to be a patchwork of a dozen different kinds of white cloth, each with a slightly different hue and texture. It had small black button eyes.

You might be thinking that isn't a terribly unusual thing for a girl to carry. Odd, perhaps, especially for one in her teens, but not freaky or anything. I would agree with you regarding that

statement. It's just that something about this particular stuffed animal was very slightly *off*. I wasn't quite sure what it was—there was just something not *quite* right about it. Its eyes seemed to track my movement, ever so subtly, and sometimes out of the corner of my eye it looked like something entirely different. Something that wasn't *nearly* as benign as a stuffed animal. Oh, and it smelled of magic too, just the faintest crackling like the air after a thunderstorm.

Nobody spoke until we were seated at a small booth in the corner of the room. The lunch rush was starting to ebb, and there was the peculiar feeling in the air of a restaurant catching its breath. I drank tea, while Bryan and the girl both went for plain water.

"Okay," I said once that was done. "Who is this and why is she here?" My patience for manners, never particularly great at the best of times, was worn to near nothing by now.

Neither of them seemed particularly perturbed. "Winter, meet Ash Sanguinaria. Ash, this is Winter Wolf."

"A pleasure to meet you," she said, her voice sounding relatively normal.

I considered her for a moment. "Your name isn't short for Ashley, is it?" I asked. I was pretty sure I knew already, but it never hurts to ask.

She smiled, the expression somewhat stilted. "No, it isn't."

I nodded. "I'm pleased to meet you too, Ash."

"Why did you ask to meet me?" Bryan asked me. As usual, he didn't sound like he cared what the answer was, or even whether he heard one.

"Hold on a second," I answered. "You still haven't answered me. As nice as Ash is, I still have to wonder what gives you the idea that she should be here."

"I felt that it would be a valuable educational experience," he said. "Rest assured that you are in no danger from her."

"And I appreciate it," I said dryly, "but I was actually more concerned about her. This situation is a bit hazardous." Ash looked at me oddly when I said that.

"Not for her," Bryan said. His voice left no room for doubt, and less for discussion.

I wasn't convinced—but, realistically, further argument wouldn't be productive, and I didn't have enough time to want to waste it. "Why are you here?"

"Because you asked me to be," he said. He didn't sound irritated at having to repeat himself—in stating the obvious, at that—but I could tell that he was.

"Not what I mean," I said. "Why are you here, in this city? Why do you want the spear?"

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"It is wise to have powerful forces in your debt," he said simply.

I rubbed my eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Scáthach wants her spear back," he clarified. "To return it is a sizable gift, and her nature is such that she is compelled to answer her debts. *All* her debts."

I thought about that for a moment. It was true that the supernatural world ran, more or less, on a system of favors owed and repaid more than any currency. It was also true that I'd never, *ever* heard a story of the Sidhe failing to repay their debts, for better or for worse. That made it pretty plausible that, whether you could use it or not, just being able to return the spear would be a significant gain.

"What would you use it for?" I asked him idly.

"I do not feel that this inquiry is your affair." His voice, although still bland and toneless, was nevertheless very cold, and I knew Bryan well enough to know that pressing further wouldn't get me anywhere. He can be very stubborn, when he wants to. "What are you planning to do with it?"

I didn't bother asking how he knew I'd recovered it. Even if I hadn't dropped a dozen clues in our discussion so far—which I was sure I had, for someone canny enough to catch them—Bryan would have known. There's no hiding things from Bryan Ferguson. He seldom even notices that you tried, and when he does he thinks it's funny.

"Well," I said slowly, "I could use a new walking stick. But I'm open to suggestions."

Ash smiled a little, at least. That made me feel better.

Bryan didn't shrug, didn't need to. "It does not matter to me. My part's finished."

See, that's why I don't like conversing with Bryan. You never get any real answers, and the half-answers you *do* get inevitably lead to another dozen questions he won't address at all. Why would he come this far to give up now? What *exactly* was his game? If he didn't want the spear himself who was he working for? What gave him the idea that this was a suitable learning experience for a girl that smelled of magic and spoke even less than he did? All these and more were questions he would never answer.

Maddening. I like the Ferguson family, generally speaking, but I *wish* they hadn't picked that habit up from Conn.

That left me in a quandary. I didn't trust Bryan. I mean, I'd have to be crazy to, right? But, at the same time, I had to do *something* with the spear. Keeping it was nine kinds of stupid. Giving it to either of the champions of the Sidhe was tantamount to suicide. I knew Conn had some stake in the matter, assuming that hadn't just been Bryan hiring Humberto, which I couldn't really say. But, again, I wasn't sure I wanted Conn having that kind of power. I wasn't sure whether I wanted *anyone* having that kind of power. I sure didn't feel any greater need to give it to Loki than I had before, that was for sure.

When in doubt, keep moving. Don't stop to think, don't stop to reconsider—don't *stop*, period. Werewolf life lessons, there. It is occasionally nice coming from a biological and cultural background which deemphasizes the importance of any time period except the immediate present.

Besides which, Bryan *had* at least gotten me asking the right questions.

"Thanks," I said to Bryan. "That helps a lot."

Ash looked confused, assuming I read her expression right. Bryan didn't. I didn't know whether he just wasn't capable of showing even that much reaction, or he truly understood what I meant. I suspected the latter, though, because it was Bryan Ferguson we were talking about, and he always did see to the heart of things.

After we ate, I went outside while Bryan was attending to such boring things as payment. It would have been more polite to wait, but I'm not really very good at polite.

Besides. It was a nice day. It'd be a shame not to enjoy the sun. And Bryan wouldn't care about impoliteness, even if he noticed. Or the expense, for that matter.

To my surprise, Ash came with me rather than stay inside. "Do you do this sort of thing often?" I asked her. Curiosity can be an impressive force, at times, overwhelming such petty things as a survival instinct.

"This is the first of this specific type," she said, seeming to see nothing strange about the question. "But yes, activities of the sort are a fairly common occurrence."

"Why?"

She shrugged, the motion strangely...apathetic, perhaps? No, not quite; I didn't get the sense that she didn't care, or that she was bored by our conversation. It was just that she didn't move her shoulders more than was strictly required to convey her meaning. "Mr. Ferguson feels that there are benefits to educational interactions occurring outside of the traditional classroom structure."

That took me a second to process. Not so much the words, as that a girl of that age—and she didn't give off the weird vibe that most beings older than they look do, so I was guessing she really was in her early teens—would actually say it. I mean, she had a vocabulary. She had *grammar*. "You *do* attend school, though, right?"

Her lips twitched in something that might, given more energy, have become an anemic smile. "You sound concerned."

I thought for a moment. "Huh," I mused. "I suppose I am. Odd."

This time it was definitely a smile, albeit a very brief one. "To answer your question, yes. I attend a...private academy of sorts." For a moment it seemed that she would say something more, but she fell

silent, her eerie facade firmly back in place. Her face showed no more emotion than it had in the restaurant, but somehow she nevertheless seemed somewhat sad.

Okay. Definitely time to change the subject. "Do you carry that everywhere?" I asked, nodding at the stuffed cougar.

"No," she said seriously. "But he prefers not to walk in public."

The worst part was that I thought she might be telling the literal truth.

"I enjoyed meeting you," she told me. "I hope I can see you again."

I smiled. "I hope so too," I said. "But I'm afraid you might not."

She cocked her head sideways, inquisitively. "Why?"

I was raised to believe, like most people, that there are some times when you should lie, for the sake of the other person. Especially when said person is a child. They never quite managed to convince me, though, that a gentle lie is better than a harsh truth. I mean, if Edward had told me the truth rather than spare my feelings, there would be four fewer deaths on my conscience. That was the kind of thing that left an impression.

So, rather than come up with some story, I just said, "I might be going to die soon."

She didn't react with confusion, the way I think most adults think most children should, or with fascination, the way I think most children actually would. She just nodded sympathetically and said, "I am sorry to hear that. Are you sick?"

My lips twitched. "Maybe so. But no, that isn't the problem."

"Then what is?" Ash seemed to feel no particular shame or disgust about the prospect of me dying. Though still sympathetic, she sounded quite polite and matter-of-fact. I approved.

"I made a bad mistake," I said, staring up at the sky. It was very blue today. "A long time ago. And now it's time I started trying to fix it."

She looked at me in silence for a long moment, and then nodded as though what I'd said made any kind of sense. "I hope you succeed." She was smiling, just the littlest bit, though the expression mostly just looked sad.

I smiled, feeling a little bit sad myself. "Thanks. I do too." I looked at her. "Good luck."

"With what?" she asked, sounding more normal than I'd heard her sound before.

"Whatever you need it for," I said seriously, and walked away. Snowflake appeared from her hiding place—which was literally *right next* to where we'd been, though I never noticed any sign of her

presence until she wanted me to—before I'd taken two steps. We got in my car and left, and neither of us spoke for a long while.

*Absolutely not*, I told Snowflake a short time later.

*Please*, she said to me, *please take me with you?*

*No*, I repeated. *Absolutely not. It's way too dangerous.*

*You could die out there*, she said. Her mental voice sounded much smaller and more insecure than normal. *I don't...I don't know what I'd do. Without you.*

I sighed gently and knelt down until her eye was level with mine. *Look, Snowflake. I've made a lot of bad choices and I've done a lot of bad things. I've killed a lot of people, and some of them didn't deserve it. My hands are bloody enough without you dying for me too. Okay?* Excessively dramatic, of course, but somehow fitting for the situation.

*I thought you always said that was my choice*, she said, sounding more like her usual self—which is to say, mocking and disrespectful.

*Sure*, I agreed. *But I'm asking you nicely. Please don't try and come save me. I want there to be at least one good thing left to show I existed, if I die tonight. Please.*

She growled. *That's fighting dirty.*

*Yep*, I agreed brightly. *Will you do it?*

*Fine*, she agreed. *You'd better not die, though, or I promise I'll make you regret it.*

*I thought I told you before threats like that are a waste of breath*, I chided her. *Good hunting, Snowflake. I love you.*

*I love you too, you great big moron. Give 'em hell for me.*

I smiled sadly and left her there, sitting in the sun out front of Kyra's house. I wasn't sure if I would ever see her again, but either way, there were worse ways to say goodbye. I should know; I'd used more than one of them.

As it turned out, of course, I did see her again, even if we both might have wished that really was goodbye.

Chapter Nine

Colorado doesn't have a long history—or, well, maybe it would be fairer to say that it doesn't have a long history *as Colorado*. There's plenty of history before that, in the form of various native tribes, but given that most of that's been lost I feel okay discounting it.

Colorado doesn't have a long history, but it has a *lot* of history, as though trying to make up for its relative youth by cramming stories into it like a kid who doesn't quite get the "clean your room" concept and has a small closet. Some of that history is buried, now, bulldozed and paved over with a Wal-Mart sitting on top. But most of it's just tucked away in a corner like an heirloom you don't need but can't quite bring yourself to get rid of.

Gold Camp Road is one of those. It's terribly impractical for modern purposes, but it's *historic*, so they haven't just abandoned it quite yet. Mostly it's unused these days except for four-wheeling enthusiasts, certain tourists who typically don't quite understand what they're getting into, and the rare occasion when the highway is closed. There are a few antisocial types with houses out thataway, and some people like me who use it for forest access, but mostly you don't see many cars.

The story's pretty simple. And, like a lot of the stories in Colorado, it starts with a gold rush. In this case, the gold rushers were rushing to Cripple Creek, just on the other side of the Peak from Colorado Springs. It's fallen far since then, but back in the day it was big business, digging gold out of the mountains up there.

There's always money to be made in gold, and lots of it. So naturally there was plenty of demand for shuttling ore from the mines in Cripple Creek to the mills in the Springs. Thus, Gold Camp. It's a narrow, winding dirt road connecting the two cities, following the route of the old railroad.

The highway is less direct—astonishingly so; it's around three times as long as the actual distance between the two cities—but it's also much less twisty, and it's paved, which makes it quite a bit faster. As a result, almost nobody uses Gold Camp for actually getting from A to B.

Fortunately, I learned to drive in Wyoming and North Dakota, often in places that make Colorado look positively tame. I didn't have too much difficulty. I still had several hours yet to go before sunset, so I took it slow. A short while later, I turned off on an even narrower, windier, steeper road up into the hills. I followed that for around a mile or so, then stopped. My Jeep was better suited to this kind of driving than a highway, but there were limits. It would have taken a specialized rock-crawling vehicle to go much further.

Besides. I would enjoy the hike.

I'd taken off the armor back in town—I wasn't particularly concerned about an attack coming before sunset—and now I was wearing a simple T-shirt and cargo shorts. To that I added a black backpack in which I had a number of things that might be helpful. It was hard to guess with certainty,

knowing as little as I did about the Wild Hunt itself, but I made what guesses I could. It helped that it was a pretty large backpack. And it was heavy. Fortunately, lycanthropy *does* have its perks.

Then I put on a thick glove, set my teeth, and grabbed the Gáe Bolg. It stung, made my arm numb and set it to shaking, but it was necessary, and it wasn't quite as bad with the glove, in any case.

I left the road shortly thereafter, not wanting anyone to see me. I mean, it wasn't *quite* the picture of a normal hiker, right? I was a little slower through the woods, but not too much. This was probably my favorite hunting ground, and I'd spent a lot of time there. It was my turf, basically, more so than the city itself, even.

The spear slowed me down—both because of the numbness and because a six-foot-long metal pole is, intrinsically, not something you *want* to carry hiking. But, again, it was familiar ground and I was carrying a comparatively light pack, and moving quick. It didn't take me more than about an hour to get to my destination, a ways north of the road.

The werewolf who showed me the place, long since dead now, had called the rock formations the Cathedrals, so I did the same. I don't know if that's the proper name, or even if they *have* a proper name, but it's descriptive enough. The red granite certainly looks majestic enough, especially if you're not used to it. There's even one formation that looks like a building—sort of like a really tiny cave that's open on both ends. Neither entrance is easily visible from a distance, especially in the dark.

That was where I went first. Inside it was pretty dark. The roof had a few holes, but aside from those patches of light the interior was lit only by the sunlight coming in the two open ends and a few cracks between different rocks in the walls. There were a few cracks in the floor, too, not wide or deep enough to justify calling them crevices. You couldn't fall in them, most likely, but you might get your leg wedged if you worked hard enough.

I stopped next to one of those, where there was no light to speak of. I dropped the spear into the crack with a sigh of relief, and covered it with my cloak. The result was, in functional terms, invisible, and I figured it was pretty unlikely that anybody would notice it. Oh, sure, it was conceivably possible that they would orient on the magic—but I reckoned if it were *that* easy to find, the Gáe Bolg wouldn't have gone as long as it did in hiding. And while my cloak didn't have the same kind of protections, it was a relatively very small piece of magic.

I did not, of course, stop there. I've spent a lot of time and effort finding things, and people, that didn't want to be found, and as a consequence gotten pretty good at finding them. This means, naturally, that I'm also quite good at hiding things—it's just a matter of approaching the same line from the other side, after all. I couldn't hide myself from the Hunt, given that they had my scent already, but that didn't make me incompetent.

So I also brushed out all my tracks with a pine branch—one I cut a long ways off, with an ordinary pocketknife. That had the added advantage of covering my scent, an advantage I went one step

further on by crushing pine needles and scattering them everywhere except in the cave. There they might have given away my presence.

It would have been more effective to use, say, black pepper as a scent bomb. But pine blended into the background smells of the forest, making it a lot less likely that it would be noticed.

Before that, though, I took out a bottle of water and a bottle of rubbing alcohol from the pack and sprinkled those liberally over my trail as well. Part of this was, again, to dilute and confuse my scent. But mostly it was because of the magics involved.

Every substance has an associated spectrum of magic, and acts as a sort of lens to focus ambient energy into that shape. Some of these are famous enough that anybody might know to use them—silver's nature as a purifying agent, for example, which can be dangerous to inherently impure werewolves (I don't mean that in any moral sense, more a matter of being a mixture of multiple things). Iron is good at grounding and stabilizing, which makes it hazardous for faeries.

What a lot of people don't realize—I know I never did, until Alexander pointed it out to me—is that the magical properties of a substance often bear a close resemblance to the physical ones, *especially* the chemical properties. Silver can be used as an antibiotic. Iron grounds electricity (why copper or silver doesn't work on the fae, though, is a mystery, at least to me).

As you may be aware, water and alcohol are both very effective solvents. They dissolve things, break them down, wash them away. I wasn't *sure* that a dash of these liquids, both hastily charged with extra power right before use, would help to erase the energetic traces of my presence, but it seemed like a decent guess.

It couldn't hurt, at any rate. Plus, the scent of water would attract no notice, and the alcohol would be long since evaporated by the time the Hunt was anywhere near the area.

So that was that. The spear was as well hidden as it was possible, under the circumstances, for me to hide it. It was time I got out of the area, making sure that nobody found it just because I was nearby.

I kept north. It was easy going, now that I was warmed up and I'd lost the spear, and I was going at a pretty good clip. I had about four hours before true dark, which I was guessing meant at least three and a half before I had to start worrying.

It took me about two of them to get to where I was going. My destination was a long, broad valley with a tiny stream at the bottom, along with a narrow half-marked path. It was mid-April, but I'd climbed in elevation rather a lot, and there was still a good amount of snow up here in the shade. There was a lot of shade to be had, too, given that it was basically a forest. Most of the trees were conifers, but there were a lot of aspens to be had. Gambel oak and similar bushes clustered around the water.

It's probably ironic, that I had chosen the same valley to run to as, almost two years ago and an eternity away, Garret White had chosen for his last stand. It made sense, though; this was a good place for a werewolf, plenty of cover and plenty of game trails. Plus it was a location I knew quite well.

And, I must admit, the symmetry amused me.

I took a long, meandering path through the valley, dropping articles of clothing at irregular intervals, tossing it into the underbrush and covering it with forest detritus. I wouldn't be needing it tonight anyway, and I hoped that scattering objects impregnated with my scent might slow the Wild Hunt down if they were relying on that to find me.

A rather anemic hope, if truth be told. But I'd take whatever I could get.

By the time that I made it to my destination, another rock outcropping, I was naked except for shoes, backpack, and my various magical foci. (I'd left the necklace of my mother with Snowflake, though. It had sentimental value.) I wasn't too bothered by that. I'm not modest, really, especially when there aren't any people around. Away from humans I revert to more animalistic patterns of thought and behavior, and the simple fact is that only humans really give a shit about that sort of thing.

Anyway. I ditched the sandals at the base of the rocks, tossing one toward the trees and the other over nearer the stream, and started climbing. It was easy going. The granite was rough and provided plenty of handholds, and the rocks here were shaped vaguely like a stack of pancakes. Within a handful of seconds I was dropping my pack, maybe fifteen feet up, at the base of another stack of rocks.

I kept climbing. It was a little harder, but I like rock climbing, and it isn't difficult to be good at it when you're a werewolf. The vastly increased strength:weight ratio makes things a lot easier. A few minutes later I was sitting comfortably on the highest rock around, maybe forty or fifty feet up. It was around ten feet square, making any worries about falling groundless, and in any case I could probably catch myself pretty well with air. Even if I couldn't, that wasn't a far enough fall to kill me. Oh, there were always outliers—you can die in the shower, after all—but the vast majority of the time I'd walk away with, at the most, a broken bone or two. Unpleasant, but not undoable.

I sat there and faced into the sun, which was beginning to wester noticeably, with my eyes closed. It was warm enough that the breeze felt quite nice against my skin. "Hello, Fenris," I said a moment later, not opening my eyes.

"How'd you know I was here?" the wolf-god asked, moving up to sit beside me.

I shrugged. It didn't seem terribly important—although, in all honesty, I also wasn't quite sure myself. I just *knew*, and somehow at the moment it didn't seem to matter how.

Fenris didn't seem to think it was an inappropriate answer. I still hadn't opened my eyes, but I could feel that he wasn't upset. "It's going to be a beautiful evening," he said a long moment later.

I grunted. "Some consolation, anyway."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Maybe so. May I ask you a question?"

"I rather doubt I could stop you," I pointed out.

"I suppose not. Why do you do it?"

"Do what?" I asked, opening my eyes. Fenris looked back to his "normal" self, casually dressed and without the ribbon and spike that he wore when he wanted people to recognize him. He was currently laying back on the rock a few feet to my side and staring into the sky.

He gestured, expansively if rather vaguely. "This. The fighting. Everything."

I looked out over the valley. The sun was touching just the tips of the trees on the other side of the valley now, looking like a gentle waterfall of gold on green. I thought about it for a long moment. "Because of this," I said eventually.

"What?"

I waved my hand, indicating the broad expanse of trees. "This," I said. "It's...look. This world is terrible. I don't like it. I don't want to die. I don't want to kill. I hate this world for what it's done to me. For what it's made me do, and be." I paused, struggling to frame my thoughts. "But then there are moments like this. Watching the sunset. Swimming in the river. Eating a good meal. Making something beautiful. The moments that make life worth living."

"Is it worth it?" he asked quietly. His voice sounded more human than I'd ever heard it, sad and soft and lonely.

I closed my eyes again. "I don't know. I guess I'll never know. But it's the best I'm likely to get." All was silent for a long moment. "May I ask you a question?"

"Fair's fair," he said, sounding amused now.

"I once asked you whether you were my father," I said. "And you said no."

"I remember." Of course he did. From his perspective, it was probably like yesterday.

"I believe you. But the more I've thought about it, the more I've started to wonder whether there might have been another question I should have asked."

"Oh?"

I nodded. "Yeah. I think I should have asked, was my father you?"

There was a long moment of silence. Then Fenris started to laugh, a sound like wolves howling. "Oh, Winter. You never give up, do you?"

"Nope," I agreed. "It's gotten me into trouble a few times in the past."

"I know," he said, laughter still dancing beneath the surface of his voice. "You're quite clever, you know. Remarkably so for your age." He was silent for a moment. "The answer, I suppose, is yes and no."

"That isn't very helpful."

He made a frustrated noise. "I know. I told you, words aren't my gift." After a pause, he continued, "Look, think of it like this. Is four two plus two? Yes. But it is also three plus one."

"So...what? He was you, but he was also something else?"

He growled. "No. Not quite. Maybe..." He trailed off, then spoke again, sounding more confident this time. "I've got it. Think of your shadow. It isn't you—it can't be, right? But it looks like you, and it moves like you, and it couldn't be if you were not." I nodded along thoughtfully. "In the same way," Fenris continued, "I was not your father. Your father was not me. He was his own wolf. But at the same time, he was *like* me, a reflection of me."

"So what does that make me?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I don't know. You, I suppose."

All was silent for a long time. "How did he die?" I asked finally, maybe five minutes later. "My father, I mean."

Fenris took his time answering. "Just how he would have wanted," he said finally. "With extravagant violence. Killed three werewolves before they brought him down."

"Wait a second, he was fighting *werewolves*?"

"They were in his territory," Fenris said by way of explanation. "He was always...stubborn. Arrogant. Inflexible." He laughed quietly. "He'd have liked you." There was a brief, brooding silence. "I always wondered," he said after a moment. "Once I knew about you, I wondered. Should I have kept him and Carmen apart? Would they have been happy together? Would you have been happier, if you grew up thinking you were a wolf? I thought it was the kindest thing, but now I just don't know."

"Don't beat yourself up about it," I said kindly, ignoring the wrench that went through me at his words. "You did the best you could."

"It wasn't good enough," whispered a voice on the wind. "She died for my mistakes, and I didn't even know for sixteen years. It wasn't good enough."

I looked sideways, feeling a strange sort of concern—absurd, really, given that it's the Fenris Wolf we're talking about here—but he was already gone.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

I napped for around an hour after that. It wasn't like there was much else I could do, after all. I'd already set my plans in motion, and there wasn't a lot I could do to improve upon them at this point.

My sleep was, needless to say, fitful and restless. The prospect of imminent death can do that to a guy. Eventually I gave up even pretending that I was going to get any sleep and just watched the last of the sunset instead.

Finally, as the colors started to fade from the western sky, I moved into the last stages of preparation. I was going to do this in fur. That was pretty unusual, as I normally prefer fighting as a human, but I thought that it was probably the smarter choice tonight. My best chance was to turn this into a contest of speed and endurance rather than outright combat, and that meant that the wolf was distinctly superior.

Besides. It was the full moon, and I hadn't shifted in more than a week. That didn't leave me a lot of room for staying human, especially under stress. Might as well just go with it.

I was relying on using my magic to help even the odds, at least a little bit. That, in turn, meant I really needed my foci, since without them I wasn't really capable of much. With the full moon I would be operating at peak power, but I needed absolutely everything I could get tonight, and that meant seizing what few advantages I had.

The bad news was that all of my magical foci were various pieces of jewelry—they stand out so much less than carrying a staff around—and they'd been designed with my humanish body in mind. The good news is, I think ahead.

I had three foci with me, the three that I could conceivably hope to use in a combat situation. The first, my focus for manipulating air and wind, was a simple bracelet, which I unknotted from around my left wrist. It was *very* simple, just a narrow leather braid wrapped several times around my wrist. It hung loosely around my neck, but I'd measured it quite carefully (a task that wasn't nearly as simple as that makes it sound, trust me) and once I'd changed it would be a snug collar.

That left two rings, one attuned to predatory animals and the other designed to help me manipulate shadows. I put the bracelet through both of them as I wrapped it around my neck. It wouldn't work quite as well as the collar solution—I'd designed them assuming there would be more skin contact than this, and believe it or not that can make a difference—but it would work.

Once that was done, I laid down, carefully keeping the collar in place, and brought the wolf over myself like a cloak.

It's hard to describe the change. I've tried, before, and it never quite works. It's just too far removed from human experience. It's like...have you ever had a joint pop back into place—not from an actual dislocation, just popping your back or something? And you remember how it hurts, a little, but there's also the feeling of something coming back to its proper alignment? Changing is like that, only different. The pain is a lot more severe, for one thing. And it lasts a long time. And it's all over your body.

And it involves actual damage to your body—quickly repaired damage, maybe, but still a lot of minor injuries.

Okay, maybe it isn't all that similar after all.

But that feeling of *rightness*, of things coming back into alignment, is exactly the same. It hurts terribly, but somehow once I start I can never quite seem to remember why I don't do it more often.

I felt it, when the moon rose. I was about halfway through the transition, at that unpleasant point where you've long since ceased to resemble a human but you're not yet recognizably canine. My eyes were currently focused on the rock about six inches in front of my face and I couldn't see clearly anyway, but still, I knew. I could feel the moon's first light brush over my skin, whispering gently to me, helping to nudge my body into the proper configurations.

It was faster, with the moon to help. Perhaps five minutes after it rose I was standing on four legs, shaking my head to clear it.

There's something very special about wearing fur under the full moon, something utterly indescribable. Most of the time I'm fairly humanlike, even when I don't look it—not in terms of appearance, but as far as attitudes and opinions go? Yep, not all that exotic there.

The full moon changes that. It brings out the parts of my psyche that are less civilized, less constrained. At the time, I can't help but revel in it. Afterwards, it's usually rather more chilling. I know quite well what can happen if you let that part take control, after all.

Tonight, though, there shouldn't be any innocents around to be endangered. So I let the moon in, and I let the wolf out.

And the world changed.

I stood, shakily, on unsteady legs. It hurt, as taking on my proper shape always hurt, but I welcomed the pain, gloried in it. I rolled my neck to either side, provoking more bright shocks of sensation, and looked out at the world.

It was oddly different than the way my normal, pathetic self saw things. Color was only fuzzily visible, easily dismissed, but differences in shading and texture became paramount. The dim light was soothing to my eyes, and the shadows welcomed my gaze.

Even more of a change, the importance of vision was itself dramatically lessened. I could smell my own recent pain—my lip curled up at the stink—and on the breeze I sorted out the smells of each and every conifer within a hundred yards without thinking. A moment later I caught the aroma of a deer to the northwest, and my legs tensed slightly. It was a good night, a hunting night, and deer would be an excellent start to the night's events.

I heard as well as felt my breathing accelerate and deepen, my heart rate pick up in anticipation, and for a moment I almost launched myself out to chase the prey.

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I think I should clarify something here. The wolf in me—because, make no mistake, this was a part of me, not an external force—wasn't stupid. It wasn't thoughtless, nor had I forgotten my purpose here tonight. It was just...immediate. The wolf was a creature of the here-and-now, and everything else was subsumed into the moment. Planning was forgotten in the moonlight, memory was washed away by a passing breeze, until all that left was the urges of the moment. Past and future lacked the visceral immediacy of what I could smell and hear and see right *now*.

A moment later, though, I heard hunting horns, long and low and hungry. Looking to the south, I could see a mounted figure lowering an enormous horn from its mouth. I couldn't see any details—the figure was shrouded in a mask of shadow, with lightning crawling over it—but it wasn't hard for me to put it together.

Impulsively, I threw my head back and howled an answering challenge to the sky. The man might be resigned to death, but the wolf never would, and it didn't know how to back down from a challenge.

The Wild Hunt thought I was prey.

They were about to have a *very* fun surprise. This was *my* forest, *my* night, *my* hunt, and God have mercy on anyone who tried to take that from me, because I surely wouldn't.

I had a plan, of course. That was in my nature; I *always* had a plan. This one was a little zanier than usual, but that was to be expected. This particular plan scared me rather a lot. On the bright side, it was quite possible that I would be killed before I could execute even the first step, so I wasn't too terribly concerned about that.

Laughing, I leapt lightly down from the rock, not bothering to slow my fall. I hit the ground forty feet below hard, sending a wave of pain through my joints, but with the moonlight singing in my blood I hardly even felt it. I slipped into the underbrush with a smile on my face, thinking bloody thoughts.

As I'd expected, the Hunt made a beeline for my location, not turning aside at the decoys. Not terribly surprising; they had a very impressive reputation for being, in addition to relentless, extremely hard to fool. No, this wasn't going to be as easy as dodging a normal hunt, or even a pack of werewolves.

I raced through the trees to a piece of open ground in the middle of the valley, on an old and long-since overgrown logging road, and watched. Behind me the trees closed in, but between me and the Hunt was a long clear stretch, and I could easily watch them coming.

Well, inasmuch as I could *see* them coming, anyway. Each and every rider and hound was shrouded in what looked like dark, grim storm clouds, complete with flickering lightning, making it impossible to pick out individual figures, let alone identify them. That was a problem. I didn't think I could pull this off if I couldn't see what I was dealing with.

Under other circumstances, I probably would have agonized and wondered whether it was *really* worth the price of what I did next. With the impulsiveness of the wolf in control, there was no hesitation. In the same moment that I recognized what I was looking at, I called the Second Sight.

I'd never used the Sight much. Nobody in their right mind does. Just now, I was hoping that it would show me the reality of what I was looking at. That sort of thing was, certainly, a reasonable expectation of the Second Sight. It was a powerful tool—and, like most such tools, at least in the magical world, it was a *highly* dangerous one.

It showed the truth of what you were looking at—but it also showed The Truth, and there was a limit to how much of that a man could stand to see. Look at the wrong thing too closely, and there won't be much of your mind left afterward. Even worse, you *can't* necessarily guess ahead of time whether something is safe to see ahead of time, making any use of the Second Sight an ongoing process of Russian roulette.

I was pretty damn sure the Wild Hunt wasn't something a sane person turned the Sight upon. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

It took only a moment. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the world had changed.

It's called—among *many* other names—the Second Sight. But it isn't sight, not really. It is usually conceived of as a sort of synesthesia, because that's the only way a mortal brain has to interpret sensations that are so utterly foreign to its nature. But odors played a strong role, for me—no surprise there, given how important they were to my thinking anyway. This was even stronger in my current body, for obvious reasons. It can also manifest as taste, touch, music—anything you can imagine, really, which is to be expected given that it's really your imagination that determines how you experience it.

There was once a philosopher called Rochefoucauld. He lived in seventeenth-century France, as I recall. I've often found his writings, although somewhat bleak, to be fairly perceptive. One of my favorites was the claim that "Neither the sun nor death can be looked at steadily."

That, right there, is the height of philosophical greatness. It's clever, quotable, slightly obscure of meaning, and—best of all—short. I'd never had much reason to argue with that claim, either. It's true that there are some things the humanish mind is not made to see, or even think about too much.

Tonight I got to add another entry to the list.

I couldn't look at the Wild Hunt, not really. It was quite simply too much to take in. I could no more understand what the Wild Hunt was than I could define the difference between the way violence smells and the sound of violet to a lizard. For one heartbeat I saw, and Saw, entirely too much for comfort, before I jerked my head away, the image burned into my brain only too clearly.

I was too far away from the hunters to see them clearly. But the Second Sight has little respect for such concerns, and I could pick out each and every figure as easily as if they were a mere twenty feet away. I could still see the storm in which they rode—which, I realized abruptly, was a sort of entity in

and of itself, although even considering that was almost enough to make me start shivering again—but I could see through it, as well, to the figures underneath.

There were, I thought, perhaps thirty humanoid figures on horseback, accompanied by a like number of hunting hounds. Or, at least, that was the illusion the shroud was maintaining; looking more closely showed another truth. Some of them were, indeed, the huge faerie hounds I'd fought once before, with fur of black and white and glowing eyes. Others, though, appeared to be normal dogs wreathed in storm, greyhounds and huskies running beside mongrels and mutts.

I saw a couple of werewolves, too, wearing fur and running beside the horses. The size and build were quite distinctive, and anyway when I looked at them I could smell werewolf on the wind. I winced slightly, even as my lip curled up in an instinctive snarl, and hoped there were none of them I knew.

The mounted figures were harder to identify. They all seemed to be wearing helmets, and there was too much to smell for me to sort anything out that way. They were all armed, though; bows and spears seemed to be the order of the day, although I saw plenty of long cavalry swords as well, and a handful carried maces or even axes. That, really, was all I needed to know.

I let the Sight fade, with a whimper of gratitude. I so did not want to see the Wild Hunt any closer up. Even a glimpse was almost more than I could take. As I did, one of the hounds (it was impossible to tell what variety, though I thought not werewolf) bayed, and was answered by another horn.

I howled back my answer, and did a very stupid thing. I charged straight at them.

I should clarify, I suppose, that this was very much a part of my plan. Fleeing was a waste of time, in any case. It would only prolong things, and not very much—it was hard to tell just how fast they were moving, but it was definitely faster than I could run, and I got the distinct impression that they were loafing around even so.

And besides. To flee was to mark myself as prey. That wasn't good.

I don't think the Wild Hunt has people charge them very often. In any case, they didn't seem to expect it. They kept running pell-mell along the logging road, the baying of hounds an almost continual sound now. For myself, I was as nearly silent as I could be. This wasn't too hard, because my mind was too dazed to really process vocal instructions anyway—damaged, I suppose, by exposure to the Hunt. In any case, the Second Sight seemed to be fading in and out every few moments, resulting in an incredibly disorienting, nerve-jangling experience. I could feel that every animal in the whole damned valley—every single one, from the ants on up—was running in either panic or glee. I could see the trees themselves swaying in the moonlight with the force of the pure, primal magic spinning through their boughs. The Wild Hunt's horns sounded with thunder and the howling of wolves, rather than any more appropriate sound, and seemed to send a spike of adrenaline through my blood.

More unsettlingly, my own body seemed to morph slightly as I moved, fur fading through every shade from black to white and back again, claws glittering with ice, snow drifting in the air around me,

visible only in my peripheral vision. I could feel a low, dull ache in my left thigh, though I knew for a fact I hadn't been injured, and when I took a moment to glance at it I saw a deep, ugly puncture wound there, as though I'd been stabbed with a sword. Blood ran freely from it, and at a glance I would have said it had been inflicted only moments before.

And then I blinked, and the Sight faded, and my body was whole. I shook my head, dismissed the vision from my mind, and kept going.

In spite of all that, I got to within thirty feet of them without being spotted, and received the next of a great many unpleasant shocks.

It wasn't Carraig at the head of the pack.

The leader was astride quite possibly the largest and scariest-looking horse I had ever seen—imagine a horse the size of a Clydesdale but built like a courser, coal-black in color with eyes that burned like, well, live coals. He was well suited to it, too, being around seven feet tall and fully armored. A lesser beast couldn't have stood up under his weight, let alone galloped. He was carrying an enormous sword, near as tall as he was, in his right hand, and holding the reins in his left.

I didn't have time to freeze. They were moving at a breakneck pace, and that thirty feet disappeared *fast*.

I leapt out in front of them, snarling and growling for all I was worth. Like normal horses, the Hunt's mounts reacted rather strongly to the sudden appearance of what was, for all practical purposes, an enormous snarling wolf right in front of them. Unlike normal horses, that reaction wasn't fear or startlement, but eagerness and redoubled speed.

The good news is that I was expecting that.

I wasn't as strong as the Wild Hunt. In all probability I wasn't even close to as strong as *one* of those eldritch riders. But, end of the day, they were still predators, and there isn't a predator in the world that anticipates the quarry voluntarily seeking them out for a confrontation. Which meant that, for a bare instant, I had the advantage of surprise. And I pressed it for all it was worth.

I slammed power through my foci as hard as I could, throwing out wind and forcing shadow into tangibility. And I focused all of it, everything I could, into a single purpose.

Namely, tripping the leading horse.

He hadn't thought to ward against that, apparently. The horse looked, for a moment, as though it would simply push through my barrier with raw muscle—but I shoved more magic into the working, and it stumbled, then tripped.

Inertia is a powerful force. Horse and rider—counting in armor and such, it had to come to at *least* a half-ton between them—hit the ground and kept right on going, their own momentum propelling them forward. Behind them I saw at least one other horse trip and fall, while others pulled up short. This

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close, I could see that the mask of the Wild Hunt made their eyes look like hollow voids filled with lightning—but they were still quite capable of showing hate.

I bolted, laughing as I went, uphill into the forest. One hound—a true Cu Sith, rather than a mortal dog or werewolf—was quick-thinking enough to get in my way. I lashed out with one paw, slashing at its face, and kept going, not taking the time to see whether it were seriously injured or not. Its howls behind me sounded more furious than pained, in any case.

The chaos was just dying down as I made it into the forest. I could feel a new tension to the air, raising the hair on the back of my neck and making my heart pound even faster. Before, this had just been a hunt—but now the Wild Hunt *really* wanted to watch me bleed.

That was all to the good. This whole exercise was to get them to respect me, after all. Running wouldn't do it—but now that I'd bloodied them, they *had* to take me seriously.

In among the trees, I would have the advantage. The trees were pretty tight together—enough so that I was navigating as much by smell and magic as sight, even with the full moon—which would prevent them from moving en masse the way they appeared to prefer. The confined spaces would prevent the horses from building up to their full speed, and I would be able to use my greater maneuverability to maximum advantage.

While I ran, I was thinking furiously. It wasn't Carraig leading the Wild Hunt against me. In fact, it seemed like a pretty inescapable conclusion that it was *Pier*, his opposite number. (I reflected bitterly that the next time Fenris told me something about a Maiden's champion, I'd bloody well make sure which one he was talking about.) That, in turn, implied some very strange things I hadn't realized about the events of the previous several days.

That, of course, didn't matter in the slightest. If I made it through the night alive, then maybe—just *maybe*—I would be able to do something about that.

Until then, all that mattered was figuring out how this changed my strategy. This wasn't too hard, because as far as I could tell, it didn't. In fact, Pier might be better for me than Carraig; it was distinctly nighttime, which meant that the Daylight champion would be weakened, after all. On top of that, he was less cunning, less unpredictable. Stronger, maybe—but then either one was so much stronger than me that that was a moot point.

Somewhere behind me, I heard the breaking of branches, announcing the entrance of the hunters into the wooded area. I was moving fast, as only a werewolf in his element under the full moon could, so I still had several seconds before the pursuit caught up to me.

I looked around, then my eyes fastened on a nearby pine tree a good bit larger than its neighbors. My jaws parted in a grin, and I trotted over to it.

Everybody knows that canines, including werewolves, can't climb. And, like a lot of the things that everybody knows, especially about werewolves, it managed to be simultaneously accurate and highly misleading.

Everybody knows that werewolves can't climb—including *the werewolves*. Think about that for a minute. We weren't stupid—even with the wolf in ascendance, I could still think perfectly well, just...*differently*. Which meant, in turn, that I could compensate for that weakness, rather than just hurl myself at a tree over and over again.

I might not be able to climb, but I could certainly *jump*.

Again, the improved ratio of strength to weight came to the rescue. I was able, using my powerful hind legs, to launch myself high enough that the branch I was looking for hit me about chest height. A bit of scrabbling later, I was uncomfortably perched on one of the thicker branches, right next to the trunk where it could actually hold me. I'm not huge by werewolf standards, but that still comes to around a hundred and eighty pounds of wolf, and there weren't very many *trees* around that could hold that much weight.

Once there, I sat and waited. And waited. As it turned out, it took almost seven seconds for the first of the Hunt to arrive. That might not sound like a long time, but trust me, it felt like forever. I could only tell how little time it actually *was* by listening to my heartbeats.

He was of a more ordinary size than Pier, and carried a shortbow rather than a sword. He was riding a more normal-looking horse as well, although the Hunt's shroud concealed enough of the details of the both of them to make it a hard thing to say for sure. Aside from the pine I was sitting in, I couldn't smell a thing over the reek of storm and magic.

In any case, he got very unlucky. He wandered directly past me, and never thought to look up. I took advantage of this opportunity immediately, dropping out of the tree to hit him from above.

The horse dodged at the last moment. Actually, that's not quite true; I'd have sworn the last moment was already past, but it lunged forward with uncanny speed, leaving me to hit the forest floor with a grunt of disappointment.

The hunter wheeled to face me, bow coming up as he did. I surged forward, seizing the horse's foreleg in my jaws and wrenching it sideways. It screamed and collapsed, spoiling his aim, and I danced back. My teeth had broken the skin, and the taste of fresh blood across my tongue was the strongest drug imaginable. It filled me with a sudden surge of hunger, too strong to describe, let alone contain.

The next thing I knew, the horse was on the ground and I was ripping at its abdomen, tearing off great bloody chunks of meat and gulping them down. It felt good, sating a hunger nothing else could ever quite satisfy. A moment later, I felt a hot stinging pain in my side, and turned to see a white-fletched arrow sticking out of my side, just behind the shoulder. Nice shot, although not exactly difficult from such short distance.

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Pity for him that it hit at the wrong angle and skipped off my ribs. Oh, I don't think that it would have been lethal if it hadn't—werewolves are terribly hard to kill, especially on a full-moon night, and his arrowhead wasn't silver—but it would have come a lot closer.

As it was, it didn't even slow me down. I wasn't sure how he'd managed to not be caught underneath the falling horse—actually, I had pretty much no idea what had happened between that first taste of blood and being shot—but he was standing about ten feet away aiming another arrow my way. I could smell his fear even from that distance, even through the shroud.

I rounded and launched myself at him, leaving the horse to finish dying behind me. Ten feet is not such a long distance to a werewolf. He panicked, an entirely reasonable reaction to seeing a bloodstained werewolf closing on you rapidly, and his first shot went wide. He never got another one, because I was leaping on him and bearing him to the ground. He fumbled at his belt for a knife, but I was biting at the join of his neck and shoulder between helmet and jacket and shortly after that he wasn't doing anything at all.

It was at about that time that the taste of his blood finally managed to drive home what my nose had been trying to tell me, if only my head hadn't been too clouded to see it. This wasn't one of the Sidhe. That was human blood.

I pulled away in revulsion. A moment later I saw the Wild Hunt's stormy mask fall away, revealing, as I'd known it would, a human being.

He was—maybe, at the most—seventeen years old.

I'd never seen someone die with the Second Sight before. It was...bad. Very nearly as terrible as the Wild Hunt, with an added dash of guilt for flavor.

I gagged, and nearly threw up. Then the other part of me, the one that didn't care about such things, took over again. I turned and yanked the arrow roughly out of my side with my jaws, not worrying about keeping the wound from widening further. It didn't matter in any case; the moonlight filled the hole, and mere moments later there wasn't even a scar to show for it.

Behind me, I heard hoof beats rapidly approaching, although they sounded less like normal hooves than tiny cracks of thunder. Turning, I saw a group of perhaps ten riders coming at me from behind, their mounts moving with an entirely unnatural agility through the trees, Pier riding at their head. Apparently his mount hadn't been seriously injured by the fall. As I watched, one of them raised his bow and sent an arrow flying my way. Considering the circumstances, I was amazed at how accurate he was—had I not moved, I would have eaten an arrow between the eyes. I *did* move, of course, taking a page from Snowflake's book and catching it in my jaws instead, but still. No human could have made that shot under these circumstances.

Good. I didn't feel so bad about killing Sidhe.

I turned and raced deeper into the woods, laughing all the way. Behind me I heard more and more horses converging on the group pursuing me. And, of course, the hounds.

I focused on speed, pouring every fiber of my being into running faster, harder than ever before. I leapt over and dove under fallen trees, ducked through gaps barely wide enough to admit me, took sudden turns, all the time moving far faster than any normal wolf could manage, let alone a human. The whole time the Sight danced behind my eyes, if anything more frequent now than before, dazzling and maddening and wonderful. Several times I glanced back with a mocking laugh and accidentally saw the Wild Hunt again. Each time hit me the same way, and some part of me wondered what sorts of damage it was doing to me.

The rest didn't care. This was what I was made for, my element. It was the greatest hunt in the world, and it was worth dying to feel this way. I'd never moved so fast, never felt myself to be so perfectly in harmony with the world. I wasn't even *trying* to do magic and the forest around me turned against the Wild Hunt—rocks turned beneath their hooves, branches broke as they rode under, everything that could go wrong for them did.

And yet, in spite of that, in spite of everything I did, in spite of the terrain, the Wild Hunt was gaining. When I'd started they had been perhaps twenty feet away, but within moments that dropped to fifteen, then ten. I wove more barriers of air and shadow to cover my back, but they were alert to that trick now and it hardly even slowed them, while the effort distracted me enough from the running that I judged it actually *cost* me time. They started shooting at me again, forcing me to dodge, which cost more time.

Right then, I knew that if I didn't change the game my life was measured in seconds, and not many at that. My ability to dodge was limited, and at some point one of them would get a lucky shot in and cripple me. After that, well, it was all over but the bleeding.

By now the entirety of the Wild Hunt was right on my trail.

Desperate times call for desperate measures. I turned hard uphill and kept running, panting now. I was starting to regret those bites of horse, as it felt like I was about to start puking them back up whole—*not* a fun prospect, especially given that I hadn't taken the time to chew properly before I swallowed.

I know, I know, karma. Although, in my defense, I feel like I should point out that I wasn't exactly in my right mind, and that I hadn't let this side of myself control my actions for years. That's gotta count for something, right? Right? Anybody?

Anyway, I was running, and they were chasing, when we came to another rock formation. I leapt lightly up onto the boulders, leaving them milling around behind me. Horses aren't good at boulders. Oh, I don't doubt that they could have jumped up to join me—this was the *Wild Hunt* we were talking about, for crying out loud, not a one of them had the limitations they should've—but horses don't do so

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great on uneven ground, especially at high speeds. If they'd have followed me with their mounts I might well have been able to cripple one or more of them just with the terrain.

I kept running, moving uphill. Behind me I heard several of the hounds jumping up to join me, and I thought that at least one person was dismounting to come up on foot, while others rode around to block me at the other side.

Unfortunately, my luck had finally run out. I wound up in a small, rock-scattered pocket canyon. Two of the three sides were steep and thickly wooded hills, rather than sheer rock, but it wouldn't matter. Climbing those slopes would slow me down *way* too much, and I'd be catching an arrow long before I was out to safety.

I turned back to the mouth of the canyon. I was planning, if at all possible, to kill the first one or two pursuers through to cause chaos and then try and bolt. The hills were undoable, but I was hoping that lycanthropic agility and air magic would let me make my way up the rock face, and then the Hunt would have a hell of a time finding their own way round.

It might have worked. It very well might—except for one teeny, tiny little detail.

Snowflake was the first hound through the opening.

Chapter Ten

She was wearing the same stormy shroud as the other members of the Wild Hunt. In spite of that, she was impossible to mistake. I mean, seriously, I'd spent *how* long around her now? Two years or so, maybe? I knew her pretty well, is what I'm saying. Well enough to see her identity in the lines of her body, the color and pattern of her fur where it was exposed by the shifting, swirling storm clouds.

Of course, the eyes helped. In particular the fact that where the right one should have been there was only a network of horrific scars and a hollow, staring pit filed with lightning. She wasn't wearing an eyepatch now, and as a result looked more than slightly creepy, even to me.

Oddly enough, I could feel her presence in my mind just like always, though it was a heck of a lot more muddled and confusing than usual—that's why I hadn't noticed before, I expect. The Snowflake I knew and loved was there, and I could feel a horror from her that was nothing less than heartrending. But overwriting that was the wolf bound, on a very deep level, to her psyche. Usually he was a hardly-detectable presence even to me. He might converse with Snowflake—I don't pry into *that* relationship, because it's freaky even by my standards—but otherwise he was just an observer. Except for tonight, apparently; his presence, dominating Snowflake's, was about an even mixture between the thrill of the hunt and, like Snowflake, a horror at the fact that I was the quarry of it. The wolf is, if anything, more dedicated to me than she is. He thinks of me as his savior.

Both of them, though, were subsumed by the film of the Hunt itself. It was what was directing her movements, clouding her mind with thoughts of blood and death until she was helpless to keep from attacking—in much the same way, I realized suddenly, as my own more remorselessly predatory nature had been directing me, until the sight of her shocked me out of it.

She charged at me where I crouched near the back of the pocket. I could hear a high, heartbroken keening in my mind, but her body just panted eagerly. I knew then that there was nothing, but nothing, she could do to stop herself from killing me.

That's the horrible part about magical compulsion—which, I felt quite sure, was what I was looking at now. It isn't a case of talking to the real person, who you know is buried in there somewhere, and them fighting their way free. I wished it was that pleasant, but it quite simply wasn't. True, for-real compulsion was coming back to yourself *after* you've killed your best friend, and realizing that they not only made you do it, they made you enjoy it.

There's nothing you can do when somebody vastly more powerful gets you in a lock like that. Nothing.

I had no choice. Running was out of the question—my planned escape route was still an option, but it would take far too long, and I knew perfectly well how high she could jump.

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I tensed my muscles, my mouth dropping open, Snowflake's voice rising inside my mind to a scream that exceeded auditory comparisons and dissolved into pure raw emotion as she got ready to leap and I got ready to intercept her and—

—and stopped, wrestling my psycho-killer-wolf aspect back into a subordinate position.

Because the truth is, whatever they might try and tell you, you always have a choice. Always. Oh, I suppose there are cases where you truly don't, but let's face it, if you find yourself in a situation where you literally don't have even a single choice, you're not you anymore. You're a puppet without a mind—because, of course, even beliefs and emotions are a sort of a choice.

I could kill Snowflake—my dog, my best friend, who trusted me implicitly, who had sacrificed more for me than I could even imagine. I could do it. It would be easy. She was more than a husky, but I was more than a werewolf, and the full moon was in the sky. Besides, she wasn't performing at her peak—someone who hates what they're doing almost never does.

I could kill her, and save my life by doing so.

But in that moment, I finally realized something. There were no words attached, just a single *concept* coalescing all at once in an instant.

Caller had asked me what I wanted. And in that moment the answer wasn't money, or fame, or power, or even survival. Not at that cost.

It had been half my life since I looked in the mirror and didn't see a monster looking back. And in that time, what had I done? Fallen pretty damn far, hadn't I? I mean, a while ago a man who used to be my friend straight up told me that I'd gone so far to the dark side that he thought the jury was still out on whether I was actually *a monster that stole the original Winter's face*. More disturbingly yet, I couldn't really argue all that much.

And now I was getting ready to do something that would relegate me to a whole new category of evil by betraying the one person who, out of all the world, trusted me without reservation.

That wasn't what I wanted. I *never* wanted that.

I suppose that's the simplest way to phrase it, really. I wanted to be able to look at my hands without seeing the blood on them. Just once, I wanted to be the person who did the right thing instead of the necessary one.

So no. I wasn't going to kill Snowflake. Because you had to draw the line at some point.

I met her eyes with mine—one blue, one stormy. I let out my breath in a sigh. And, for maybe the first time in two years, I felt, not happy, but...at peace. It wasn't how I'd wanted to go out—if nothing else, I hated how much it would hurt Snowflake to do it—but there are worse things than dying.

And right then is when some bastard seized me by the scruff of the neck and turned the world into a goddamn Tilt-a-Whirl. Because *obviously* that couldn't have happened *before* the disturbing psychological revelations.

It was impossible to keep track of what happened. Perspective shifted and spun too fast—every time I blinked I seemed to be looking at something different, and no single view lasted long enough to make sense of. I was falling, running, jumping, and swimming all at once.

After maybe twenty repetitions, everything stopped and, naturally, my head started spinning instead. I took two steps before puking. It was pretty much exactly as unpleasant as I had anticipated.

"Hurry it up," Carraig said, sounding tense and jittery. "They'll be on us soon. Five minutes tops."

I heaved myself to my feet and looked out over the valley. I'd never been here before, but I nevertheless had no difficulty figuring out where we were. I'd seen the broad, low, rock-strewn hilltop overlooking the valley from a reasonable distance a dozen times or so.

I stared. Five minutes? To bring thirty horses up game trails, with at least a thousand feet elevation gain in a few miles?

Carraig smiled thinly. "You've no idea how fast they can be when they want to." He stared out over the expanse. "Start changing," he said abruptly.

I wasn't sure *why* he thought that would be a good idea—but, hey, my attempt hadn't exactly gone to plan, and it wasn't like I had a whole heck of a lot to lose. Besides, full moon or not, I didn't think for a moment that I would live if he decided to kill me. It was hard—the wolf was fighting me for control, urging me to go out and resume the hunt, any hunt, encouraged by the moon—but I initiated the change back to my more normal form.

Carraig nodded approvingly. "The Hunt can draw you in," he said by way of explanation. "You were getting pretty close towards the end there. Much further, you might not have made it out."

I shivered slightly—*not* recommended in the middle of shifting, by the way—and pressured my body to change faster. It was hard, terribly hard beneath the staring eye of the full moon, but I had a lot of practice at focusing my will.

This was getting to be a little much, though. I mean, I could see the first one, that was a pretty obvious call, but the second? What, was he capable of reading my mind?

"Only a little," he assured me, staring off into the middle distance. "And that's more than usual." He hissed softly. "We're going to have to bolt for it. Sorry about that." He grabbed me by the scruff of the neck again, paying no attention to my gurgled sound of pain, and there was another round of whirlwind transitions. It was, if anything, a lot less fun than the last. On the bright side, I didn't throw up this time.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

The dim side was, of course, that this was primarily because my esophagus wasn't in working order. But hey, there *was* a silver lining involved.

After that, I had plenty of motivation to finish the change as fast as inhumanly possible. Strangely enough the prospect of being yanked around by the neck while in the middle of rearranging my bodily structures was enough to convince me. I guess I'm easy that way.

"I don't understand," I panted a minute or two later, blinking away tears. That had been a *very* unpleasant change. "I thought you wanted me dead."

On the other hand, the instant I was human again the Second Sight cut off like a faucet. That was more than a minor relief. I was just glad that the universe had been merciful enough not to show me Carraig—or, even worse, *Snowflake*—through that particular lens. A primal force of the grim side of nature was one thing, but looking at *people* was infinitely more unsettling.

He gave me a perplexed look. "Dead? What gave you that idea?"

I stared. Then I held up one hand and pointed at the wrist—where, I might add, the crucifixion scars were still quite visible. Fenris had done me a real favor there, but they hadn't healed significantly since that point, leaving an easily noticeable whitish indentation.

"That wouldn't have killed you," he said, sounding aggrieved. "It was just supposed to keep you out of the game for a while. Didn't expect the dog to find you." He squinted out at the valley—we were relatively high on the side of the hill looking out over it, by the way. "Guess she's paying it back sooner than she expected."

"Wait, what?"

He glanced at me. "You saw her. You didn't think the Wild Hunt just took random dogs off the street, did you?"

Wow. I hadn't even thought about it, but he was telling the truth. Practically the first lesson they teach you about the fae (right after "stay the hell away from the fae") was that it's always about bargains, giving one thing up in exchange for another. "Are you saying—" I began.

"Later," he said, cutting me off effortlessly. "The Wild Hunt isn't going to put up with this much longer. We need to get out of here."

I stared. "What do you mean? You can't just run away from the Wild Hunt."

"No," he said testily. "But you can put enough distance between you and them that they get bored and go after someone else." He held his hand out toward me.

I stared for a moment, then sighed. I hate it when, right after you've made up your mind to do the noble self-sacrificing thing, after much agonizing, somebody comes along and offers you a fresh new

deal with the devil. It's like getting gut-punched at the end of an exhalation. "No," I said, feeling very tired.

He stood, hand still outstretched, something that I suppose you could call a smile on his face. "No?"

"No," I said. "I'm not leaving without Snowflake."

"I can't carry both of you through shadow," he said testily.

I shrugged. "Get her, then."

"That's not a high-value move for me," he said. "Especially considering the danger involved in snatching someone away from the Wild Hunt."

I thought for a moment. "I'll give you the Gáe Bolg in return," I said.

"You have it?" he asked. I did not miss the sudden note of avarice in his voice.

"No," I said, which was technically true in the immediate sense—I got the distinct impression that answering *yes* to that question could be highly hazardous to my health. "But I know just where it is, and no one else does. Get Snowflake out of here, without inflicting upon her physically or mentally anything that I or she would regard as harm, and it's yours."

"I get the spear first," he said.

"Your word on it."

"I give you my word," he said, his voice more heavily accented than usual and quite serious, "that upon obtaining the Gáe Bolg I will find the being known as Snowflake, and will remove her from the sphere of the Wild Hunt, without harming her as per your conditions."

"And return her," I said, "to me, or in the event of my death or imprisonment, to the city of Colorado Springs."

He nodded. "Aye, even so."

"Swear it."

His eyes glinted and I got the distinct impression that he was *not* happy about even that much of an aspersion, but he didn't protest. "I swear," he said in an even if somewhat hungry tone, "upon my honor, to rescue your companion as we have just outlined. May Scáthach strike me down if I lie."

Well, that settled that. For anyone in the supernatural world to break a sworn oath was highly unusual. For someone associated with the fae to do so would be unprecedented. For Carraig to break an oath sworn on his patron goddess's name would be...a highly entertaining way to commit suicide.

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Entertaining for Scáthach, I mean. For Carraig, well, not so much. The Sidhe, like most divine and quasi-divine beings, are noted for both creativity and a total lack of proportion when it comes to the revenging, and they take their rep *seriously*.

I nodded and took his hand. "Fair enough," I said.

Getting to where I'd hidden the spear was a bit of fun, given that I didn't understand Carraig's mode of transport well enough to give him really specific directions. It didn't help that I hadn't been there at night in several years. Shadow-walking was fast enough, though, that it still took only a few minutes to get there.

I felt a certain satisfaction when Carraig didn't see the spear on his own. Granted my precautions hadn't been as necessary as I anticipated, but it was good to know that they would have worked.

Fortunately, I'd memorized where to look. I fished around in the crack for a moment, then pulled my cloak out. Underneath, I saw something incredible.

The Gáe Bolg was...still there. I mean, I'd more than slightly expected that someone had already stolen it and left the cloak to mock me. I was even ready for Carraig to get seriously pissed at me for leading him on, kill me in a slow and unpleasant way, and leave Snowflake to her fate. But no, the long steel shaft was still there.

Carraig, moving faster than I'd thought *possible* for flesh-and-blood entities, darted over and snatched it up. A beatific smile spread across his face, and he cradled the ancient weapon to his chest. If he felt the same numbing effect I had, he didn't show it at all. Not surprising, really; his was, if I understood things correctly, the role which traditionally used the damn thing.

"I'll be going, then," he said.

"Wait," I said frantically.

Shockingly, he actually *did*. Wow, this was just my lucky night. "What is it?"

"I don't suppose you could drop me off where I stashed my stuff on the way?" I asked. Now that my more rational, planning-oriented side was back in charge, I could actually *remember* what the original intent of said plan had been.

He shrugged. "Don't see why not. Come on."

Back where I'd dumped my stuff, I hurriedly started digging through my pack. I knew, on an instinctive level that I didn't bother questioning, that the Wild Hunt was done playing cat-and-mouse—

and they had been playing, I knew that too, or else I would have died in the first ten seconds of the hunt—and this was the final stretch of the chase.

It's hard to put on and take off armor solo. They never seem to mention that in the stories, but it's true. I mean, it's bad enough under ordinary circumstances. In the middle of the night, when you're in such a panicky rush that your fingers are shaking a little and you're still struggling the whole time to keep mental and physical control because you're a werewolf and it's the full moon and all your instincts are screaming that this is the time to cast off your humanity and hunt, it's significantly harder.

I managed, though. It helped a lot that, because whatever cousin Aiko had contracted the armor from put efficiency over tradition, all the fastenings were fiercely modern in nature. Stiff leather and medieval-style buckles would have been impossible.

By the time I had the breastplate, greaves, and associated parts on, I could hear the hounds again. I hurriedly tugged on the boots—not *armored*, exactly, but heavy-duty leather made to match the armor—and stuffed my hands into the gauntlets. Because wearing rings under gauntlets is *not* a fun experience, I was still wearing the bracelet with rings attached around my neck, although I'd had to wrap it around a couple of times so it was snug enough to not fall off.

I summoned Tyrfing and clipped it onto the belt I'd packed (and *that* was tons of fun, let me tell you; the armor was designed to stack together in the smallest possible space, but it still took up a lot of room in the pack), then swung my cloak over my shoulders, leaving it open in the front except for one spot at the neck to hold it in place. It looked scarier, having the armor exposed. I grabbed the helmet, artfully designed in the shape of a snarling wolf's head, and jammed it onto my head. I'd seldom worn it, because it was *extremely* conspicuous and it got really hot inside what was essentially a glorified tin can lined with Kevlar (I suppose part of it is also because I just plain hate it that every single thing I own seems to contribute to the impression that I have an unhealthy obsession with wolves, when it's really just a whole bunch of unfortunate coincidences). Tonight, though, I wanted both maximum intimidation factor and the most protection possible, and either of those was sufficient motivation for wearing the thing.

I took a deep breath, and tossed the pack aside. The hounds had fallen silent, and it wasn't hard to guess why. I could see eyes, burning with the light of the storm, in a loose semicircle around me, though the shroud of darkness kept everything else hidden in the night. The rock was at my back, but everywhere else was filled with the sparks, lightning in miniature sparking and fading only to flash again. The riders wouldn't be far behind them.

"Pier!" I shouted. "Are you coming? Or are you too much the coward to face me yourself?"

There was a sudden, absolute stillness, as though the whole world were waiting with bated breath. A moment later, the glowing eyes began to fall back, a gap forming within the semicircle. Pier rode through it, huge and grim in the dark, wreathed in storm and lightning. His horse, which looked even bigger and scarier through human eyes, set each foot slowly, deliberately, with a sound

somewhere between thunder and falling trees. Up close they smelled—in addition to everything that Pier himself smelled like—of ozone and storm winds and terror and fresh-spilled blood.

My blood, specifically. It was a rather distinct and depressingly familiar aroma.

"Coward?" he boomed mockingly. "You're the one that ran."

I grinned fiercely behind my helmet (incidentally, do you have any idea how hard it is to really *project* from inside a helmet? If I kept this up I might have to find, like, an opera coach or something). "That's funny," I said, carefully mocking. "I seem to remember there being a couple more of you a few minutes ago." I waved cheerily to the Cu Sith with the fresh, livid scars across its face. It growled in response, sounding distinctly unfriendly.

But I saw, behind Pier's back, that it also dipped its head in a sort of bow, and there was respect in its eerily intelligent eyes.

My heart lifted at the sight. Until then I hadn't known, not really *known*, whether this would work, but when I saw how the hound reacted I was sure.

I first got the idea from what Fenris had said. He'd compared the Wild Hunt to a werewolf pack, and I'm sure that was no mistake—if nothing else, the presence of werewolves in the Hunt's retinue suggested some relationship. And besides, it just makes sense. They were both primal magics, powers of the hunt and the hunter. It wouldn't make *sense* for them to have nothing in common. And that brings us to my plan.

You see, a werewolf pack is an interesting dynamic, socially speaking. Dominance is a huge part of werewolf psychology, more so even than humans. But, as Ryan had implied, dominance—in the sense of the psychological traits that make a person unwilling to submit—was nothing without the authority and the respect to back it up. That was why, for example, Kyra was having discipline problems—part of it was that she wasn't really Alpha-level dominant, just closer than anyone else nearby. But more was because her experiences with Roland had left her too psychologically scarred to instill that sense of *authority* in a way that werewolves could understand, subconsciously.

That, really, was the key I was counting on. The pack is implicitly loyal to the Alpha—right up until the moment the Alpha does something to suggest that he's too weak to lead, in which case the best they can hope for is to be deposed. Worst case—and much more common—that deposition is lethal. In Kyra's case, even though her wolves recognized that she was no coward (and that intelligent decision-making was more important in a leader than fondness of violence), her reluctance to physically keep them in line told their instincts that she was unfit.

By fighting back instead of running blindly—and, more importantly, by fighting *successfully*, at least in some small measure—I told the predators in the Wild Hunt that I was one of them, not prey. Prey you can hunt and kill at will, but a predator demands respect, especially from the literal embodiment of the hunt. If I could capitalize on that respect, well, this might not be *quite* over yet after all.

"The one you slew was the weakest of us," Pier boomed, his own voice also mocking. "Hardly a feat to boast of."

"Why'd you send him instead of coming yourself then?" I wondered aloud. "Surely a champion of the *Daylight* isn't too cowardly to deal with little old me himself." That, too, was a calculated tactic. The Wild Hunt might disdain such things as courts and politics, but the fact remained that it was a force of darkness, and not fond of the Seelie Court. By reminding them that Pier was a representative of Day, I hoped to drive just another spike between them.

"I don't know, though," I continued, voice disingenuously thoughtful. "I mean, you *did* feel the need for this whole Hunt so you didn't have to face me alone. Maybe your balls really *are* that small."

There was a reaction—just the barest indrawn breath, the slightest pause, but my senses were working overtime right now—at that. Good; I'd worried the insult wouldn't carry the same meaning for the fae, but it looked to have done the job.

Between the cloud, the lightning, and the helmet, it was impossible to see Pier's face. But I could feel his frustration, somehow, in his gaze on me. He was silent for a moment, and I got the distinct impression he was trying to think of a way out of it. Unfortunately for him, at this point there wasn't one—even if he tried to turn this back into a regular hunt, the Wild Hunt following him would inevitably wonder if he really *was* afraid of me.

Showing fear in front of the biggest, baddest collection of hunters in the world is not a good way to go about securing a long and happy life.

He really shouldn't have stopped to gloat.

And then I noticed something. The noise had stopped. Oh, it had been quiet before, but this was different. The wind, the gentle rustling of branches, even the barely-detectable sounds of breathing ceased. Silence was absolute. Stillness was absolute. The hounds were still watching me, eyes bright with lightning, but I could feel that their attention was elsewhere.

I didn't shudder, but I wanted to. Something *big* was coming.

I was not disappointed. Through the clouds rode another Hunter, one I hadn't seen before. I would have noticed, if I had.

She rode a pure white stallion, with lightning woven through his mane. (Don't give me that line about no white horses, either. If you can say that with a straight face, I promise you it's because you've never seen a faerie horse.) The horse itself was something majestic, shaming even the other Hunters'. But it paled in comparison to the rider.

I have trouble describing just what made her so remarkable. She was tall and slender and beautiful, but not so tall as other Sidhe I'd seen, nor any more beautiful. She carried in her right hand a

spear that looked as though a beam of moonlight had fallen to the earth and been trapped in her grasp, but it was no more beautiful or terrifying than Tyrfing.

She was simply *more* than the other Sidhe. She was terribly awesome and awesomely terrible and to look at her was to see the beauty and the terror of the Night. The mantle of the Wild Hunt hung over her like a cloak, and in that moment I'd never seen anything quite so unearthly.

I bowed my head slightly, when she entered the ring, and I saw that Pier did as well. We had no choice. For all that I was a werewolf and born of Fenris's line, for all that he was a champion of the Sidhe himself, we could not help but acknowledge that she was so much more. She took it as her due, not even looking at us.

"Master Pier," she said in a voice like harps and thunder. "This one calls thee coward. He says thou art no hunter at all, but prey. How will thou answer?"

He raised his head, and though his face was hidden behind the helmet and the mask of shadow it was still quite clear he was looking straight at me. "In blood, lady, as is only fit."

"Come then, brethren," she said with the air of someone who'd already known what form the conversation would take. A ritual, then. No surprise there. "Let us witness this proving."

Moving with slow deliberation, Pier dismounted and slapped his horse on the flank. It obligingly turned and cantered off. The shroud of the Hunt had drawn back to form a low, loose ring around us, and within seconds the beast had vanished into it. The others rode, although the specter on the white stallion was the only one I could see clearly.

I paced slowly, steadily out from the rocks. I didn't want to start this with an obstacle at my back, after all. Pier moved with me, not turning his back to me. I noticed, with an idle part of my mind, that the Hunt's magic had stopped smelling like my blood in particular and gone back to more generic hunting smells. I wasn't the sole focus of this hunt anymore, although I had no doubt that if I lost—or worse, *ran*—they'd be on me faster than you could say "Psych!"

We moved out, pacing each other, through the ranks of hunters, all of which silently parted before us. Up close, I could see them much more closely, as the fog swirled around them—even without the moon, their own attendant storm would have provided enough light to see.

I wasn't particularly happy about this fact. Some of the riders were Sidhe, and not unlike those of that race I'd seen before—which is to say unnaturally beautiful, slender figures that moved with inhuman grace. They tended to be the ones carrying the elegant, lovely weapons—intricately carved longbows, slender swords made of crystal or some metal that gleamed like silver in the moonlight, and long spears that were both beautiful and terrible in their simplicity.

Others were...equally terrifying, but less humanoid. I saw several short, musclebound figures that were hideously ugly, and couldn't have been mistaken for men by a blind dog who'd never even *encountered* a human being. Their exact features varied a lot, but none of them were pleasant. Some

had tusks, or jagged teeth that could have been transplanted from a shark's mouth, or four-inch-long claws. Most of them seemed to disdain all but the most cursory of armor. They carried weapons, though, crude things that made no effort to look like anything other than brutal instruments of destruction—war axes, flanged maces, and short, heavy bows seemed to be the norm.

They did have one thing in common, to be fair. All of them were grinning wide, bloodthirsty grins below mad, wild eyes. I wasn't sure whether they wanted me to win or die. I wasn't entirely sure they *cared*, so long as blood was spilled.

There were other, stranger things among that terrible hunting party as well, many of which I fully expected to haunt my nightmares if I made it out of here. I saw something that vaguely resembled a wolf walking upright, which disdained the use of horse and weapon and armor—no wonder that I'd mistaken it for another of the hounds at a distance. Alone of all the Wild Hunt, it saluted me as I walked past. Smaller things rode several of the hounds, carrying appropriately scaled weaponry. I didn't make the mistake of thinking that made them less dangerous than their human-sized counterparts.

After the first few seconds, I stopped looking. It wasn't as severe without the Second Sight, but the Wild Hunt was still not comfortable to be around. I smelled a dozen kinds of magic as I passed through them, and most of those smells had blood in them.

After we'd moved out a ways, Pier and I were surrounded in a sea of storm, bright eyes and dimly seen figures moving in a loose ring around us. The hounds had started to make noise again, growls and snarls rather than the baying of the hunt, and I thought that I heard a sort of indecipherable susurrus from the storm cloud as well. It was just on the threshold of hearing, and I was tempted to stop for a moment to hear it more clearly. I resisted, of course. I'd heard the stories, and nothing good *ever* happened to people who made a mistake that glaring.

We were moving pretty slowly, so it was almost a minute of walking, although it felt much longer at the time. My nerves were getting seriously jittery, and I half-wished they'd just kill me and get it over with.

On the other hand, I didn't see or hear or feel Snowflake in the Hunt anymore. Some victory, at least, and good to know that Carraig had kept his word.

Once we were out on flat, level ground, Pier stopped. I stopped as well, perhaps ten feet away. The rest of the Wild Hunt were invisible in the cloud, but I had no doubt that they were there.

It helped that the hounds and not-hounds, visible only in the form of lightning-eyes in the darkness, formed a distinct ring around us, perhaps thirty feet across. The implication was clear: the arena had been defined, and whosoever broke it could expect no mercy.

This was the Wild Hunt, after all, and mercy had no part in that.

The Sidhe on the white horse had faded into the cloud, but I had no doubt that it was her voice I heard. It had eerie overtones of thunder, and of baying hounds, which reminded me oddly of Fenris.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Let us see, brethren," she said, the voice coming from everywhere and nowhere, lost in the storm, "which of those before us is the greater hunter, and the hounds feed upon the unworthy." A stroke of lightning fell in the dead center of the circle, evenly between myself and Pier, and the boom of thunder following it seemed almost to hold the sound of hunting horns within it.

Showtime.

Pier drew his monster of a sword slowly. It shone in the moonlight, and flickered oddly as he spun it lightly in his hands.

Fortunately, at least in the weapons department, I wasn't outclassed. Tyrfing sang as it slipped free of the scabbard, gentle and suffused with the promise of death. Its surface was bright as a mirror, and in the eerie half-light of the moon and the storm it almost seemed that it was reflecting a bit too much light to be just a reflection.

There was a moment of silence, much like that which had accompanied the Sidhe lady's appearance, when I drew my sword. Tyrfing was a mighty sword, and its appearance on any battlefield was the sort of thing that demanded respect—and got it, even from the Wild Hunt.

That probably should have scared me more than it did.

Pier and I began to slowly circle one another. The mask of storm and shadow still wreathed his body, making it hard to say for sure, but I thought he seemed a lot less angry than I would have anticipated. Resigned, perhaps, would be a better word. Like...he didn't *regret* what was about to happen, but he wasn't going to celebrate it either.

After a minute or so of this, with the low growling of the hounds the only soundtrack to the fight, Pier attacked. He closed the distance between us faster than anyone his size should have been able to move, let alone somebody wearing heavy armor, and launched the same diagonal strike he'd used to start the fight with Carraig.

Like Carraig before me, I ducked easily away to the rear. I didn't bother trying to parry; Pier was twice my size, a champion of the Sidhe, and wreathed in the power of the Wild Hunt besides. The only thing matching my strength to his was likely to do was rip my arms off. Better to dodge.

He was obviously expecting the move, because he immediately turned the slash into a cross-body thrust at my chest. *This* blow I could parry—not pitting my strength against his directly, but striking perpendicularly to the direction of his strike while stepping sideways. Like Carraig's sword, his weapon was apparently immune to Tyrfing's edge. Shame.

"Not bad," Pier said, falling back out of range of any counterattack. I took several steps back as well—his sword was rather longer than mine, after all.

"I don't get it," I said, watching him warily. The storm would make it harder to see the telltale cues before he attacked. "You saved my life from Carraig."

"I thought that you'd lead me to the spear," he said, shifting the sword to a higher guard.

"That doesn't make a lot of sense, you know," I pointed out. "It was pretty clear that I was looking for it for myself. Why would you want me to find it before you?"

I thought for a second that he would answer me. Instead he lunged forward, cutting horizontally at his shoulder height—halfway up my head, in other words. I was a little too slow dodging, and had to interpose Tyrfing between me and the attack. As I'd expected, the force of the huge man's swing tore it from my hand, but it gave me time to fall back and the sword passed over my head.

Pier pressed the attack, stepping forward and bringing his blade back around to stab at me while I was lying on the ground. I had no idea how he could move that monster of a sword around so quickly and effortlessly—his strength had to be almost unimaginable.

Fortunately, there's more than one way to fight. I flung shadow and air at his foot just as it started to move, knocking it sideways behind his other leg. A textbook perfect foot-sweep, executed with magic. He didn't fall, but he stumbled and the would-be killing stroke fell far short. I had plenty of time to scramble to my feet and recover Tyrfing.

"Maybe I didn't want Carraig killing you," Pier admitted.

"Why not?" I asked, genuinely curious. A failing of mine, perhaps, that I was obsessed with figuring out why things were happening when it would have been smarter to worry about surviving the next five minutes.

Pier stepped closer, forcing me to retreat. Much farther and I'd run into the line of hounds. "I loved your mother," he said, low enough that not even the dogs would hear and cold enough to make the night air look like a sauna.

I fainted at his face. He batted Tyrfing casually from my hands—I was barely even *trying* to hold onto the thing, at this point—but I used the time it bought to circle around him, giving myself room to maneuver. "Then why call the Hunt against me?" I asked, summoning Tyrfing once again. That was an excellent trick, and I had to admit that maybe I was actually grateful to Val for giving me the sword. Cursed or not, Tyrfing had served me admirably.

"She never loved me, of course," Pier continued, taking no notice of my question. He lunged at me, holding the huge sword one-handed, but he was so far overextended I could deflect it easily enough, and even riposte. "But she never lied about it. And she was willing to play around."

I shuddered and cut at his legs, mostly to interrupt that sentence. I *so* didn't want to hear the details of what my mother got up to with the champion of Daylight. I mean, I knew enough sordid stories about her sexual exploits already to make me nauseous whenever I thought about it. I did *not* need another.

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Pier stepped away from the attack easily, and cut down at my hands. I dropped Tyrfing and jerked back out of the way. His sword hit the ground and sank three feet into it, having as much difficulty cutting into the rocky earth as most blades have with the resistance of jelly. It wouldn't last long, but for just a moment his sword was trapped, and I took advantage of it. Tyrfing came easily to my call, and I brought the cursed sword down in an attack on *his* hand. I didn't cut it off—Pier was uncannily fast even by my standards—but I nicked one of his fingers. First blood to me—and, better yet, now I knew that Tyrfing would penetrate both the storm and the armor without difficulty.

Not surprising, really. There isn't much that can resist Tyrfing's edge. But it was good to be sure.

Pier snatched his sword back up before I could press the advantage any further, and danced away. "I suppose I feel like I owe her," he said, circling around again. I moved with him, so that the distance between us remained constant.

I raised one eyebrow behind my helmet. "And yet you brought the Wild Hunt here to kill me."

He snorted, moving the sword's point through small patterns in the air. The cut to his finger didn't seem to be bothering him at all, and in fact now that I thought about it I couldn't smell blood anymore—or, at least, not more than the background magic of the Hunt. He'd healed already, healed a cut made by Tyrfing no less. Wonderful. "That's *why*. I don't know whether she'd want vengeance, but it's the least I can do."

I blinked, and almost lost a hand because of it when Pier attacked without warning. I barely dodged out of the way in time. "Vengeance? For what?" I was starting to run out of breath and it probably would have been smarter to conserve it for the fighting, but I've never been too smart where my curiosity is concerned.

That's the source of a lot of my problems, actually, now that I think about it.

"Killing her, maybe?" he said.

"My mother was a suicide," I spat, thrusting at his abdomen. He batted the attack aside with his hand, not even bothering with the sword.

"Suicide?" he said mockingly, stepping back out of range. "Yes, I suppose that's what they would have told you. Wouldn't do to hurt your feelings, after all."

"What are you getting at?" I asked, falling back as well. I wanted to be sure that I heard what he had to say before the fight was over, either way.

"You never met her," he said, voice dripping venom. "But I know you've heard stories. If you've any of her brains you must have thought that the story they told you doesn't make a lot of sense." He snorted again. "Suicide in slow-motion? Carmine Vilkas, dead of a broken heart for someone she spent one night with? I don't think so."

"What would you know?" I snarled. I was somewhat surprised at the depth of my own emotion; I'd always thought that her death didn't bother me all that much—I'd never known her, after all—but apparently I'd been wrong. It occurred to me, somewhat belatedly, that neither of us was keeping his voice down.

"I don't know what your father was," Pier said, and his voice wasn't calm either. "And I've no idea what sort of monster you are. But I *know* a parasite when I see one." He started stalking closer to me.

"What do you mean?"

"Exactly what I said!" he roared, loud enough to hurt. "You're a *leech*, and she died because of it! You took something from her, and the more you grew the more she lost. But it was never enough!"

"No," I stammered. Glancing back, I saw that I was once again almost to the edge of the ring. I heard the hounds behind me growling, snarling. "No, you're lying."

Pier laughed. "Tell yourself whatever you please." He was close enough, now, to attack, and he did.

It quickly became clear that he was done with talking, and ready for the fight to be over. If I'd thought he was fast before, now it became clear that he had been slacking off. Now he wasn't, and he moved almost too fast to see.

In the first five seconds he attacked me twenty-three times. That included fifteen sword blows, five unarmed attacks—which, of course, would have been every bit as lethal had they connected, given how unimaginably strong he was—and three magical attacks. Of those last, two involved fire, and the last was a beam of light that I felt sure would have burned like a laser. I dodged it, fortunately, and it dissipated when it struck the wall of storm around us.

I have no idea how I survived that barrage. I was once again moving on instinct, not thinking at all, and while I know exactly what he tried to do to me I cannot for the life of me say what I did to avoid it. By the time we came apart, I'd lost Tyrfing—a few times, I think—and I was bleeding from several wounds, none of them life-threatening. He'd broken a couple ribs when he connected with a knee, even through the armor.

But I was alive. And not all the blood I could smell was mine, so I must have nicked him again in there somewhere.

Pier was finally starting to show some signs of wear—apparently even he was stressed by that flurry of attacks, because he was breathing heavily, and his guard wasn't quite as perfect as it had been before.

That wasn't quite as comforting as it might have been, because I was undoubtedly still the worse off by a wide margin. I was panting, and even with the full moon the cuts to my left shoulder and right

shin would be moderately incapacitating, and of course the ribs had the potential to be a serious inconvenience.

In other words, things looked bad. I'd been playing Pier's game, and now that he was playing seriously it was very clear that I would lose. I couldn't survive another onslaught like that, and he looked plenty capable of launching one.

So. That meant I had to change the game.

I backpedaled fast, almost to the other edge of the ring. Pier looked at me, and even with the mask and the armor anger was writ large in every line of his body. He charged straight at me—no words now, no careful exchanges. This wasn't a play fight anymore.

Perfect.

I concentrated. I would have to time this perfectly for it to have any chance of success. At a thought the wind picked up, blowing into my face. The air around me dropped a couple of degrees, and I felt my mouth spread into a cold smile. "Ten thousand years of winter," I murmured, and wrapped the freshly forming frost around my fingers. Feathers of frost spread in seconds across my body, down Tyrfing's length, onto the ground at my feet.

It was that last one I was concerned about. Pier was around ten feet away, his sword upraised, and moving fast. I concentrated on a thought I still barely understood, and the frost around me spread further, turned in places to ice.

Pier was fast, strong, and skilled, and I don't doubt that he could have killed me. He was furious, too, enough to do it without a first thought, let alone a second. But, like some werewolves I'd known, he let that fury blind him. Being too angry to see straight can be an asset in a fight, occasionally, but it seldom helps a person think clearly.

It *definitely* wasn't helping Pier right now.

I waited until he was only a few feet away, until the sword had already started the downswing, before I moved. I didn't try and fight. I dove sideways to the ground instead, simultaneously throwing a surge of magic behind the wind, whipping it up into a gale. It was very localized, and it would only last a moment—I wasn't strong enough to muster anything more.

It was enough. Pier tried to turn to face me, where he would have plenty of time to run me through on the ground, but his own supernatural speed worked against him. He had so much momentum, aided by the tailwind I'd so thoughtfully given him, that he couldn't turn on a dime.

I was suddenly reminded of the demon-possessed werewolf, the only thing I'd ever fought that could possibly have matched Pier in terms of sheer strength. Like him, it hadn't been able to perfectly control its own momentum once it really got going.

Of course, back then I hadn't been able to produce patches of ice on the ground on an otherwise warm night.

Pier's foot hit the ice slick just as he was turning his forward momentum into a turn. For those of you who haven't had the joy of experiencing something similar, trying to turn at speed while on ice isn't a very good idea. Predictably enough, his foot went out from under him.

Of course, he still had a lot of momentum. And the ground was quite slick, what with all the frost and ice on it. So, rather than bounce straight back to his feet, Pier slid.

Into the storm.

I couldn't see what happened, then. But I could hear it. It didn't sound nice. Not nice at all, in fact.

I moved back out to the center of the ring, and finally did what I should have done to begin with. That is to say, I used my brain.

Pier was vastly my superior in physical combat. That was obvious. I couldn't continue to fight him like this and hope to survive—and he wouldn't fall for that trick with the ice again. That was for sure. He might not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but he wouldn't have lasted five minutes with the Sidhe without some kind of brain.

But he wasn't omnipotent. And, as the sounds from the cloud bank started dying down, I realized something. Pier hadn't, at any point, pulled the weird short-range teleportation he and Carraig had employed so extensively while fighting each other. Now, in the early stages, that made a certain amount of sense—he hadn't wanted to kill me all *that* much, clearly. But now? He wasn't playing softball. So why no teleportation?

I thought maybe it was because he couldn't. I mean, the only way I could think of to work that sort of ability was to use the same mechanism as a portal to the Otherside. Oh, not exactly—but everything I'd ever learned about magic suggested that just flat-out manipulating the fabric of space was impossible. Or, if not outright impossible, nigh-impossibly difficult. Portals avoid that difficulty by exploiting the fluidity of the border between my world and the Otherside—but even on the Otherside, with its bizarre approach to geography, I'd never seen or heard of a portal from one place to another within the same domain.

So, if I was right, Carraig's shadow walking trick had been essentially the same thing, in a different way—taking advantage of his role as an avatar of Midnight to walk from one shadow to another through the medium of Faerie.

Pier couldn't do that, not now. Because to do so would, in some measure, be to leave the area set aside for our duel, even if he exited and reappeared within it.

I grinned and saw what I had been doing wrong. I tossed Tyrfinn aside.

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

Just in time, too. Pier walked back out of the storm cloud at more-or-less the same time I had my realization. And he looked like hell.

In spite of everything, I had to admit a certain amount of pity for the big man. He was quite literally dripping—both normal, human blood, and something that looked like liquid shadow touched with lightning from the tears in the Wild Hunt's mask. Parts of his armor, visible where the shroud of storm had faded, were missing. In most cases the gaps revealed burns, but I also saw a few puncture wounds, at least one of which was too big to have been made by teeth. Even werewolf teeth.

Note to self: don't try to leave the ring. The Hunt wouldn't take it kindly.

The injuries were terrible. They would have killed a human, no doubt about it. Even a werewolf, even tonight, would have likely been incapacitated. Even Pier noticed them. His sword was missing a chunk from the hilt, which appeared to have been bitten off, but he was still carrying it, and looking very angry. If he was moving slower now than before, it was clearly because he didn't want to get burned again.

I didn't waste time talking. Instead, as soon as I could see him clearly, I threw the object in my left hand at his feet.

Light is a very simple thing to produce with magic. I mean, magic is defined by thought, right? Well, pure light's something very easy to think about. It's easy to concentrate on, which makes it easy to work with. I'm not very good with it, just like I'm not good with almost everything else. Using it in a fight was probably a waste of time.

But that all changes when you're talking about a stored spell instead of something cast spontaneously. With a stored spell, all the work is put in on the front end, meaning you have all the time you need. That takes a lot of the stress out.

The clear marble I'd just thrown was one of the simpler spells I'd made. It was designed to trigger on impact, and to do nothing fancy. It would just burst into light.

Very, very bright light.

I turned my face away and closed my eyes in time. It was still bright enough to see through my eyelids. Pier, who hadn't had any such forewarning, was caught by the full brunt of the light. When I opened my eyes again, he was standing still, one hand outstretched. I didn't think blindness would slow him down—heck, even *I* could function on other senses—but it *had* stunned him momentarily. It had stopped him, however briefly, in his tracks.

Which meant he wasn't watching closely enough to stop me from throwing what was in my right hand. Namely, Tyrfing.

Throwing your sword in a fight is a bad idea. It's a *terrible* idea. But Tyrfing isn't a normal sword, and as such it isn't subject to the same limitations as a normal sword. For one thing, the curse on it

ensures that bad things happen to whosoever has the bad luck to be near it, which means that you don't have to worry about a bad bounce or it twisting in the air—throw it at someone, and that someone will probably get stuck.

For another, I could always recall it to hand. That alone takes throwing it at the enemy from an insanely stupid tactic to a quite workable one.

I did not, of course, leave it at that. I also drew a knife in my left hand and threw that. And a rock.

As I watched, the giant fell. It was more akin to watching a tree fall than anything I associated with people. A few moments later, the shroud of the Wild Hunt flowed away, fading into the background storm. I walked over to inspect my handiwork.

As I'd expected, Tyrfing alone almost certainly would have been lethal—a yard of powerfully cursed steel through your lung can do that to a person. I cursed when I saw that—I would have preferred to ask him whether he was lying about my mother, but I wasn't going to be asking Pier anything. Ever again. Or, more accurately, I wouldn't be getting an *answer*—I could ask all I wanted, he was just too dead to reply. The knife, which had hit one of the large gaps the Hunt had left in his armor, had hit blade-first and slipped between his ribs—assisted, undoubtedly, by Tyrfing. A spinning knife is just random enough for an entropy curse to affect.

This is also, of course, why the stone had bounced off his breastplate straight up under his helmet and shattered his jaw. Even if he hadn't died instantly, there was no way he could have spoken.

I collapsed to the ground next to him. I felt almost too exhausted to move. I'd been throwing around a lot of magic, tonight, and between that, the injuries, the exertion, and the fact that I still wasn't totally recovered from being crucified, I was pretty much wiped out.

Around me, the hounds went from sullen growling to outright howling. A moment later, the Sidhe with the white horse rode out into the open space. "Excellent," she murmured, looking down at Pier's dead body with unmistakable satisfaction.

I looked up at her, although now that the adrenaline was fading even that much movement was an effort. "I take it you're satisfied with how things turned out, then, Scáthach?"

"How did you guess?" she asked me, a laugh like the loveliest of bells playing a dirge underneath the surface of her voice.

"Pier couldn't have called the Wild Hunt himself," I said dully. "And they weren't really trying to kill me, from the start." I stared off into the night, still shrouded from view by the Hunt's porta-storm. "You were happy to see him dead." I shrugged listlessly. "Seemed like a reasonable guess."

She laughed delightedly. "So! A fine mind, for one so young. Perhaps my sister was right about you."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"Your sister?" I asked. I realized I sounded almost as monotone, in my exhaustion, as Bryan did all the time. If I hadn't been so damned tired it would almost have been funny.

Scáthach did something which, in a being of less refinement, I might have called a shrug. "No matter. Congratulations on your victory, Master Wolf."

"I didn't win," I said softly. "He lost." I knew, without even a shadow of doubt, that Pier's death was in large measure his own fault. If he'd taken things seriously from the start, or restrained his anger later on, I'd have been dead meat.

"Perhaps," the goddess said, and I got the distinct impression that she knew exactly what I meant. "Even so, you are alive and he is dead. Is that not worth celebration?"

I sighed. "I used to think so. But every time I see someone die, I become less sure."

"An unusual attitude for a werewolf."

The saddest part, of course, was that it was true. I couldn't work up the energy to reply, and I wasn't sure what possible response I could have to something like that.

"We will hunt elsewhere, this night," Scáthach promised me. And then, without fanfare of any kind (Loki could stand to profit by *that* example), the Wild Hunt was gone, taking Pier's body with it.

I couldn't seem to care enough to move, so I slept in the bloody dirt right there.

My dreams were, of course, of the nightmarish variety.

Chapter Eleven

I woke up slowly the next day. I do mean day, too; I slept until almost noon.

I was pretty disoriented, which is why it took me a moment to realize how funky things were. I'd gone to sleep in my armor, in the forest, draped in all manner of weaponry. I woke up sitting in a chair, in the same cafe where I'd met with Kyra and Pellegrini, wearing street clothes.

In other words, something was very wrong with the world.

To reinforce this impression, as soon as I was awake I heard a voice. More specifically, Loki's voice, or at least the voice he used most often in my experience. He said, "You're about to go visible, so try not to jump."

Loki himself was sitting across the table from me. "Good morning, Winter. How do you feel?"

"Stiff. Sore. Generally not too great. But alive."

"Very good," he said enthusiastically. "Most excellent. Oh, your food should be here shortly. I'm sure you're hungry, after last night." He motioned toward the large glass of iced tea in front of me.

I considered asking whether it was poisoned, but dismissed the notion. I mean, really, what would be the point? If it was, Loki probably wouldn't tell me. And, in any case, if he ever decided to kill me, there wasn't a lot I could do about it. He was a god; I was just a mortal with a little bit extra tacked on; ergo, any fight between us could end in only one way. It wasn't complicated.

It occurred to me that it was more than possible today was the day he would make that decision. In which case, hell, I might as well enjoy some breakfast first. The tea was quite good.

"So," Loki said. I noticed he was idly flipping a butter knife around in one hand, and couldn't help but remember that was the instrument he'd promised to kill me with if I messed up. "I'm assuming that you have some entertainingly complex plan to recover the spear. Or else you're terribly confused."

I bowed my head slightly—not that I really thought the gesture of submission would count for anything, but I had to try, you know? "Actually, Loki, I wasn't planning on retrieving it."

"Now, see," he said, "that's what I would call 'terribly confused.' After all, we *did* have a deal, didn't we?"

"I have fulfilled the terms of your request," I said.

He raised one dark blond eyebrow. "Oh, this should be good. Do continue, Winter, I'm dying to hear this explanation."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"You asked me to identify the person or persons responsible for three deaths in this city," I said carefully. "I have done so. Shannon Plumber was killed by Pier of the Daylight Court, Steve Potts by criminals hired by Humberto Escobedo, and Humberto himself by Carraig of the Midnight Court. In a more broad sense, Erica Reilly was responsible for all of these deaths and several others by obtaining, and subsequently selling, the Gáe Bolg."

"Which is all fine and well," Loki said. "But I rather think you're forgetting one little part. Namely, that wasn't all I asked you for. By which I mean that I also asked you to return the stolen goods."

This was where it got tricky, but if it worked I might get out alive. "You asked me to return anything stolen *from the victims*," I corrected. "At no point in time did the Gáe Bolg fall under that category. Plumber sold it to Potts before her death, which was a legal transfer of property. It was then confiscated by the police from Potts's home, which is their legal right and was properly executed. Neither of these were cases of theft."

"And for you to take it from the police? Will you tell me that was legal, as well?"

"No," I said. "That was theft. However, you very clearly stated that only things stolen from the victims of the three murders which had happened when you contacted me were to be returned to you. As I did not steal it from any of those individuals, it does not qualify, and at that point the spear was mine to do with as I would."

Loki considered that for a moment. Then he did the last thing I'd expected.

He started to laugh. And kept laughing, until he was leaning on the table for support with tears running freely down his face. "Oh," he said breathlessly—which was pretty funny in itself, given that I don't think he actually needs to breathe in order to talk. He was a pretty good actor, when he remembered that he wanted to be. "Oh, man. That's really good. Nice job, Winter. I have to say, I didn't expect you to be that good at lawyering."

"So we're even?" I asked cautiously.

He waved one hand carelessly. "Oh, sure, sure. No problem. I mean, I have to reward that kind of twisty thinking somehow, don't I?"

"Do you?" I asked, curious.

"Well, I'm reasonably confident I'm *supposed* to, at any rate. Being god of half-truths and unethical bargaining and all that. Besides, it's not like I wanted the thing anyway."

Right about then the waiter dropped off my food—and only my food, because apparently Loki wasn't even pretending to need to eat today. "What do you mean you didn't *want* it?" I asked once he'd left.

"Of course not," Loki said patiently, as though speaking to a child. "Why should I? I mean, I've no idea what I'd do with such a thing, and then I'd be always wondering where I'd left it. No, thank you. I probably would have just given it back to Scáthach. No big deal."

I stared. "I don't get it," I said eventually. "I mean, if you didn't want it in the first place, why'd you cash in your favor?"

"Well, it was funny, wasn't it?" he asked, as though that explained anything. "Everybody had all these careful plans laid out, I just couldn't resist interfering. You make a wonderful monkey wrench, by the way."

"Thanks," I said sourly. "So this whole thing was just to satisfy your twisted sense of humor for a day?"

"Pretty much, yeah. Thanks, you were a lot more exciting this time around."

I spent a minute eating and reflected that the universe put way too much effort into hating me.

"No, actually," Loki said as though I'd spoken aloud. "Very common mistake. People find the claim that God hates them to be very comforting, so I suppose it's only natural."

I snorted. "Comforting? *Comforting*? In what way is knowing that there are forces vastly more powerful than me which hate me *comforting*?"

"In what way is it anything else?" he countered. "People *say* they believe in a benevolent and loving God, of course, but that's a very difficult attitude to maintain in the face of a world which seems determined to disprove any such concept. Often, I find, humans find it much easier and more satisfying to believe in a God which hates them personally."

"I still don't get how that's a comforting attitude."

"Think about it," Loki said, leaning forward earnestly. He was wearing deep blue eyes today, presumably because the real thing would have been inappropriate for such a public venue, and if I hadn't known better I would have thought him perfectly trustworthy. "If God hates you, then nothing bad that happens to you is ever really your fault. It doesn't matter what you do, because God will always ensure that nothing goes right. Besides which, you can always tell yourself that you've *beaten* this God with whatever scraps of happiness you do achieve, which must be a significant boost to your ego."

I frowned. "Huh. I guess I never thought about it that way before."

"Of course not. To think about it from a rational perspective would undermine all the psychological benefits of such a worldview. Besides which, that would force you to examine a much more existentially frightening concept."

"Namely?"

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"The idea that God doesn't care," he said, sounding even more earnest. "Think about it, Winter. A God who hates you is, fundamentally, a God who knows that you exist, a God who pays attention to you personally and cares about your life. In a negative sense, perhaps, but all attention is good attention, as they say. Malicious, yes, but it nevertheless says that there *is* something bigger, that it *does* know and care who you are, that you're *important* to no less a being than God himself."

"Now," he continued, gesturing grandiosely with his butter knife, "compare that to the alternative—that is, that there *is* no God, or worse, that God exists but doesn't *care*. Now *that* is a terrifying concept—imagine a God who knows you exist but can't be bothered to remember, who is so much more than you that you become just a number on the file folder. It's the difference between a gunshot and cancer, you see?" He shrugged. "I imagine it also places a great deal more moral responsibility on you. If God isn't responsible for the horrors of the world, after all, there are very few other candidates than yourselves."

I thought about that for a while as I finished up the food—not as much as I might have wanted, but I wasn't about to complain to Loki. It was an interesting perspective, one I hadn't ever really considered before. "So which is true?" I asked after a minute or so.

He laughed, infinitely more disturbing than Fenris's. When Fenris laughed, the sound was touched with wolves' howls and a hunger too deep for words. Loki's laugh, though, had an edge to it of madness that made mere human insanities seem rather blasé. "In a cosmic sense? Who knows?" Grinning a mad grin, he stood up and offered me his hand. "There's something I want you to see."

Did I want to see it? No. I didn't even have to ask to know that I would rather take a silvered grater to my knuckles.

It's never good when the Trickster smiles. Never. Never ever.

Of course, I was still holding my life in my hands, quite seriously. Loki might have been amused enough by my exploitation of a technicality (not to mention all the violent antics of the past days, which seemed like something he'd enjoy) not to kill me. But he was still fucking *Loki*. He didn't need a reason to kill me. He didn't even need an excuse. If he wanted to, he could murder me right there in front of a dozen witnesses and I was willing to bet he'd get off scot free. My continued life was dependent on being amusing to him—and, while my life might not be the best available, I wasn't ready to give it up quite yet.

Not as heroic an attitude as I'd managed the previous night, perhaps. But, alas, it was a lot harder to hold on to that sort of dedication and sacrificial attitude in the light of day. It's one thing to die heroically, but I've never been all that great at *living* heroically.

So I shrugged and took Loki's hand. And, as it had before, the world changed, literally in the blink of an eye.

When my eyes opened again, I was standing in the corner of a cramped, cluttered room. I recognized it, too—I'd only seen Erica's dorm room once, but the sharp division between the mess on her side and the neatness of her roommate was distinctive.

Of course, it helped that Erica herself was sitting at the desk. I mean, that sort of thing tends to jog my memory, you know?

At around that time, I noticed three things. The first was that Loki wasn't standing next to me. The second was that Erica hadn't reacted at all to my sudden appearance. The third, and by far the most disturbing, was that I had no control over my body whatsoever. I couldn't blink or look away from the tableau. I certainly couldn't walk. I was still breathing, and my heart was still beating, but other than that I was immobile—and, in spite of the spike of fear that went through me at this realization, my breathing rate and heartbeat remained steady, no change at all.

As I watched, Loki moved into the scene. He wasn't wearing the "normal person" persona now. His clothing, all dull blacks except for a single gold ring, was tailored to make his tall, thin frame even more noticeable, and while his hair was the same dark blond his eyes had gone to orange-and-green chaos. His voice, when he spoke, was deep and rich and had mad laughter dancing under the surface.

"You asked me for power, Reilly. Do you remember that?" he asked, moving forward into the center of my field of vision. Erica stood up, obviously taken by surprise, and turned to face him. It seemed like she was moving very slowly. "And I gave it to you! I gave you everything you asked for—power, knowledge, wealth, whatever, not that you had the imagination to ask for much. And all I asked for in return was that you obey one simple rule. Do you remember?"

She was afraid. Oh, she tried to hide it, but she wasn't very good at it. She knew who she was talking to—she'd seen those eyes once before, and I'd told her who they belonged to—and even Erica was smart enough to fear Loki. "What do you want?" she asked, stammering very slightly. Huh. Maybe smarter than I'd thought.

"Anything unusual is to be reported immediately," Loki said, seeming to take a certain amount of relish in the words. "Is there some complexity to the statement that I don't understand? Did you somehow think what I really meant was, 'Unusual things can be sold to anyone I feel like?' Did I perhaps fail, in spite of numerous repetitions and assurances, to make it clear that I was serious?"

"You disappeared! How was I supposed to tell you?" Erica protested. She sounded aggrieved, and just slightly too strenuous in her denial. She knew that she'd messed up, even if she wasn't going to admit it to anyone but herself.

"Really," Loki drawled sarcastically. "I've given you a lot of slack, Reilly. I've been willing to tolerate your idiotic greed, and it is idiotic, up to this point, because you were of marginal utility to me. As of right now, you are rapidly approaching the point of being a liability instead. Comments?"

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"I...how could...what was I supposed to do?" Erica said, stammering more heavily now. She tried to retreat from Loki, only to find herself up against the edge of the desk after a mere two steps. "Look, I can make up for it! Just tell me what I have to do!"

Loki shook his head slowly. "No, I don't think so. Your second chance has come and gone, and you failed. Furthermore, you demonstrated either abysmal stupidity or astonishing recklessness in ignoring my rule. I have little patience for either of those things—and none for failure. Goodbye, Reilly." Without seeming to move at all, he was standing mere inches from her. He reached out and flicked her lightly on the forehead with one finger, then disappeared.

Erica sighed in relief, the tension running out of her body visibly. If I could have moved, I would have screamed at her in frustration. It's *never* that easy, Loki's *never* really finished with a person, she should have known that.

But then, Erica was never the sharpest.

Of course I couldn't scream at her. My body was still on lockdown. I couldn't even move my eyes, or close them.

As a result, my view of what happened next was *much* better than I would have liked. So much.

Take a raw tomato. Dip it in boiling water for a few seconds. Pull it out and drop it in a bowl of ice water. Watch the skin pull away, easy as anything, exposing wet red flesh underneath.

This was a lot like that. Except nastier. So so so much nastier.

I've seen some bad things, and I've done some bad things, and I generally think I have reason to think of myself as being something of a hard guy. And this made me want to cry, or vomit, or at least avert my eyes—not just because it was awful, but because there was something terribly intrusive about it, like accidentally seeing a stranger naked.

I couldn't do anything of the sort, of course. My body was still firmly under Loki's control. Oh, I fought it, of course I did, but it didn't make a difference. A fly had as much chance of getting free of a sundew as I had of resisting Loki's will made manifest.

Erica was dead. I knew that. I mean, anybody with any kind of medical knowledge will tell you that one of the most important things you can learn—and one of the hardest—is that there are things you can fix, and there are things you can't, and no amount of wishing will make the one into the other. I knew just enough about the subject to know that Erica fell very firmly into the second category. I mean, she'd lost her skin. Her *entire* skin, at least as far as I could tell.

You don't walk away from that. A healthy young human already in an emergency room wouldn't live. A werewolf with the full moon and a pack in support wouldn't survive it. A vampire might survive it, if you could call that survival, but I wasn't sure even of that. And Erica was none of those things. Short of

divine-level magic—which, thanks a lot and all, but I think we've got enough of that already—there was nothing I knew of that might save her life at this point.

I clarify this so that you understand what I mean when I say that my first impulse after the puking bit was to kill her. I didn't have a weapon, but that isn't really a serious impediment to a werewolf, not when the other guy's half-dead already. It wasn't that I bore Erica any particular ill will—she wasn't my favorite person by a long shot, but I didn't hate her *that* much. It was just that I don't like suffering, mine or anyone else's. Erica didn't so much as whimper, and she didn't so much as twitch, but I knew that having your skin ripped off had to hurt, and I knew that at this point a mercy kill was the only thing I could offer.

I couldn't do that either. I was quite literally helpless to do anything but stand there and watch. It may have been the closest I've ever been to Hell.

My senses were never impaired, though it felt like they should have been. There are times when superhuman senses truly aren't a gift, and this was one of them—but at least I could tell, a few minutes later, when Erica's breathing stopped, and didn't start again. It was the blood loss that did her in, which was a mercy. One-hundred-percent loss of skin was lethal, but if she hadn't bled out she might well have lingered for days or even weeks before dehydration, infection, or septic shock finished the job.

Not a big mercy. Puny, in fact. Picayune. But still. A mercy.

So died Erica Reilly. She wasn't a good person, at least not the way I saw things. She was greedy, shortsighted, and not infrequently almost unbelievably stupid. Had circumstances been slightly different I suspect I might have killed her myself. And yet, for all of that, I didn't want to see her die, and would have helped her if I could.

Almost immediately after Erica's death, I once again found myself elsewhere. As I had control of my body again, the first thing I did was to puke out the meal I'd just eaten. I took my time about it, and did a fairly thorough job.

"Oh, come on," Loki said in an amused tone after a minute or so. "Don't you think that's a little excessive? It's not as though you liked her."

I looked up and saw the god standing a few feet away leaning on a graffiti-strewn brick wall. On some level I knew it wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I still glared at him, and when I spoke the venom in my voice surprised me a little. "But I didn't *murder her*," I spat.

He looked at me evenly. "You might have, if I hadn't. It's not like you haven't killed people you liked more."

I didn't have a lot of grounds to argue that one. "At least I would have done it quickly. And painlessly, if I could."

## Debts Outstanding (Winter's Tale)

"And?" he said. He sounded honestly confused.

I wanted to keep arguing with him—but, on some level, I recognized that it was pointless. Things like mercy and gentleness were quite simply not a part of his nature. He was ancient and inhuman, and to judge him by human standards was a waste of time and effort. Heck, I doubted he could even *understand* human values. "Never mind. Why did I have to see that?"

He grinned. "Well, now you know I don't dislike you." The implication was pretty clear; if he *did* dislike me, that was what I could expect.

It was a sobering reminder of what I was dealing with. Even talking with Loki was the equivalent of jumping up and down on an unexploded land mine.

He started walking down the alley. I followed him, because what else was I supposed to do? After a few seconds, I recognized it as being directly across from my lab. I could see the building, the familiar door replaced by one without a hole punched through it. "So," Loki said, halting just before the mouth of the alley. "For entertaining me, you get a reward. Three more of those mage-children have made similar deals with me. I look forward to watching you figure out which ones." He winked one forest-fire eye at me and disappeared, leaving me behind.

I had a lot to think about as I crossed the street.

I didn't have time to think about it, of course. That's how life goes.

Fenris was standing next to my door. He had his civilized human face more firmly in place today, and only my ability to smell magic (and the fact that I recognized his form, which—unlike his father—he never seemed to change) allowed me to recognize him for what he was.

He also looked rather smug. I wasn't as worried about that as I was when Loki did it—Fenris had helped me out several times now, and he actually *meant* it—but it was still a little unsettling. Especially after seeing the way Pryce reacted to his presence. Forget old legends, *that* was spooky.

"Winter!" he called to me, not moving from his spot next to the door. "You made it!"

"Barely," I agreed with a sigh. "What are you doing here?"

His grin spread wider. "Thought I'd give you the tour."

Tour? What tour? I thought for a moment...and then froze as I realized that my lab building smelled of magic.

Now, that wasn't too surprising, in itself. After all, the outside was covered in fae wards, and the inside was covered with my wards. I'd have been seriously worried if it *didn't* smell of magic. But this was different, a new tone added to the mix. I wasn't sure quite what it was—it was woven in very subtly, very smoothly, and I couldn't pick out enough of a distinct marker to say for sure what it was supposed

to do or who had cast it. All I knew was that the delicate blend of energies making up the aroma of "standing outside my laboratory door" was different, and not simply because Fenris was standing there.

Fenris, seeing my expression, smiled even more broadly, reached over, and opened the brand-new front door, revealing an impossibility.

The building was a small, worn down old house. It was one story tall, with nothing fancy about it whatsoever. The first room inside the door was a foyer, carefully set up to give off the "abandoned" air. I just about literally knew every inch of that room. When I looked through the door, that foyer was what I saw, perfect in every detail.

But when I stepped through, I found myself somewhere very different. I froze dead still and looked around in wonder as Fenris followed behind me and shut the door behind himself.

I'd never really done the mansion thing. So I don't know what a typical entrance room—a room dedicated solely to being an entrance, I mean—really looks like. But I know that this one was pretty damned impressive.

It was around three stories tall, for one thing, with a great big vaulted ceiling overhead, and long enough that you could have built a small house in it without cramping. To either side of the door was a spiral staircase, elegant and seemingly unsupported, made from finest white marble, leading both up and down. The rest of the furniture was, if not quite as dramatic, equally nice. There were a number of chairs and couches, artfully arranged throughout the hall. I wasn't sure whether to sigh or laugh when I saw that at the far end of the room was a marble dais with a small but genuine throne on it. There were several doors down both sides of the room.

The furniture was nothing short of lovely, all dark woods and bronze fittings. The upholstery was a mix of silk and velvet, all in shades of deep forest green, with a bit of leather (*not* green, thankfully) thrown in for variety. There were a handful of accents in blue, violet, and white, but for the most part green was clearly the order of the day.

It is not often that I am struck speechless. This did it.

Fenris laughed at my expression. "You like it?" he asked.

My mouth worked. Nothing came out. I eventually managed a "Wow."

He laughed some more. "Come on," he urged, sounding as excited as a kid with a new toy. He tugged gently at my sleeve, and proceeded to lead on one of the more impressive whirlwind tours of my life.

It quickly became apparent that my initial impression of "mansion" wasn't far off. The entrance hall was the largest room, but there were a *lot* of them, and none was less than incredible. To the left of the throne room, as I immediately came to think of it, was a literal game room, by which I mean that I couldn't see any purpose to it *but* games. The chess set—set into its own table, of course—was more

white-and-black marble, flawless, with just enough variation between the pieces to be handmade, but not enough to have been made by anyone short of a master. There were also a number of card tables, billiards, tall glass-fronted cabinets holding more games, the works.

Behind the wall where the throne sat was a large indoor garden. The flooring here was dirt, with flagstones forming winding paths throughout. Here and there, marble planters provided a place for anything a person wanted to give special emphasis. Everything was empty—excepting a single long planter that wrapped around the outside wall of the garden, which was filled with a mix of goji and lingonberry, mingled together.

I'm sure Fenris had a reason for that. It just hasn't occurred to me yet. Subtle symbolism is a fine thing, but I occasionally have to wonder whether these people are overdoing it a little bit.

I suspect you can guess a lot of the rest. The other side of the empty garden led into a kitchen, more marble, complete with top-quality everything. Even the knives had handmade hardwood handles. The dining room next to that, rounding out the ground floor, could have seated a banquet at the long oak table.

"This is incredible," I said, following Fenris in a daze. He seemed content to just escort me through the place with that same silly grin rather than saying anything. "How'd you *do* this?"

"We're actually on the Otherside," he said with—entirely reasonable—pride. "This domain is permanently linked to your old lab, so you don't have to worry about the time dilation. Don't worry, though—it'll only work for you and anyone with you, or people you specifically designate. And *they* won't be able to bring anyone else in with them."

Holy cow. I mean, wow. I couldn't even *imagine* the complexity involved in that kind of magic. It's one thing to know that you're barely more than a child when it comes to magic, and that you're talking to a literal god—but wow. It is *entirely* different to have it driven home.

Fenris seemed, again, content to give me all the time I wanted to absorb that while he showed me around the place. The basement had a laboratory, larger than the entire building I'd been using up until that point. I recognized most of the supplies there, including Legion's skeleton, though the room itself was *much* nicer than my old lab. I mean, seriously, when even the *labs* get marble counters and hardwood worktables, you know you're in a classy place.

More surprising was the armory right next to it. It was equally huge, and equally impressive. Strangely enough, it was softer and more welcoming than the rest of the mansion—more wood and cloth, less stone, gentler lighting (all of which, by the way, all through the house, was given off by simple stone panels enchanted to glow). One mannequin held my armor, another Aiko's.

In between were scattered all sorts of weapons. There was a sizable gun rack, an equally impressive if rather more scarcely inhabited sword rack, and a long display case lined in green velvet with individual, tailored depressions where shorter blades rested. I also saw, as we walked through, a

table covered in magical foci and stored spells, and another with various other small weapons and toys, and a large cabinet filled with ammunition of all types.

Granted it was all either my stuff or Aiko's, but sheesh. I'd never seen it all in one place before. Now that I did, I had to admit it might be a wee bit excessive. I mean, at some point you have to acknowledge that your knife fetish is approaching pathological levels.

There was a lot more, but at some point the rooms started blending together in my head. Suffice to say that the second floor—no more marble, thankfully, although the hardwood and velvet were there to stay—was less impersonal than the ground floor. There were guest bedrooms, bathrooms, a library, and more than a few rooms whose purpose I couldn't even guess. I suppose at some point you can't think of any more, so you just start throwing in empty areas and hoping the tenant can think of something to do with it. Possibly the most remarkable—and, I must admit, slightly unsettling—section of the second floor was the trophy room.

A trophy room. Seriously. A *trophy room*. It wouldn't have bothered me so much, except that there were actually trophies in there. Nothing grisly—certainly no animal heads, thank Fenris—but still. I'm not the kind of guy who has trophies. Come on.

Anyway, I guess I was getting kind of numb by that point. It was just too much stimulation in too short a time, especially right after waking up. Besides, going from a cot under the lab table to *this* was a little too much to really accept right away. I'd never in my adult life lived anywhere more extravagant than a cabin. The idea of living in this massive, well-appointed mansion was too much to take in.

Which is why I wasn't expecting much different from the third floor. Well...I was wrong.

I'd more than slightly expected the massive bedroom, and I wasn't far off on the details, either. Thick green carpet, bronze-and-wood furniture, wooden paneling, check, check, check. Granted, the paneling was rosewood instead of more ebony or walnut, which was nice—comfy, rather than impressive. And the bed was a massive four-poster complete with curtains—curtains! on a bed!—which, I have to admit, was more than slightly surprising given that I didn't think beds like that actually existed. All of which paled when I saw a heap of silver fur at the foot of said bed.

I started to walk over and say hello to Snowflake—somehow I was unsurprised she'd adjusted to the new digs faster than I would—but was stopped by Fenris's outstretched arm. "She needs her rest," he murmured to me.

For a second I was confused. Then I saw another, smaller canine curled up in the exact center of the ridiculously large bed. This one was red, and looked to be so solidly asleep that a decent-sized explosion wouldn't do much. My heart lurched a little at the sight, to indulge in an overused yet strangely appropriate expression—not an unwelcome surprise, but a very unexpected one.

It says a lot about how stunned and overwhelmed I was, that it didn't occur to me until that point what the ramifications were of living on the Otherside. Aiko was allowed to be here.

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I allowed Fenris to usher me back downstairs without complaint. "The tomte moves in tomorrow," he said to me. "Don't try and spy on him while he works and you shouldn't have any issues with cleaning or maintenance. And I've arranged for grocery deliveries—it might not be the most variety, but I can promise everything will be fresh."

What do you say to something like that? I have no idea. Anything I could come up with seemed inadequate. So I settled on "Thank you," and hoped that it could convey all the rest.

Fenris seemed to understand. He looked at me, and smiled slightly. "Good job, Winter," he said, opening the front door. It looked out on the same street in the same bad neighborhood as my lab's door always did. "I'm proud of you."

After that, pretty much all that was left was wrapping up. I didn't hear from Bryan again. I *did* get a card from, of all people, Ash Sanguinaria, which I sure as heck didn't see coming. It was meticulously handwritten in plain black ink, and very serious. The contents weren't anything too remarkable—she had enjoyed meeting me, she was glad I wasn't as dead as expected, she hoped to talk to me again, etc.

I'm reasonably confident that she didn't know that someone, presumably a less serious fellow student, included another piece of paper in the envelope. It was written in a much more spontaneous way (by which I mean the handwriting wasn't that good, and there were a lot of misspellings and crossed out words), and told me not to take Ash's demeanor too seriously, because it was mostly an act.

I don't know whether that's true. But it made me smile, and I actually do hope I see her again. That's unusual—most of the time, after I meet someone new, I wish I believed in God, just so I could pray to never encounter them again. It doesn't work, of course but it might make me feel better.

Just look at Carraig. I mean, sheesh, I'm sure I never want to see *him* again, and equally sure he'll stick his nose in again at an inopportune time. He'll probably have moved on to keelhauling or something by then.

But hey! It could be worse. I mean, I'm alive, Snowflake's alive, Aiko's alive, everything else you can live with, right? We've got a kickass mansion all to ourselves (needless to say I've been taking certain measures to ensure that. In fact, I feel rather sorry for anybody unlucky enough to try breaking in, given that Aiko and Snowflake pitched in on the defenses. Those two scare *me* when they get going, and I frankly think the bit with the dental floss was a bit over the top).

As for the rest, well, I'm currently pretending it doesn't exist. Oh, I know I can't pull that off forever, but for right now? I think we all deserve a bit of a rest.

Epilogue

Three days later, I was meeting Kyra in the city. It was supposed to have happened two days earlier, but as it turns out, you don't actually get phone reception on the Otherside. When I made it back to the "real" world to stretch my legs and keep from going crazy with cabin fever, I had about a thousand messages. They started out polite, moving on to annoyed after about twelve hours. By the second morning she was actively angry, and then in the late afternoon to worry and depression.

I'd left her a message, the first day back, about not being dead, at least. I don't think I want to know what she'd have thought or done otherwise.

*Thank God, Snowflake muttered as she trotted down the road at my side. Until this morning, she hadn't spoken since I got back—that whole Wild Hunt thing hit her pretty hard, and no surprise. She must have been feeling at least a little better now, though; she was not only talking, she'd asked to come with me, and settled on the purple eyepatch with a Day-Glo-green peace sign on it, coupled with a heavy black leather collar set with a double row of steel spikes. (I cannot express to you how hard I laughed when I saw that there were three separate walk-in closets attached to the master bedroom—one for me, one for Aiko, one for Snowflake. They were all about the same size.) I couldn't take one more day in that abgefueckt beschissen house.*

I didn't make a big deal of the fact that she was talking to me again. I mean, come on, I knew her pretty well by now, okay? And I *knew* nothing would make her retreat faster than that. *Can't argue, I agreed. It wouldn't be so bad if it just had a few windows. I don't think I've ever gone so long without seeing the sun.*

*Agreed, she said fervently. I love the furniture, but that's going to get old fast.*

We were, thankfully, not bound to the same cafe as before. That would have been just spooky. Kyra and I had, after some discussion, settled on a tiny park instead. It was a pretty good walk, but neither of us had any objection to that; after three days stuck in our new house, both Snowflake and I wanted a chance to stretch our legs.

Around an hour later, we strolled into the park, looking...well, not like any other person walking a dog, but a reasonably close imitation. I wasn't even wearing the armor—light and masterfully crafted or not, it's too bloody uncomfortable for anything short of an emergency. Granted I had a number of knives secreted on my person (I'd forgotten I even *had* some of those), but they were small enough I wasn't even wearing my cloak as a long cape or trench coat. A light hoodie, not unreasonably warm for April in Colorado, was quite adequate to conceal them.

Kyra was already there waiting for us. She looked...different, somehow, a matter more of bearing and posture than physical appearance. It took me a minute to figure out what it was, although once I did I couldn't believe I'd overlooked the obvious.

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She looked like herself. As in, *just* herself, without the added baggage of the Alpha. Authority changed a person, especially a werewolf, and the difference in how she carried herself after acquiring that role was marked. Now...it was gone, plain and simple. Kyra looked like the reserved, mildly snarky werewolf I'd known for years before that change. She was even slouching a little.

I wasn't at all sure what to make of that. She was still alive, though, so it couldn't be too bad. That's the nice thing about werewolves—they tend to be very *direct* about hating you. You seldom have to wonder whether you pissed a werewolf off; if they haven't tried to eat your spleen yet, the answer is probably no.

"How's it going?" she asked as I walked up. She didn't so much as glance in my direction, and she was slumped against a small tree. An Alpha would never act so carelessly, not even with a trusted old friend.

"Not too shabby," I said, sitting down next to her with a sigh. Snowflake flopped across my feet. "Yourself?"

She grunted. "Good news. Ryan's alive."

I blinked. "Really?" We hadn't heard from him since he disappeared from the shopping mall, and I'd been pretty sure that wasn't going to change in the near future.

"Yep," she said. "Apparently he saw some sort of something in the crowd and thought he should go investigate. Next thing he knew he was waking up this morning. Called me first chance he got."

"Huh. That's interesting." Sounded like a will-o'-the-wisp to me—they were Unseelie beasties, so they could easily have been working with Carraig. I didn't think a werewolf would resist their lure particularly hard, either; in fact, what with the focus on hunting, they might be *more* susceptible than a normal human. The only thing that surprised me was that he was still alive.

Kyra grinned. "Oh, you haven't even heard the best part. He woke up stark naked and rather sore in the middle of a cornfield in Kansas—oh, except for a collar. With, and I quote, the worst hangover imaginable, a bottle in his right hand, a set of spurs in his left, and smelling like lemons and burnt toast."

"That is quite possibly the most disturbing mental picture I've had all week," I said after a moment. "Thanks."

Her grin got even wider. "I'm still not done. He has a number written on his hand in something he says is almost but not quite permanent marker. With 'Call me' underneath. Oh, and a number of bite marks. I'll let you guess where."

I closed my eyes for a second or two and tried to banish the images *that* conveyed. I so did not want to hear any more details about this.

*I think I need to bleach my brain after that, Snowflake said in agreement after a moment. I thought you got up to some weird stuff on the weekends, but this trumps every story you have put together.*

"Okay," I said, eyes still tightly closed. "Now that you've scarred us for life, why did you want to talk?"

"The pack's splitting up."

I opened my eyes. "Wait, what?"

"You heard me," she said.

"Well, yes, but...*what?*"

She shrugged. "Too much action the past year or two. Between that and all the publicity—we were one of the media-attention packs, you know, and now that that gambit's over...." She shrugged again. "Plus we've lost a bunch of people. Makes more sense to just split things up and assimilate into other packs, rather than try to move."

"Kyra, I...I'm so sorry—"

"Oh shut up," she snapped. "Christ, Winter, I've heard the condolences speech from twenty-four werewolves, you really think I need it from you too?"

"You could at least have let me finish the sentence," I said sourly.

"You'll live."

*Epic burn, Snowflake laughed. I wonder if you could convince her to wait while I catch a rabbit?*

*Wouldn't popcorn be more appropriate?* I asked her.

*Well, sure, but seriously, popcorn? Bleck. Who likes popcorn?*

"Where're you going?" I said out loud.

"Wyoming," she said decisively. "I've already talked to Frodsham about it, and he says he'll take me. I'm driving up there tomorrow."

I blinked. "Why Wyoming?" I'd always thought of Kyra as more of a city person.

She shrugged. "You make him sound like a decent guy." No surprise, really, considering that Edward was the closest thing to a father figure I'd ever had. He *was* a decent guy, too, especially for a werewolf. Most of the species is, I'm sorry to say, bad enough that I don't have to wonder too much about where the scare stories come from.

"Good luck," I said eventually. "I think I'll be staying here."

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She glanced sidelong at me. "You sure?" she asked—just serious enough to let me know it was a serious offer, just joking enough to let me know she wouldn't object if I declined.

"Yeah," I said. "I've got too much going on here. Besides, I've lived in Wyoming once already. It hasn't been nearly enough years for me to want to go back yet."

"Fair enough," she said. "I'm not sure how long I'll be staying. I think I might go back to school, finish up my degree. I guess I've got time to decide, right?"

"I really am sorry," I said as she stood up.

She grinned. "I'm not. I was never really Alpha material anyway." I couldn't honestly argue with that one, so I didn't try. "See you around." She walked briskly off.

Snowflake and I stayed awhile in the park. The sun was warm on my face, and I laid back in the grass for a short nap. The world was still a terrible place, I was still a terrible person, we still sometimes had to do terrible things—but, for just a little while, it was still pretty good. Nobody can be a monster *every day*, after all.

I still had questions to ask, loose ends to tie up, loads and loads of work to do.

Work, we decided unanimously and without discussion, could wait a while.